TADDLE CREEK

CHRISTMAS NUMBER, 2007
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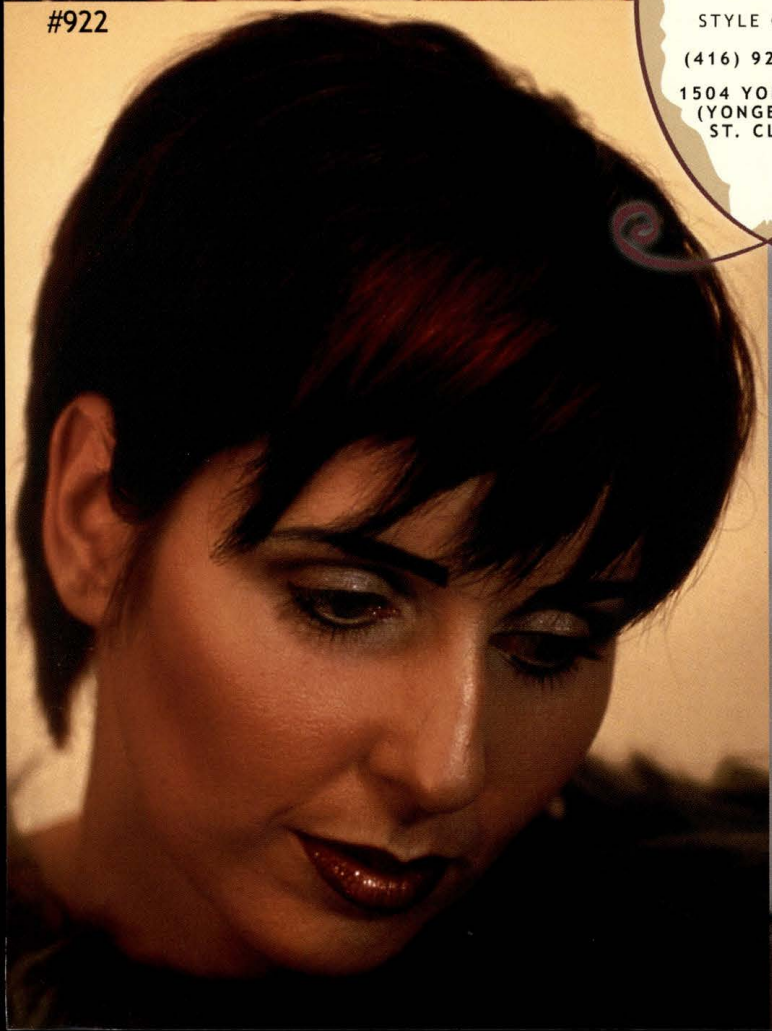

TADDLE CREEK

VOL. XI, NO. 1 • CHRISTMAS NUMBER, 2007

THE FICTION

THE OUT-OF-TOWNER

THE ILLUSTRATED FICTION

THE DEPT. OF ETERNAL REJECTION

THE PROFILE

THE GALLERY

PEOPLE AROUND HERE

THE POEMS

THE COVER

TADDLE CREEK

Under, above, and to the side.

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THE CONTRIBUTORS

Alex Boyd ("A Glimpse of My Bright Life in the Morning," p. 9) lives in York. He is the host of the IV Lounge Reading Series and the author of *Making Bones Walk* (Luna, 2007). He has contributed to the magazine since 1997.

Michael Cho ("Stars," p. 11) lives in Little Portugal, where he works as a cartoonist and illustrator. He is currently working on a graphic novel of short stories. He has contributed to the magazine since 2000.

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Dani Couture ("The Threat of the Comfort Inn," p. 21) lives in the Annex. She is the author of *Good Meat* (Pedlar, 2006). She has contributed to the magazine since 2004.

Gary Barwin ("The Porcupinity of the Stars," p. 35) lives in Hamilton, Ontario. His most recent book is *Frogments from the Frag Pool* (Mercury, 2005). He has contributed to the magazine since 2001.

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John Degen ("To the Beautiful Men in Soho, with Whom I Rode the Elevator," p. 49) lives in Etobicoke. His first novel, *The Uninvited Guest,* was published in 2006 by Nightwood. He has contributed to the magazine since 1997.

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Chris Chambers ("Stranger Here," p. 68) lives in Liberty Village. He is the author of *Lake Where No One Swims* (Pedlar, 1999). He has contributed to the magazine since 1997.

Kerri Huffman ("The Night I Took Benicio Del Toro to Bed," p. 70) lives in Little Italy. She is the magazine's founding associate editor, a position she held from 1997 to 2002.

Dave Lapp (*People Around Here,* p. 72) lives near the Church-Wellesley Village. He is the co-editor of the comic anthology series *Don't Touch Me.* He has contributed to the magazine since 2001.

Ian Phillips (Cover) lives in Beaconsfield. He collects junk and runs Pas de Chance press. His book *Lost* was published in 2002 by Princeton Architectural. He has been the magazine's illustrator since 1998.

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THE MAIL

READER WON, READER LOST

I recently discovered your magazine's Web site and found your policy of limiting your contributors to Toronto quaint and kind of revolutionary. Who thinks of geography any more aside from mid-level marketing managers?

However, I found your submissions guidelines snotty and not particularly appreciative or open to people not already aware of your journal. Many people deal with a deluge of unwanted submissions to their attention. It's called spam. If you can't deal with abundance, you should remove your request for feedback from your Web site. But perhaps this is what you intend.

So I stopped exploring your site, figuring if there is any writing you've published worth reading, I will hear about it through other means.

SEED CAKE
Via E-mail

Seed Cake is referring to Taddle Creek's recently updated submission guidelines, now available on the all-new Taddle Creek Web site, at www.taddlecreekmag.com/submit—a must-read to be sure.

[EXTRA SPACES HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM THIS LETTER]

Your submission guidelines are snarky and pretentious. The fact that you refuse to accept manuscripts that have two spaces after periods suggests you don't know how to pick your battles. It's called editing. Or should we just submit writing already formatted in QuarkXPress?

I know you need to weed out submissions, but any blanket policy regarding form as opposed to content is indicative of pseudo-intellectuals in control.

Honestly, guys, read your submissions guideline again and ask yourselves: Are we really these assholes? The pros never act that way. Why the fuck would I want to submit to a magazine that treats me like I'm a misbehaving schoolchild?

With twits like you overcrowding contemporary literature, I'm happy to create all the extraneous spaces I can.

SEAN STANELY [*sic*]
Via E-mail

Speaking of editing, regular readers will be pleased to know the Taddle Creek on-line archive now includes all of the magazine's notes on editorial style, including the very popular above-mentioned lesson on why leaving two spaces after a period is so passé.

A MID-LEVEL MARKETING MANAGER WRITES

There appears to be an inconsistency in your guidelines for submission. You state that no one from outside the city of Toronto will be accepted, yet you published several individuals from outside Toronto in your summer issue. What qualifies as an exception to the rule? Also, you state, "no shaped poetry." Is the poem "From My Spell Diary," by R. M. Vaughan, not shaped?

LOUISE ANTHES
Via E-mail

No inconsistencies, Louise. The magazine's guidelines state: "Taddle Creek accepts only submissions of fiction and poetry, only from authors currently residing in the city of Toronto." This is true. The magazine publishes usually one work from an out-of-towner each issue, but this author is invited to submit by Taddle Creek. The magazine does not accept unsolicited submissions from out-of-towners. And while R.'s poem has some extra tabs and spaces between words, it does not form a specific shape, such as an apple or a monkey.

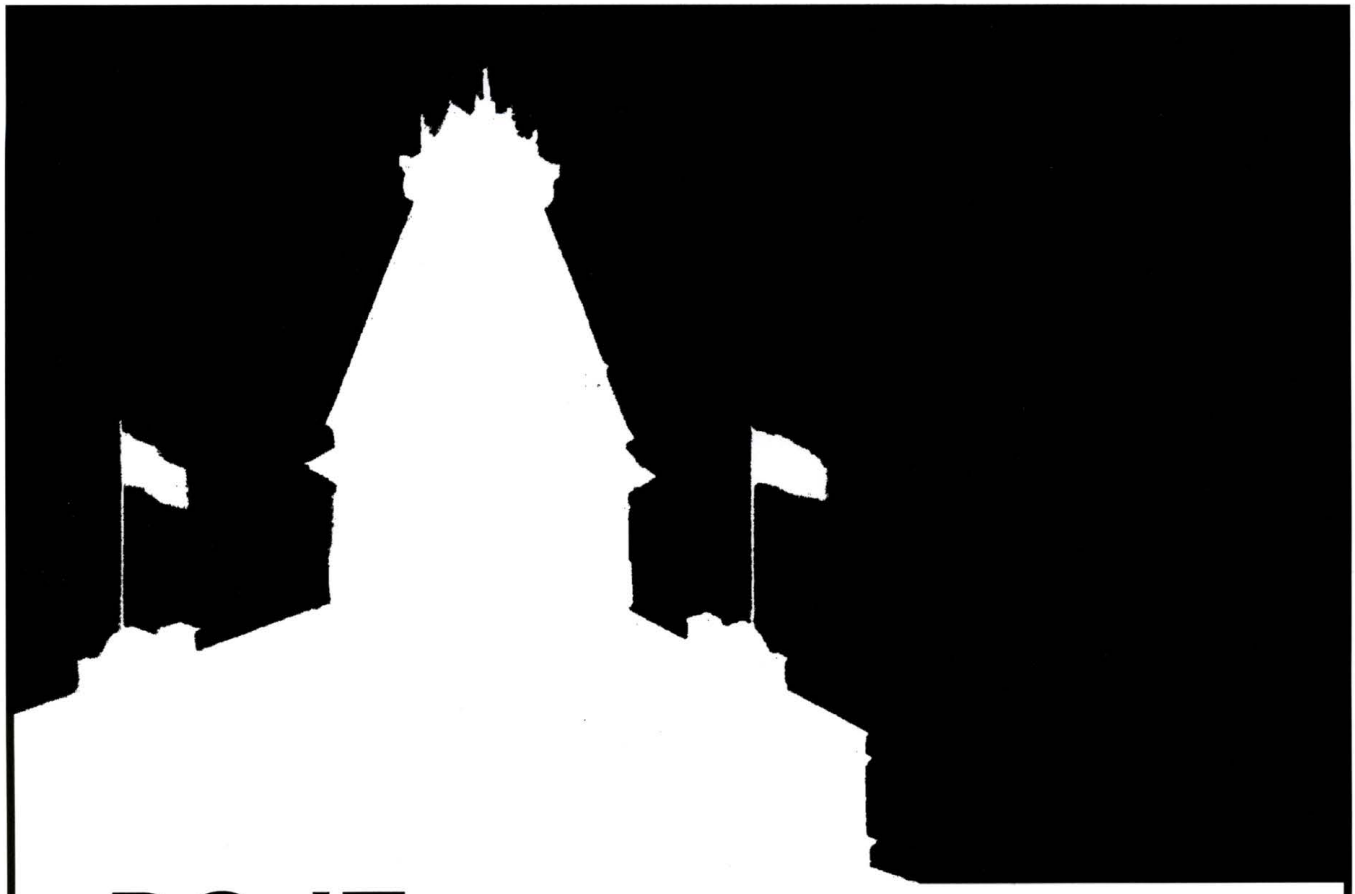
TADDLE CREEK'S BEST FRIEND

I've just been reading through my second issue of *Taddle Creek,* and I have to compliment everyone who worked on the magazine. It is truly enjoyable. I really appreciate the variety of articles, poetry, and fiction, and found the short fiction pieces particularly engaging. I look forward to the next issue.

CHRIS MCMAHEN
Armstrong, B.C.

Whatever you do, Chris—don't read the submission guidelines.

Letters to the magazine should include the writer's full name, address, and daytime phone number, only the first of which will be published. The magazine reserves the right to mock any nasty or especially silly letters. Due to the volume of mail received, Taddle Creek should have no problem responding to all letters in a timely fashion.



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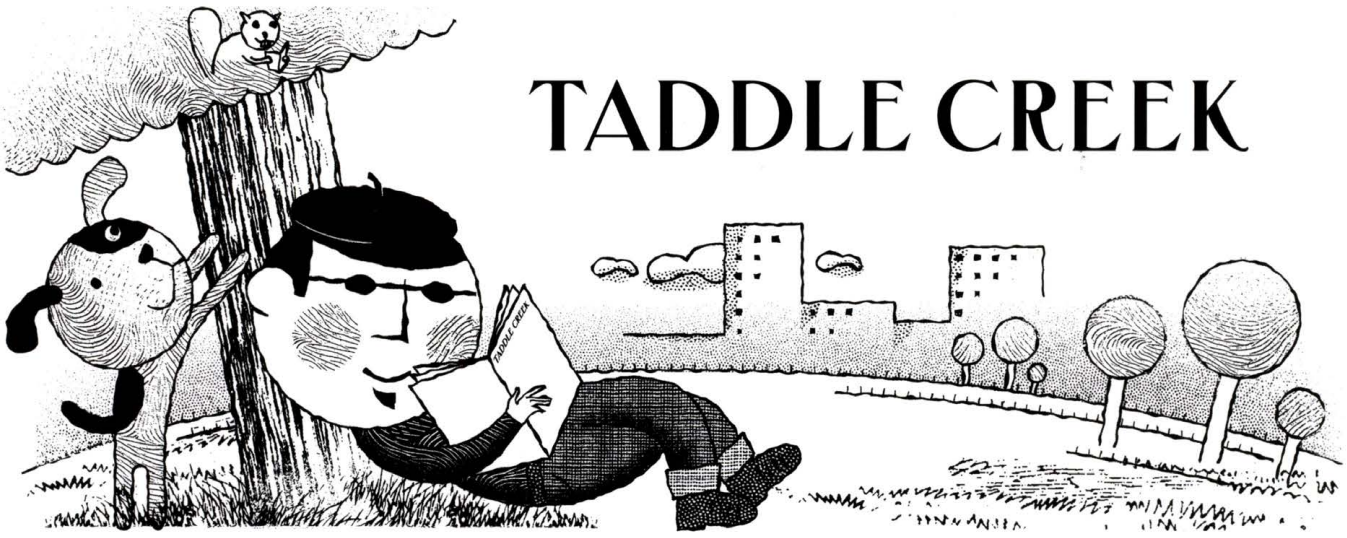


TADDLE CREEK

APOSTROPHES 'N' QUOTE MARKS

Taddle Creek has long thought nothing could raise its grammatical ire as much as the leaving of two spaces after terminal punctuation. But lately, the magazine has been losing more and more sleep over a problem threatening to unravel the very literary fabric of proper editorial style: misuse of the friendly apostrophe.

More than simply a space saver, an apostrophe helps make speech sound more relaxed by standing in for letters and numbers. An apostrophe can also show possession, and though there is great misuse of this small but powerful punctuator in that area (the dreaded "its'," for example), today *Taddle Creek* pronounces judgment on only the former of these two uses.

By replacing a letter, an apostrophe can join two words, forming a contraction such as "doesn't," the abbreviated form of "does not." It can also replace letters to help shorten a single word, such as in the case of "rock 'n' roll," where apostrophes take the place of both the "a" and the "d" in "and," and in the case of "'cause," the shortened form of "because." In both cases, the use of the apostrophe undoubtedly makes these words sound much more hep than they would were they pronounced in full.

An apostrophe can also take the place of numerals. This use is most often employed in the shortening of calendar years. One example seen in many magazines (though certainly not in the one you are currently holding) is the abbreviation of a decade from four digits to two: thus "the 1970s" becomes "the '70s."

But poor public education, combined with the same cursed technology that is slowly killing the en dash, has led to yet another shameful bastardization of the English language.

Given that the keystroke for an apostrophe and for a single quotation mark are allotted to the same key on most computer keyboards, one ends up commonly seeing such errors as "rock 'n' roll," which translates to a sarcastic letter "n" framed by the word "rock" on one side and "roll" on the other. Absolutely meaningless. The computer keyboard, programmed to assume the depression of the apostrophe key before a word is meant as a single left quotation mark, turns the apostrophe around, and ignorance is off and running.

Ignorance alone, however, cannot account for such non-words as 'n, n', and n', which, respectively, mean: nothing, "nd," and nothing again. (For that matter, "the '70s" is equally meaningless.)

Taddle Creek begs its readers to remember that a proper apostrophe (') should always be used when replacing letters or numbers, and never a single left quotation mark (‘). If you need to create an apostrophe at the beginning of a word, simply hold down the Ctrl key, press the apostrophe, release both, then press the apostrophe again. For those using a Macintosh, Shift+Option+]. If such functions are beyond your technological capability, simply press the apostrophe key twice ('') then go back and erase the first character. Easy stuff.

But *Taddle Creek* cannot sit around and wait for word to spread. Every time it sees an advertisement for Nice 'n Easy hair colour, places its favourite Guns N' Roses record (*Appetite for Destruction,* of course) on its hi-fi, or opens a box of Smarties via its Pop 'n Pour spout (Rowntree never would have made such an egregious error, Nestlé!), its day is a little less joyous. Every time it walks down Church Street, past Hair 'n After, or sits down in a bar beside a Texas hold' em (shudder!) electronic gambling machine, the magazine has a little less spring in its step.

And so, beginning immediately, in an attempt to show them the error of their ways, *Taddle Creek* will be sending letters to those most guilty of apostrophe misuse. The magazine encourages its readers to do the same. Interesting responses will be printed in a future issue. Do not/don't let the insanity continue.

—TADDLE CREEK

ROBIN

BY DAVID WHITTON

My name was Robin. Yep. That was my name. And this is what happened. I slipped, and then I fell. The first thing I thought: I've slipped off the balcony. The second thing I thought: it's seven storeys down.

The air was wet and heavy, the sky a hazy blue. You'd think it would've held up a little thing like me, but no—I dropped. The palm trees were swaying, their leaves waving up, waving down: bye-bye, bye-bye. I saw them as I torqued and twisted through the air. Low black clouds were massing on the horizon. And I could still taste the corn dog I ate for dinner. The mustard, the cornmeal, the all-beef frank.

And what happens to your mind when your body can't contain it any more?

Half an hour ago, a guy named John Milton drank lemon gin from my navel. I'd known him less than a day. He came to our hotel room with a friend, a man he called the Goat. The Goat brought a movie camera. John Milton brought a knapsack full of liquor.

"So why are you called 'the Goat'?" I asked.

"Everyone calls me that."

"Yes, but why?"

"Fuck, I don't know."

"But there must be a reason. You don't look like a goat. Do you act like a goat?"

"Fuck, I don't know. Body shots, anyone?"

Hip hop playing on the radio. Muted pictures on TV. Someone was giving a speech. Maybe the president, maybe the pope. I really wasn't watching. Kaytee lay on the bed and the Goat filled up her belly button. Then I did the same. I lay down on the bed. John Milton tilted the bottle. And when the lemon gin hit, it was cold, cold.

First I saw the sky, and then I saw the ground. First I saw the sky, and then I saw the ground. And here I had to calculate . . . would I fall into the pool, the chlorine-blue, egg-shaped pool, or would I hit the flagstones? Either way, death was certain.

I wished I were home. I wished I were home in my room, with my bedspread and pillows. With my stuffed animals huddled on the dresser. With my pictures of pop stars tacked to the wall. I could almost remember. . . . The way it felt to fall asleep in that room on a cool autumn night, the smell of leaves in my nose. The way it felt to wake up in a thunderstorm on a hot summer night. I wished I were home instead of here, falling through the air.

I had many regrets.

I regretted that I'd ever met Kaytee. That was the big one. She was my best friend, my dorm-room partner, and oh, how I loathed her. I regretted also that I'd come to Daytona. I regretted letting Kaytee book Room 712 at the Orange Grove Motor Lodge. And I regretted entering that contest. This morning on the beach. Platforms, speaker towers, banners: "WHO HAS THE BEACH'S BEST BOOTY?"

Kaytee smiled when she saw it. "Let's sign up."

"Why would we do something like that?"

"We've got great asses. It's time the world acknowledged it."

"Yeah . . . I don't think so."

She handed me the pen. "Print your name. Make it legible."

A clutch of college boys drank beer and howled. They were shirtless, sunbaked. We stood on a platform and danced. The master of ceremonies hosed us down and told us to shake it like a Polaroid picture. And when it was over and we'd been judged, I found I had Daytona's fourth-best ass. Kaytee didn't place at all.

If we hadn't entered, we wouldn't have danced. If we hadn't danced, we wouldn't have met them. The Goat and John Milton, that is.

It was Kaytee's fault, of course. It was always Kaytee's fault. Everything bad that had ever happened to me happened because of Kaytee. She was a needy person. A depraved person. She'd do anything to be liked. Anything at all.

We were in the bathroom, getting ready to go out. Kaytee clamped the flatiron to her bushy red hair. She spent an hour every day straightening that mess.

"So what do you think about those guys?"

I wrinkled up my nose. "They seem a little old. To be doing what they're doing."

"The Goat is hilarious. He totally reminds me of my brother."

"And that's a good thing?"

Kaytee adjusted the silicone pads in her bikini top, then smeared more bronzer on her face. She was all freckles. She burned after seconds in the sun.

"I just meant they're both, really, whatever. Funny."

The little bottles of shampoo. The little bottles of leave-in conditioner. The almond-scented soapette. The hair net, the shoe buff. The smell of Kaytee's flatiron plugged in and warming up.

"I guess I'm not drunk enough yet," I said.

There was this one time, back home. We got wasted at an Un Cappa Bru party. I passed out on a sofa. When I woke up, next morning, I found out that someone had stolen all my jewellery. My earrings, my necklace, my bracelets—all gone. Even my diamond tongue stud. They'd pried open my mouth and pulled it out. And where was Kaytee then?

She wasn't content just wrecking her own life. She had to wreck everyone else's, too.

And when was it, exactly, that things stopped being innocent? When I was a kid it was different. When I was a kid it was ice cream cones and cartoons and picking apples in the autumn. But now . . . a darkness had opened up inside me. Every particle of my body was screaming for ugly, animal things.

John Milton said, "I'm a professional adolescent." He said, "Partying, hanging out with beautiful ladies such as yourself—where's the problem?"

He'd been coming here ten years straight. That's what he said. His face

IAN PHILLIPS


HOTEL

was orange and rutted. His hair spiky and blond. He wore a muscle shirt, surf shorts, designer flip-flops. A patch of hair on his chin. He was thirty, thirty-one, at least. He looked artificial.

"We're filming a movie."

"What kind of movie?"

John Milton stroked his chin like a philosopher. "It's called *Spring Break Insanity.* Working title. We might come up with something better."

The ocean was roaring. The sand white and burning. We talked for a while, but there wasn't much to say.

"And you want us in your movie?"

"Absolutely."

"To do what?"

"Here's the scenario: two opponents unwinding after the competition. They dance, they drink, they party."

Kaytee kept touching the Goat. The Goat kept touching her back. He looked just like John Milton, but brown-haired. Same muscle shirt, same muscles. Cracked ketchup in the corner of his mouth.

Things were changing. I could feel them changing, even as I stood there. I'd made some bad decisions, met some bad people. But soon, very soon, I'd leave them all behind. Even here, even now, they were fading to vapour.

Mom and Dad loved me. They also neglected me. I did what I wanted. They paid the Visa. "Have fun in Florida," Mom said, "but call once a day so I know you're alive." She worked in financial services. She had a work phone, a cell-phone, a fax.

Everyone worked in financial services nowadays. My mom, my dad, my aunts, my uncles, my parents' friends. Even the Goat worked in a bank when he wasn't making art films. If you don't fall off a balcony, you'll end up in financial services eventually.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hey, sweetie. Are you having a good time?"

"Totally. We entered a contest and met some really cool people, and we're just having fun and relaxing and forgetting about everything."

I was on the bed, smoking a doob. John Milton was kneeling on the floor, sucking on my big toe. We hadn't done anything, John Milton and me. Not yet. But there was a promise hanging between us.

A GLIMPSE OF MY BRIGHT LIFE IN THE MORNING

I catch a glimpse of my bright life in the morning,
before I begin, it looks like a small dog
up at me to ask which way to go, as I bend
to put on shoes. I step on it for the first
time that day going out the door, then it sees
where we're going—to the office to know
only certain kinds of corners, sharp metal gods
the size of filing cabinets, each day a bundle
of time dropped like a newspaper on my step
and layered so similarly, down to the mall at lunch
(garbage can, bench, plant, bench, garbage can).
I see a man caught in the eye of a camera.
He watches himself on TV, raises an arm,
at last reflected in the face that means so much.
Somehow sad, wrapped in the flag of a trench coat.
I look back, see he's still caught in the spell,
step out to get the brochure reminder: except a man
be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.
And the man who misses the garbage, keeps going,
takes one small piece of my hope, but I get it back
from the crooked wave of a co-worker I like.
At home I get in the door, catch another look
as my life reappears, and like a wet dog,
shakes itself off. Covered in pins, useless notes,
it looks up at me again. I'm tired, I say.

—Alex Boyd

"That's wonderful, honey. I'm glad you called, but I have to run. Someone's standing at my door."

We said goodbye and that was it. In eighty-five minutes I'd fall to the ground and be gone forever.

They say that there's an unseen spiritual dimension to life, that it reveals itself to us if we know how and where to look. But all I saw, as I flailed toward the earth, was physics. All I saw were the laws of nature.

My name was Robin. That was my name. And because my name was Robin, my favourite colour was robin's egg blue. My bedroom—robin's egg blue. My wedge pumps, my snowboard, my Volkswagen—robin's egg blue. It was my colour. I owned it. Even the bikini I wore right now, as I flew through the salty ocean air, was robin's egg blue. The colour of birth.

The Goat aimed his movie camera at me. His left eye was a slit. His mouth was wide and white and leering. John Milton carried a microphone on a stick. He held it over my head like a threat.

I narrowed my eyes at them. "You want me to do what?"

"Show us your boobs."

"What's my motivation?"

"Your motivation is you have nice boobs."

It was all so lame. Transparent and cheap. I had to do it. I had to do it—to mock the whole idea of it. So I pulled up my top and flashed the camera. I did it with irony. I did it with a sneer. Because, after all, boobs are boobs. Every woman has them. And no matter how much they saw of my outside, they'd never see the parts that really counted.

It wasn't until much later—after I fell off the balcony, before I hit the ground—that I realized none of this irony would come across. There's no place for subtlety in this world. No place for poetry. Everything was commerce.

What if it was winter? What if it was frigid and dark and I was on my way home after class? What if the bus was lumbering through the unplowed roads, snow was blowing through the funnels of street light, my mittens smelled of wet wool, and my mom had dinner waiting for me on the table? Why couldn't that be the thing that was real, instead of this?

I didn't expect the railing to be that slippery. Like someone had smeared it with margarine.

And what if I hadn't just fallen off a balcony? What if John Milton hadn't leered at me and said, "Let's see you dance"? I was a normal girl. I would have had a normal life, eventually. The darkness would have passed. I would have had a husband and a child. A house in Oakridge Estates. But now that was gone. My child had been cancelled. My husband had been cancelled.

John Milton hoisted the microphone on the big silver stick.

"Let's see you dance."

"Sure. How's this?"

"Beautiful."

I jumped off the bed and danced onto the balcony. "They say it's a metaphor."

"What is?"

"Dancing."

"A metaphor for what?"

"Anger. Sadness. Unrealized dreams."

"Are you kidding?"

"Uh-huh. Let's take things up a notch. Let's make it dangerous." I boosted my foot onto the railing.

"Careful there, baby, it's a long way down."

"I'm always careful."

"Maybe you should get down. Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

So many decisions to make in a day. So many corners to turn. You can't always know which way to go. Sometimes left, sometimes right. Sometimes up, sometimes down.

Kaytee and I were lying in the sand, the waves of the Atlantic roaring toward us. The air smelled like salt and seaweed, like fried dough and melted sugar. Cigarette smoke drifted across the beach. It felt like I was turning into liquid, soaking through my towel, down into the earth. I could

have stayed there forever.

"Those two boys," I said.

"Who?"

"John Milton. The Goat. They're bad fucking dudes."

"The Goat's funny. The Goat's hot."

"They feed on weakness."

Kaytee rolled over and looked at me. Her skin smelled like boiled sausage. "Sweetie," she said, "who cares? This is Daytona. Nothing here is real. Whatever we do, it's like it never even happened."

Across the ocean was Spain. I could feel it out there, behind my eyelids. Its cities were ancient, blood-soaked. To the south was Antarctica, where icebergs slept in electric-blue water. And far, far away was Chernobyl, where all the old buildings had turned into radiant gardens. There was a whole huge world out there, and some of it was real.

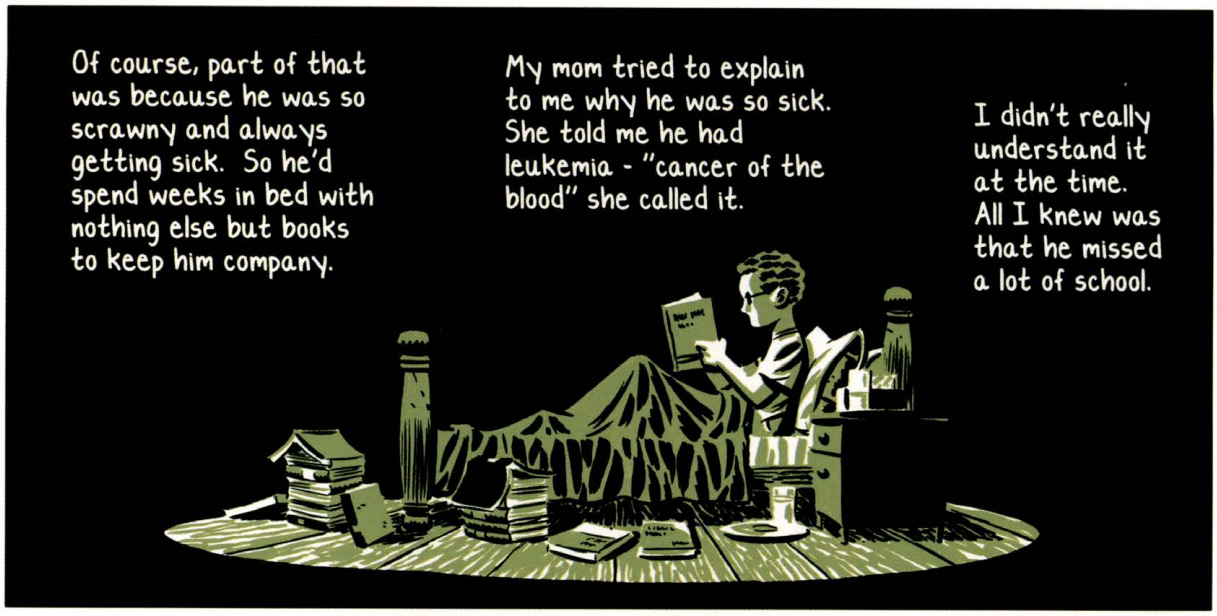
The last thing in this world that I'd see was John Milton's orange and gaping face.

Maybe all I had left now was an interior life. And maybe not even that. Maybe, in a few seconds, as my head cracked like an egg and my brains leaked out over the flagstones, everything would become exterior. My thoughts, my memories, my body. They'd merge with the grass and the trees, and I'd become part of the scenery. I'd float through the air instead of falling, free from all the natural laws. I'd go backwards and forwards in time, reliving my happiest moments. I'd tan without burning, I'd dance without tiring. And I'd never have to work in a bank.

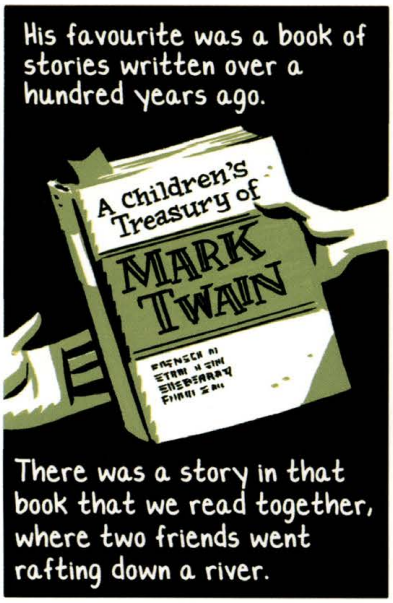
My name was Robin. That was my name. I'd made some bad decisions, met some bad people. You can't always know which way to go. The ocean was roaring, the sand white and burning. And when the lemon gin hit, it was cold, cold. Everything was commerce. The colour of birth. There was a whole huge world out there, and some of it was real. ⊳o

David Whitton lives in North Toronto. His fiction has appeared in the anthology 05: Best Canadian Stories (Oberon, 2005), and in the Fiddlehead, the Dalhousie Review, and the New Quarterly. His short story "The Eclipse," from Taddle Creek's summer, 2005, issue, was long-listed for the Journey Prize. He has contributed to the magazine since 2003.


Stars.
by Michael Cho
When I was in the third grade, my best friend was a kid named Delmont Henry.
Delmont Henry - now that's a strange name, I know.
It sounds kind of backwards, like the teacher is reading it off attendence at school in the morning.
Abbott, Stacey...
here!
Billings, Jeffrey...
yeah.
Delmont, Henry...
...
But that was the name his parents gave him and he had to live with it. It kinda fit him too, because it's a smart kid's name.
And Delmont was smart. Really smart. He always read a lot, and was reading books without pictures by the first grade.

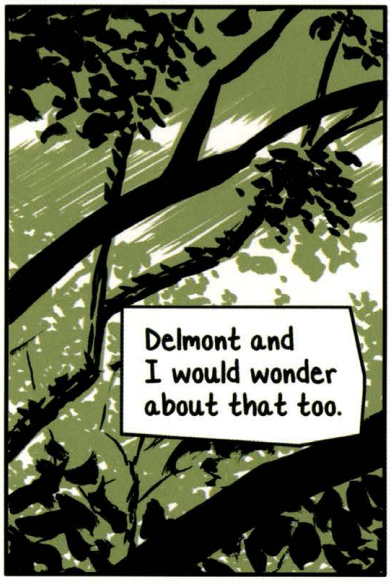

Of course, part of that was because he was so scrawny and always getting sick. So he'd spend weeks in bed with nothing else but books to keep him company.
My mom tried to explain to me why he was so sick. She told me he had leukemia - "cancer of the blood" she called it.
I didn't really understand it at the time. All I knew was that he missed a lot of school.


But he was my friend, and when he was sick like that, I'd come by and visit, because I liked to read too.
My thing was comics, but for Delmont, it was old books. And the older, the better.
Stories about King Arthur, pirates, ghosts - that kind of thing always got Delmont excited.

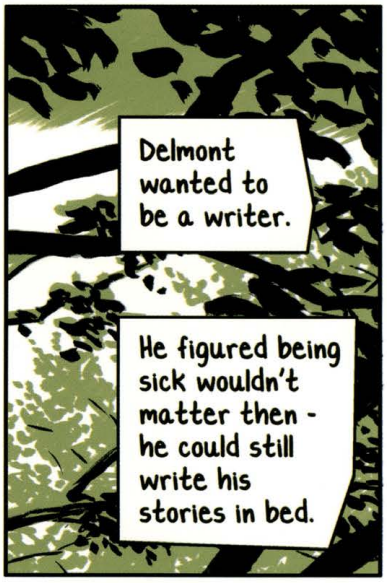

His favourite was a book of stories written over a hundred years ago.
A Children's Treasury of
MARK TWAIN
There was a story in that book that we read together, where two friends went rafting down a river.


We wanted to do that too. We especially liked the part where they went drifting at night, under the stars.
"...sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two - on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming from one of them crafts..."

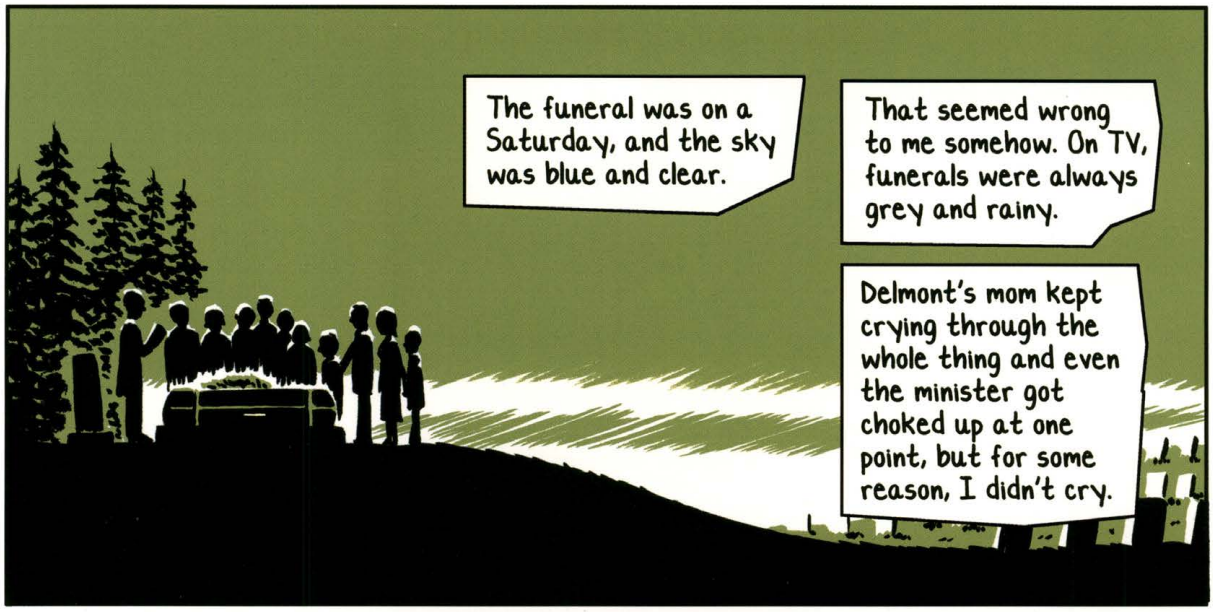

"It's lovely to live on a raft.
"We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened.
"Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened."


Delmont and I would wonder about that too.


That and a million other things, like what we were going to do when we grew up.
I imagined I'd be a detective or the captain of a submarine.


Delmont wanted to be a writer.
He figured being sick wouldn't matter then - he could still write his stories in bed.

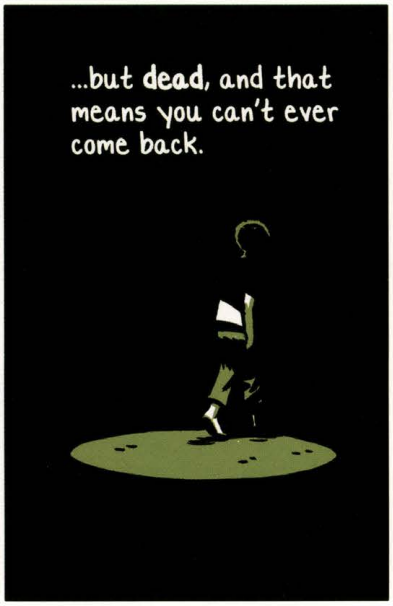

Then, one day...
...a Wednesday, I recall...
...my dad got a call and sat me down.

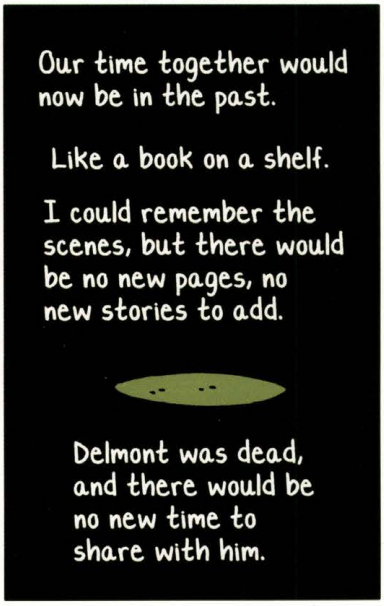

The funeral was on a Saturday, and the sky was blue and clear.
That seemed wrong to me somehow. On TV, funerals were always grey and rainy.
Delmont's mom kept crying through the whole thing and even the minister got choked up at one point, but for some reason, I didn't cry.


I didn't know why that was.
All I knew was that my best friend was gone and I didn't cry.


At home that night, I sat and watched the sky until the stars came out and I thought about Delmont.
I thought about his mom, thought about his books, and I wanted to go and knock on his door.


That's when it finally hit me that he was dead. He wasn't **gone**, because gone means that you can come back...


...but **dead**, and that means you can't ever come back.


Our time together would now be in the past.
Like a book on a shelf.
I could remember the scenes, but there would be no new pages, no new stories to add.
Delmont was dead, and there would be no new time to share with him.

I started crying then, and long streams of tears carried Delmont from my life, like the funeral had carried him from the earth.

I knew then that the stars were not **made**, and that they didn't **just happen**.

They just **were**.

They were, they are, they always would be.

They had no beginning and they had no end.

They had no **reason**.

HEAVEN IS SMALL

An excerpt.

BY EMILY SCHULTZ

Chandler Goods' E-mails were always paired with subject lines that would have sent Gordon's pulse racing, had he had one. Unfortunately, they seldom lived up to the promise.

"Your male opinion" meant she wanted to know if he had noticed Carma's skirt, and if she should get one. "Thinking of you" meant she had straightened out his productivity report with Manos. "Speaking of romance" meant she could not concentrate at all on the business of romance publishing because Titus Bentley was distracting her. She believed he had power issues that were "affecting the Floor 12 vibe." The subject line "A proposal" meant she needed a coffee break—could she steal Gordon for ten minutes of accompaniment?

Gordon was in no position to refuse. He resisted writing back that, now that he noticed it, Carma had been wearing the same skirt for three months, likely three years, and that Titus *definitely* affected the Floor 12 vibe, and that the anxiety he emitted was a symptom of his necrosis. He also refrained from letting on that that cup o' joe had become his greatest joy and sorrow.

"Gord, what's up? It's *Friday,*" Chandler commented on his sour expression. She walked in, fast yet hesitant, the way she always did. "In a hurry," her body said, but also, "Just passing through." It struck Gordon as incredibly cute, since she was only about five feet four in her heels. She had almost made her way out of the kitchen when she stopped at the doorway and doubled back, won over by the mocha scent.

As usual, she didn't have her cup with her. She scrounged around the back of the cupboards, too high for her reach. As she was going through her cup-at-the-back-of-the-cupboard routine, Gordon found himself once again swept into an appointment with her rear end that he had not known was coming. He was not the only man at this appointment. Titus Bentley, as well as a number of men from Design, all sat at the table in the middle of the room, silently sipping from their own fully possessed coffee mugs, none looking too bashful as they drank their fill, each head tipped to a forty-five degree angle, parallel to Ms. Goods' goods. Bentley's face in particular froze into a salacious sneer. His lewd mouth made a dark tear in his face.

Chandler's hands crept blindly across an empty shelf above her head. Her teeth stapled her bottom lip. One knee leaned against the cupboards, for leverage, the other foot off the floor. The loose ruffles of her short sleeves fell back to her shoulders, and the muscles bunched beneath them. All of her streamed upward with effort, including her breasts. Even her eyebrows arched, a bank of effort appearing across her forehead. She glanced in Gordon's direction, then her gaze flew back to the shelf above her.

Gordon walked over to the gathering of gawkers. He kicked the table's leg. Coffee cups burped black liquid over their edges. The men jolted, unfroze. Gordon walked over and produced a cup for her—the one he had brought in with him. With a quick rinse, he handed it over. She blushed, the flush extending across her face and into the cleft of her blouse. "Thank you," she said, her shoulders falling as if they understood better than she the scene that had just played out behind her.

"I don't know why I do that," she said, pointing to the shelf, herself, the shelf, her eyes doing an embarrassed dance between the two. "But that's me." She peered at the straps around her ankles that fastened to curved black heels. "And these aren't getting any taller." She filled Gordon's mug, and, double-double, they walked back to her office. "I'm developing a very serious relationship with that shelf," she yammered. "That third shelf and I." She crossed two fingers.

"Oh, I'm sure you say that about all the shelves," Gordon quipped, and without expressly being invited, he found himself once again inside Chandler's shimmering office. She went through the varied motions of cleaning up without seeming to rearrange any of the actual piles. Gordon inwardly acknowledged the effort as a sign of her self-consciousness. She liked him. He had saved her. She was drinking from his mug. It was as easy as something written on paper.

When his hands were empty, Gordon knew he had his own nervous habit of digging through his pockets for lint, or that imaginary coin. He reached out decisively and plucked a handful of unsharpened pencils from a stout holder of whorled pink glass. He set about the task of sharpening them with a metal wedge. Small pulpy flowers bloomed into one palm as he turned the yellow wood round and round.

"Making yourself useful? Careful, I could get used to having an assistant."

"A male assistant in particular?"

"Oh, I'm really not particular," she said, missing his invitation entirely. She tossed her hair and set the steaming mug down on the desk, kept both her hands wrapped around it as if for warmth, though one thing Gordon had noticed long ago was the building's temperature; even as fall had turned to winter, Heaven seemed to have a flawless thermostat. It was unlike anyplace Gordon had ever worked or schooled.

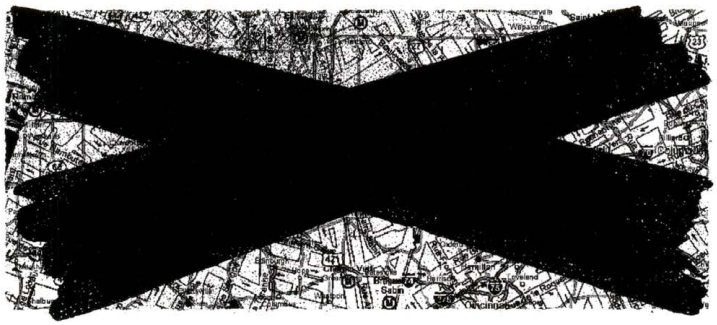
"Is it colder here than in France?" he asked, referencing her recent transfer from the Heaven Paris branch.

"Well, France is north of here, of course. But dampness, crispness, there are different kinds of cold, I'd say. France is no England for instance. But, you know," she continued, as if it were occurring to her only as she spoke, "I haven't had to change my wardrobe. When I left I just assumed I'd buy anything I needed when I got here, but . . . who has time, and I haven't really found it necessary. I can't complain, for a move across an ocean." She sank into the coffee steam, getting down on level with the cup, her chin nearly upon her elbow. "You know what I do miss?"

He watched as she eyed the cup with melancholy. "Café au lait?"

"The sunlight. Paris sunlight is just different."

IAN PHILLIPS



Gordon crumbled three pencils' worth of trimmings into the wastebasket. As they fell, he felt his thumb and ring finger rub together, and just for a second, he felt the familiar absence of his wedding ring, which was still inside a velvet golf-ball-sized box beneath the briefs with the waistband half torn away in the top drawer of the dresser in the upstairs bedroom on Russett Avenue. At least, it had been, he reminded himself. "How can sunshine be different?"

"Oh, you wouldn't say that if you'd ever been to Indiana. The light there is like water leaking out of a cracked glass."

"What does Indiana have to do with Paris?"

Chandler took a long gulp from his coffee mug as if swallowing down her own fear. "It's where I'm from."

The question in Gordon's mind was how she had gotten to Heaven. The question he put forth was how she had gotten to Paris.

The way that Chandler explained it, life began in the outlying farm areas of Indianapolis. "The Crossroads of America" was her town's grand motto, though to apply it to the rural area where the Goods resided was munificent. Chandler described herself as one of those eager, over-anxious children, the kind who are constantly spinning in circles or turning the tiniest problems over and over in their minds in order to avoid running about and biting the light circuits. By sixteen, in a whirl of summer romance, she'd gone and gotten her heart broken worse than one might think imaginable, considering she'd never actually kissed the boy—or any boy for that matter. Though she'd always had difficulty with attendance, her solution to heartbreak was to inhale the smell of the ink from every page of every textbook within the very first month of junior year. She soon skipped ahead, progressing straight to senior without passing Go. If it was a jailbreak to get out of Indiana, Chandler had decided to go the whole nine yards, treating Indianapolis and all its outlying crossroads like San Quentin. Though she applied to top schools across the country, scholarships and bursaries, her true goal was to get off the continent. A convenient, unknown uncle in Scotland emerged at this point in the story, and a letter.

Gordon paused to consider the rudimentary nature of the letter, the penmanship of one Chandler Goods, aged sixteen, in blue felt tip on airmail paper thinner than the Goods' household T.P., the flag on the three-quarter-inch stamp frantically waving—like one of surrender—yet immobile, as Chandler's thenlineless hands clutched it tightly. He imagined her blowing on it for luck, and dropping it finally into the dark of the

TWENTY BUCKS

Guy offers a kid twenty bucks to get in his car,
go for a ride. Don't tell me the kid didn't know
the score. The kid knew enough,
but he didn't know the handcuff trick & the man did.
Man 1, Kid 0.

Twenty American dollars in your hand
cash money, you can live like a king for ten minutes,
huge amounts of dope, a woman overnight,
passage to strange places, any information
you want. Saw it on TV one time.

Twenty dollar bill, gripped in the stripper's fist
& you can't tell if she hates this job
or your whole sex or just this song.

Twenty dollars is half a month's wage in prison
where life is measured out in cigarettes:
five minutes nicotine delight,
five hours to earn it.
Five years inside,
five years left.

For twenty bucks I can get us to Coney Island,
get us a hot dog & still have cab fare home.
Don't ask me how.
I know a guy, that's all I can say.

Gimme twenty bucks for this here chair.
My old dad drank half his life away sitting right there.
Gimme twenty bucks for it,
otherwise, I'm just gonna chop it into matchsticks.

One easy payment of twenty dollars, sorry—no C.O.D.s.
Pay cash no tax, why not? Sounds smart to me.
Black markets everywhere buzz with green bees,
old Mr. Jackson or our own lovely queen.

Twenty piece, fits in your hand, perfect.
Just enough to tide me over, brother.
Do me a solid, man,
gimme twenty bucks.

—Patrick Rawley

box on the block where she had lived her whole life, a series of unknown sacks and baggage compartments awaiting it.

The uncle responded, also in letter form, approximately thirty days later, enclosing the most beautiful photograph Chandler had ever seen. It showed the outlying countryside of his "modest but by all means serviceable estate."

Gordon had an uncanny feeling that he had heard this story before, but he said nothing.

Though her parents objected to her choice, Chandler recalled that she had believed their protective instincts were motivated by their earnestness to keep her harnessed to a life of mediocrity. And so she ascended, hovering over the Atlantic, heart buoyed with girlish dreams—all of which would be dashed in the days to come.

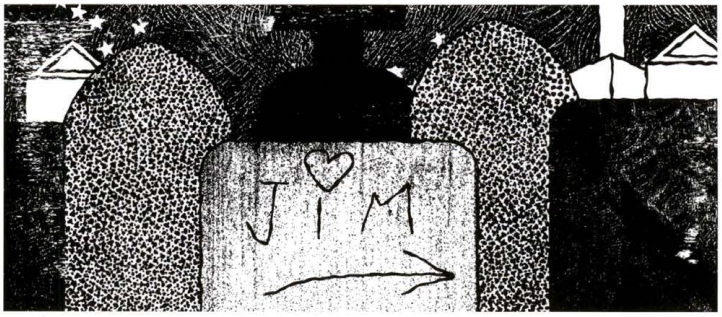
An uncle with no aptitude for pleasantries retrieved her from the airport and drove her farther and farther from civilization, to his indeed "modest but serviceable" estate, the only benefit of which was the view of the neighbours' far more lovely, sprawling, and completely unpopulated properties. Chandler recognized these from the photograph she had kept tacked above her desk in Indiana. She found herself cloistered in a small stone cottage. With no telephone and few modern conveniences inside, the exterior façade resembled a crumbling, forgotten prison. The interior was similarly unwelcoming. The romantic in Chandler vowed to make the best of her situation and she spent her first few hours writing postcards announcing her arrival, and even wrote an original poem on the first page of a shiny hardbacked journal she had bought for the purpose of recording her new life.

The entries that followed were streaked with tears, and Gordon sat aghast as she recounted in endless detail her uncle's demonic behaviour, which began that very night with an unhealthy monitoring of her personal habits, and led, in the days to come, to him intercepting her outgoing and incoming mail (from her uni applications to her pleas to her parents for plane fare), building to a nightly imposition of his basest desires upon her unsuspecting, often sleeping, corpus. He had horrid whiskers, and fouler breath. Though he had lost one hand years earlier, he took particular delight in attempting to stimulate her with his most sinister clamps, stroking her feminine flesh with his unfeeling steel, and—on those days when he feared she might flee from his advances—wielded his medieval hook like a weapon, holding it to her throat as she struggled against him.

Gordon attempted to interrupt Chandler at this uncomfortable point in her story to warn her that he was sure he had read just such a thing in a Heaven title the previous week, but she patted his hand on the third word out of his mouth—as if he were attempting to console her—and rushed on.

She had fought her uncle always, though he continued to tell her how much sweeter their love would be if she would only give in to what he knew was

her heart's true desire. He took to referring to her as his American Mail Order, and ordered her about the isolated garden simply by the name "Bride." When she found the actual marriage licence among his papers, her forged signature and the deadline of their pending appointment led her to grasp the gravity of her situation: she would need to do more than merely survive his abuse, she would need to escape now or perish into what would become a lifetime of sexual submission and servitude, a regulated schedule of eternal misery.



By the time Chandler arrived at this junction in her story, twelve proofreaders (two of the same faces twice) had trooped through to pick up ten new manuscripts, and, inside the wastebasket, Gordon had cultivated a garden of pencil shavings that threatened to drop its sooty petals to the floor—most of her pencils now nubs. At this vital point, Chandler became so ambiguous about her "escape" that Gordon began to suspect the rope or the razor.

"Maybe life is just a series of increasingly bizarre escapes," he interjected, trying both to comfort and to prompt. A paternal desire overcame him, to reach out and stroke her elbow or her hair, but he tamped it down.

Chandler smiled that self-deprecating smile, the one that emphasized not only her dimple, but the faint lines around her mouth. No matter how long she had lived under the malicious thumb of her uncle, she could not have lived there as many years as fell between seventeen and thirty. The skin around her eyes was still lusciously unyielding, but her mouth was more pliant: she was no child.

Gordon questioned her, as congenially as one can when inquiring into absconding from incestuous rapists. He quickly determined that, in spite of what it said on her business card, Ms. Chandler Goods had never been to Paris.

Her knowledge was rooted in the vocabulary of a would-be tourist, something book-learned melding with fantasy gleaned from movies and photographs—or, perhaps, it occurred to Gordon, with the view of one stationed just slightly above the city, looking from an unchanging position, a permanent window. In Chandler's Paris there were no beggars, no dog droppings, no confused tangle of metro lines, none of the fine filth that had covered the city and crept its way under Gordon's nails and even into his nostrils, darkening his phlegm when he spat, during the few days he'd spent as a student backpacking around Versailles, the Louvre, the Sorbonne, Sacré Coeur at Montmartre, and, of course, at the Lizard King's grave. Chandler's apartment had no

THE THREAT OF THE COMFORT INN

In bell jar, the grizzled remains
of heavy summer lumber.
Arms up, maw stuffed
with thick lacquered tongue.
What Mat-Su afternoon ended
in this lazy edit?

Down the hall, ice cubes calve
inside the ice machine.
A corner of carpet
begins its slow curl.
The hostess's pink nails
drum down the seconds.

Her bored blue eyes shift
to what water could reanimate—
what animal would tear
into poly-mix beds,
split continental-fed businessmen
from wallet to ear.

But what's there remains
in state under the ten-point shadow
of a deer antler chandelier.
A slippery procession of children
shuffle past, move from pool
to room to chlorine-rimmed sleep.

Whatever tragedy would allow her
to go home early, happen now.

—Dani Couture

neighbourhood, or, if it did, it was a strange patch of land able to levitate itself and switch from left to right bank at will. She had no transit route to work, and no friends outside the office. She had never been to a nightclub. She did not know the number of francs required for a Coca-Cola or a *bouteille de vin,* nor the name of the *boulangerie* where she bought her *petit déjeuner.* The only thing she seemed able to detail with any accuracy was the work she'd done. And even that, strangely, was in English, as though, in spite of the prevalence of French names, Chandler's entire department had been a flock of expats.

Whether she noticed his sudden spike in curiosity or not, Chandler meandered right back round to "Paris sunshine . . ." placing her chin on her palm with a sigh. "It's like a net thrown over the sky to try to catch the clouds. In the morning, the sky was always white along the bottom, and overhead, a pale seventies blue . . . like my mother's eyeshadow."

"How . . ." Gordon tossed a handful of shavings—and an entire pencil nub along with them—into the trash. "How could you give two poops about sunshine after everything you went through?" Two things occurred to him even as the question escaped his mouth. The first was that he had just asked after something he didn't even believe. The second was that he had quite naturally reached for the phrase "two poops" instead of the beloved four-letter version he had favoured when he worked at the mall.

Chandler leaned her head into one hand like a twelve-year-old. She peered at his mug, now empty, as she hooked a pinky finger through its handle and dangled it, letting it swing, her eyes following the slight impromptu pendulum. "Everywhere you go, Gordon. Everywhere—" She glanced past the mug to him as if offering it back. "You have to find something, at least one thing, to love."

He reached out and took the mug carefully from her fingers, which were cool to the touch. The phrase "the cool hand of a girl" came to his mind, but he banished it with a half-hearted smile.

Gordon had expected one would remember important things after dying—those emotional, life-altering moments. But what he remembered were the mundane, passing-time days of errands and meandering. What he remembered most clearly was contemplating buying a carry-on for a vacation he never wound up taking. The bag had thick black straps and leather on the handles, a thick silver zipper, and a leather logo patch—and the saleswoman, name-tagged Anita, had smiled in this super-genuine way. He remembered standing there with a riot in his stomach, wondering if he should shell out the seventy bucks so she could make her commission, deciding in the end to postpone it for the express purpose of a return trip to the store and a future conversation. For weeks Gordon had walked by, peripherally obsessed, trying to monitor her shifts so he could ask her out, but never going back and doing it in the end, and never buying the carry-on either.

His life was an urban mall. His memories were Freshly Squeezed, Bubble Tease, Jimmy the Greek, Roasty Jack, New York Fries, Made in Japan, Bagel Stop, Cinnabon, Carlton Cards, Deco Home, Payless, Radio Shack, Island Ink-Jet, H.M.V. The cherry rosettes of photograph-perfect ice-cream cups were frequently replaced by seasonal promotions tied into children's films Gordon knew but hadn't seen. Surf's up! Fruit blast! Splish splash! Penguin swirl!

When Gordon tried to remember the important things—like his wedding to Chloe, or, even better, their wedding night—it was like holding one shoe in

his hand and leaning over, peering under beds for the other. The memories were cobwebbed, dark. But the temperamental price gun from Gags 'N Tease still jammed in Gordon's hands; and he could still visualize the cartoon faces on the latest batch of Simpsons T-shirts. SpongeBob SquarePants Forever Bubbles key chains retailed for four seventy-five. Add that to a movie poster for seven ninety-nine and you've just bought a fabulous birthday present for less than fifteen dollars—with tax! Cultural detritus floated up at him, dreamlike. He recalled bikini-girl beer holders, classic horror-movie calendars, and in the fishbowls that lined the counter, rock 'n' roll buttons, rubber lizards, dice with sexual commands printed on their sides, innovatively shaped pencil toppers, light-up gel pens, and bug boxes with magnifying lids, perfect for catching insects in, and one of which Gordon had pocketed immediately and used to carry his magic pills. The sound the Vivatex tablets had made the first few days he carried them was like a tiny maraca teeming with beans. To the left of his heart, where he kept them even now, inside his shirt pocket, invisible, the eraser-sized see-through box rattled with the pleasure of his pain. As white as Chloe's birth control pills, they became his own kind of control.

Gordon remembered ordering tubs of French fries and waiting. Waiting for shifts to start and shifts to end. He remembered the backroom where they cashed out at the end of the night, the rhythm of dimes trilling beneath thumbs. He remembered the big rock in the park that he had passed every day as he left work and proceeded to Brass Taps on College Street for supper (pizza, burger, or suicide wings), and he remembered the Doberman, the border collie, and the pit bull who all passed him with daft looks of doggy satisfaction, who took turns lifting their legs and spraying the rock's grey to black.

When Gordon joined Chandler next in her office, just days later, her confessions had evaporated. It did not take long for Gordon to realize Chandler's confidences were about as thought out as her E-mails: banged out in a frenzy and sent off with no reread, no forethought nor fear of the impression she was making, nor any hope of answer. She went into a two-hour inventory about the workforce she had left behind in Paris.

"Daniel was known for his little dog, and photographs of little dogs, and conversations of little dogs; Lizette for top buttons undone; Laurent for middle buttons undone; Eduard for worshiping Tour de France, for slinking in and out of rooms silently, his body sleek as a bicycle."

At the end of her prattle, seemingly without any prompt, Chandler dug under a stack of folders and came out with a stiff cardboard package, which she handed him. "GORDON SMALL, HEAVEN" it said on the rectangular label. It was the book he had ordered from an on-line retailer—to test whether items could travel between the living and the dead.

"For you?" she asked with a hint of suspicion, even though the bookseller's logo was prominently printed in the return address corner.

Gordon nodded, and without a word he took it away. As he walked, he let his hands slip up and down as if weighing something, and enjoyed the shape the cardboard made against his skin. It didn't feel nearly as heavy as he had expected.

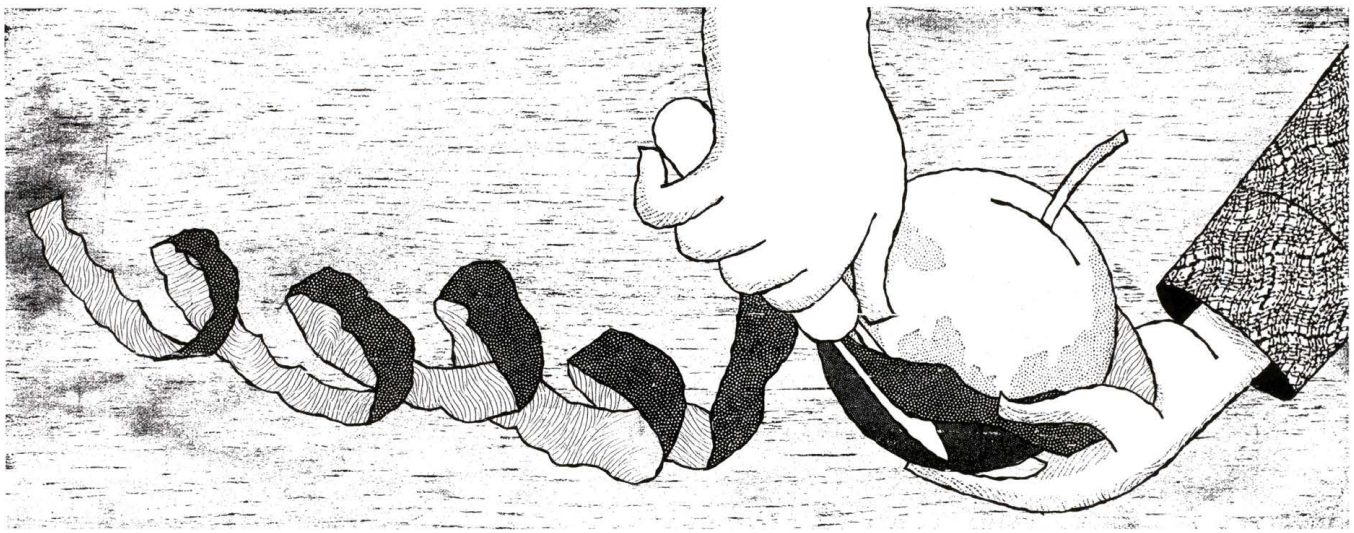
In his cubicle, he tore his finger open on the staple, put it in his mouth and sucked, though there was no blood, and nothing to suck. As the cardboard gates opened, he saw that the cover was not the blue-green twilit expanse he had anticipated. The book had a mottled wine colour for its cover, and the adorning name did not belong to Gordon's ex-wife. Half in roman and half in script, the title declared: *The Purpose-Driven Life.* Gordon dropped the book and its packaging abruptly on the desk and sat staring at it.

A moment later, Chandler E-mailed. Her subject taunted, "Is it good?" The body of her message read: "What did you get?"

Gordon used one finger to push *The Purpose-Driven Life* an inch at a time across the surface of his desk. It hung half on and half off then fell with a wallop into his garbage basket.

"The wrong thing," he wrote.

Emily Schultz lives in Parkdale. She is the author of the poetry collection Songs for the Dancing Chicken (ECW, 2007), the collection Black Coffee Night (Insomniac, 2002), and the novel Joyland (ECW, 2006). She has contributed to the magazine since 2003.



THE YEAR OF SILENCE

BY CAMILLA GIBB

Every other Saturday morning I slammed my face into Dad's hard belly. He had no choice but to envelop me in a dewy, Irish Spring–smelling hug, even though bodily contact was anathema to him—a foreign phenomena, American in all the very worst ways.

He had the gruff voice of a lonely, heavy smoker—six hundred cigarettes and not much else for company all week—and he wore his blue suit, which was soft with wear because he never wore anything else. The rest of his clothes were in the closet upstairs.

He took me to a greasy spoon, where he ordered bacon with two runny eggs and home fries and I had a vanilla milkshake. He always gave me a quarter for the jukebox, which I clutched in my palm as I laboured over my choice before finally pressing G-something, but it was never the tune I intended. I would slink back into the booth in humiliation and Dad would say, "That's an oldie—an oldie but a goodie," and I would feel ever-so-slightly redeemed.

We spent the day at his office, where he did paperwork in the front room and I built a fort between boxes of paper and broken chairs. Later, he peeled an apple for me in one single strip with his Swiss Army knife. The traffic light cast alternating rays of red and green over the room as the sun disappeared behind the big buildings in the distance.

"Best be getting you home," Dad said, and I obediently picked up my pencil crayons and put them into my satchel. We drove home in silence in the car with a pine air freshener hanging from the mirror and I wondered where Dad slept.

Mum never asked more than, "O.K.?" when I got home. It was the year that everyone stopped speaking.

One Saturday I lunged into Dad's stomach and opened my eyes to see grey. I pulled back in confusion—he was wearing a different suit. I wondered if Mum had let him upstairs. He had his bacon and eggs and I had my milkshake, and I pressed the jukebox button and for the first time ever I got the song I intended, and Dad said, "Don't know that one," and I worried I'd disappointed him.

When I came home that night Mum said more than, "O.K." She said, "My friend Bill's coming for dinner, so why don't you change into your new dress?" She had on blue eyeshadow and a skirt I'd never seen before. My new dress was laid out on the bed. I tugged it roughly over my head without undoing the zipper. I heard it tear before I felt it tear. I tugged some more.

"It's broken," I said standing at the top of the stairs, holding up my arms.

"Oh dear," Mum muttered, wiping her hands on an apron. "Well, I don't have time to fix it now."

So I kept my arms at my side when I met Bill, refusing to shake his outstretched hand.

Mum served fancy food—coquilles St. Jacques—and I wondered what beach had shells so big, and whether we would ever have a holiday there.

"Delicious," said Bill.

"Where does Dad sleep?" I asked my mother.

Bill looked into his shell and Mum cleared her throat and said, "Not now, Ruby," and took a sip of wine from Bill's glass. Her lipstick left an oily pink mark.

I picked up my sticky shell and cupped it over my ear, relieved by the hollow roar of the ocean. Cream slid down my neck as I struggled to hear the echoes of speech within the abyss.

Camilla Gibb lives somewhere between the Annex and Rosedale. She is the author of three novels, including Sweetness in the Belly (Doubleday, 2005)—short-listed for the Giller Prize and winner of the 2006 Trillium Book Award—and Mouthing the Words (Pedlar, 1999), winner of the 2000 Toronto Book Award. She has contributed to the magazine since 2000.

IAN PHILLIPS

THE PROFILE

EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

Hal Niedzviecki—Canada's self-defined indie guru—faces adulthood, fatherhood, and a growing generation gap.

BY LAUREN McKEON

Hal Niedzviecki is obsessed with fame—not necessarily his own, but the type of fleeting fame that makes others thrust themselves into the spotlight. Talent doesn't seem to matter, he observes; fame junkies just need their fifteen-minute fix, to feel the thrill of admiration, the sheer sense of being everywhere, the surety of "specialness." In Niedzviecki's perfect world, there would be less of this type of fame and, he says, almost wistfully, "more people doing cool stuff."

Niedzviecki's own experience in the spotlight has lasted much longer than fifteen minutes, long enough for him to do some "cool stuff" of his own. Since the late nineties, he has produced a short-story collection, three novels, an anthology, three books of analysis on the state of culture (both popular and alternative), a ghost-written biography, and a city-dweller's almanac, not to mention countless newspaper and magazine articles. He has appeared frequently on radio and television, and along the way also managed to co-found *Broken Pencil,* a quarterly magazine dedicated to zines and D.I.Y. culture, and its corresponding annual zine fair, Canzine. In the process, Niedzviecki has become one of Canada's most interesting—and bizarrely original—cultural commentators.

Niedzviecki's non-fiction topics range from reinventing Judaism through pop culture to the dirge of "stupid" hipster books available near the cash register at stores like Urban Outfitters. In its crudest form, his fiction is made up of flashes of masturbation, pornography, cyborgs, shit, piss, and sex. It's visceral, it's emotive, and, in the words of the writer and editor Darren Wershler-Henry, with whom Niedzviecki co-wrote *The Original Canadian City Dweller's Almanac,* it's "some of the weirdest fiction that's being produced in Canada today."

Yet, past the surface, Niedzviecki's stories can also be softly tragic and even tender. An early short story titled "Between Two Old Ladies" contains only the six words, "There is a sudden smell here." His novel *Lurvy* is a blow-job–filled retelling of E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web,* from the perspective of the farmhand. And in the cyberthriller *The Program,* Danny, a boy who may have suffered sexual abuse at the hands of his uncle, grows up desperate to meld himself with his computer.

Despite some touches of sublime weirdness, Niedzviecki's writing is, as Anne Collins, who edited and published two of his novels for Random House, says, "so serious it hurts." That seriousness involves the balance in Niedzviecki's fiction between his provocative brush strokes of society at its most animal—or most human—and a thoughtful critique of many of the most pressing issues in Canadian culture today. Unlike on TV or the Web, Niedzviecki's layers can't be coasted through. Reading his work requires thought, which isn't always easy—explaining, perhaps, his modest but steady sales numbers.

"What is fiction supposed to do?" asks Collins. "Is it just supposed to reassure us, comfort us, make us feel like we've gone to some other place for a week or two, or is it supposed to help us figure out what the hell we are and how we are mutating?"

While some authors have little more to offer than the intellectual equivalent of a one-way ticket to Disneyland, and become famous doing it, Niedzviecki is engaged in the genuinely cool act of dissecting the world and trying to analyze the nearly seven billion people on it, including himself.

Growing up in Ottawa, Niedzviecki, like most teens, spent little time thinking about the future. By his own words, he was never "one of those kids who would go and write a novel at fourteen," but he did read ferociously—a book a week, at least, during junior high.

Niedzviecki's father, Sam, worked as a civil engineer for the Canadian government. In 1981, when Niedzviecki was eleven, Sam was sent to work on a project with the World Bank, in Washington, D.C. When he decided to make the move permanent, the family left their home in Ottawa, and Niedzviecki spent the remainder of his youth in the United States, attending Winston Churchill, a public high school in nearby Maryland's well-to-do Montgomery County.

Churchill was the type of school Niedzviecki says encouraged "extra thinking." It boasted a "fancy literary magazine"—Niedzviecki took the required English class to become a staff member—and a biweekly newspaper Niedzviecki also worked on. "I was like assistant, assistant arts editor," he says. "Basically, all I did was sweep the floor." Yet, despite his involvement in the student press, Niedzviecki still wasn't producing much beyond his class assignments.

Writing, he says, somewhat elusively, is something he eventually "fell into." It wasn't until he moved back to Canada, to complete a bachelor of art in English literature and philosophy at the University of Toronto, that Niedzviecki attempted his first short stories—ones he says he remembers only vaguely. During the next four years, he developed a certain enchantment with words—and an inkling of their power.

In the essay "Darker Country," published in the 2007 anthology *Generation What?: Dispatches from the Quarter-Life Crisis,* Niedzviecki reflects on time he

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK LYALL

spent on a study exchange in Scotland: "My classes ground me, give me something to do. More than that: they suggest a truth. . . . The words read out loud by the professor fill me with an inescapable longing, a need that cannot be satisfied. Words create places, and places create words. Perhaps I can find words, create a place."

Despite eventually earning a master of fine arts in creative writing from Bard College, in New York state, Niedzviecki never dreamed he would be able to make a living as a writer. His choices, he felt, were to become a full-time journalist—a career that held no appeal for him—or bust. He settled on the life plan of taking low-stress jobs that wouldn't exhaust his "mental energies"; for Niedzviecki, this included employment as an usher, security guard, delivery boy, data co-ordinator, and publishing intern. These jobs enabled him to work in his off hours on projects that held his interest.

One such project ended up being a magazine called *Broken Pencil.* Like so many great ideas, *Broken Pencil* began over a glass—or two, or three—of beer. Late one night in 1995, at the now defunct Beverley Tavern, on Queen Street West, Niedzviecki got on to the topic of starting a literary review with his friend Hilary Clark, who was then tending bar, and would later go on to become the first managing editor of a resurrected Coach House Books. Their original idea of reviewing independent journals and literary publications would eventually come to focus on zines and D.I.Y. zine culture, similar to the format of the U.S. magazine *Factsheet 5.*

The modern zine had come out of the nineteen-seventies punk movement, and by the following decade was entrenched in the independent scene—photocopied, stapled, personal forms of expression. By the nineties, the zine movement was at its peak, thanks in part to that decade's supposedly lost, slacker generation—perfect timing for a project like *Broken Pencil.*

Figuring a budget of two thousand dollars would cover printing costs, Niedzviecki borrowed a portion of his share from his parents. "I told them I had to buy, like, a vacuum cleaner or something like that," he says. Though the desktop publishing revolution was underway, technological—and, more to the point, financial—limitations still meant pasting up hard-copy pages to send to press, which was done using facilities at the *Varsity,* the University of Toronto's student paper, where Niedzviecki had worked as the arts editor and for which he still wrote on a regular basis. Completed mostly during the paper's late-night/early-morning off hours, putting *Broken Pencil* together was extremely labour intensive. But, by the fall of 1995, when the first issue was launched, Niedzviecki had followed through with a project that most leave at its pipe-dream stage. "That's just the way I am," he says. "I get something in my mind that I want to do, and I'll do it."

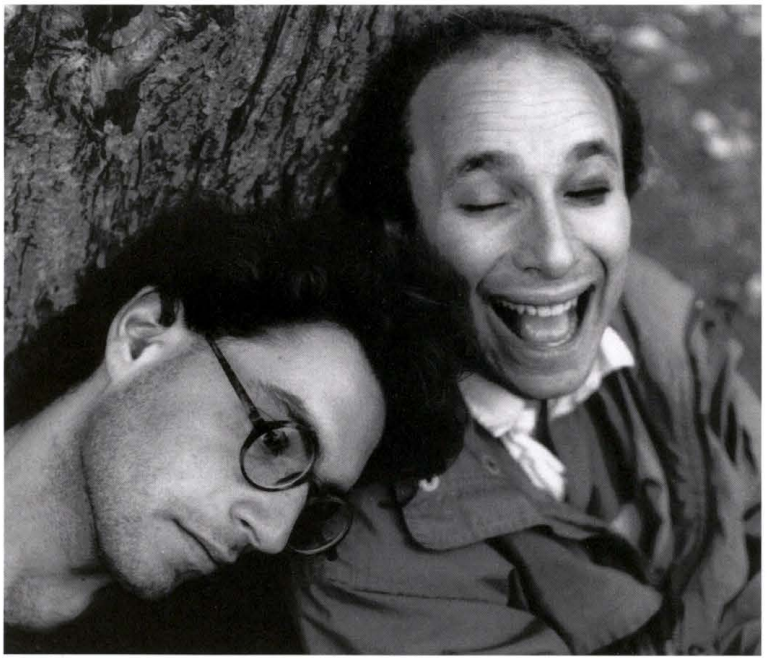
After the first issue of *Broken Pencil* was published, Niedzviecki was offered his first professional writing assignment. David Dauphinee, an editor at the *London Free Press,* had seen the magazine and was intrigued by the ideas it presented. He offered Niedzviecki four hundred dollars to write a feature on zine culture. At that

point, Niedzviecki's day jobs consisted of working as a theatre usher and driving the *Varsity's* delivery van—four hundred dollars was close to a week's salary. The big payday and prominent placement in the paper's Saturday edition got him thinking there was probably a better way to make money than hauling around bundles of newspapers. He wrote several more articles for the *London Free Press* and eventually began pitching assignments to other publications, including the *Globe and Mail,* the *National Post,* and *This Magazine.* Within five years, Niedzviecki's life plan had changed: he no longer needed to worry about exhausting his mental energies with menial day jobs; he was able to do what he wanted full time.

Before the decade was out, Hal Niedzviecki had become the It Boy for the independent community. What the *London Free Press* began—Niedzviecki's self-defined role as cultural commentator—practically every other news organization in Canada reinforced. He has, over the years, become the mandatory sound bite for anything the mainstream might consider weird or off-the-wall—though it's not always a mantle he wears with comfort. Once, in a 2001 article for *This,* he described the guilt that came from a classroom speaking experience: "The hour went by slowly. After 50 minutes of fielding questions about how to write a novel, how to make a living as a fiction writer, how to self-publish, even I was sick of my own prevarications. . . . I wanted to tell them, in my entire life I have never planned for anything to happen to me, nor do I have any good advice to impart."

But that didn't stop the media from calling. Over the next decade Niedzviecki would be asked to comment on every aspect of independent culture, and was even approached to take the defence stand for John Robin Sharpe, a Vancouver man accused of disguising child pornography as literature. Niedzviecki had become, despite his measured embarrassment, precisely what a 1998 *Toronto Star* profile dubbed him: the "guru of independent/alternative creative action."

In recent years, Niedzviecki, now thirty-six and living in Toronto's Little Portugal neighbourhood, has slowly taken a less active role at *Broken Pencil.* He gave up the editorship and day-to-day operations of the magazine in 2002, and now holds the titles of publisher and fiction editor. The duties of being editor-in-chief were like a "mountain" on him some days, he says. His current role allows him to spend much less time in the office, and more time on other projects. "Some days I think I love it, and I start thinking I'll be publisher or fiction editor forever. And then some days I think I should get out of it altogether."



Niedzviecki and Ed Rubinstein, the mid-nineties musical duo Anger Only.

Another recent event in Niedzviecki's life that has caused him to slow down somewhat was the birth of his daughter, Elly, in 2005. Niedzviecki says he initially found it hard to settle into his new role as parent. "I wanted to keep doing what I've always been doing: late nights, drinking, lots of going out to things, experiencing the city and all it has to offer." He has since altered his life accordingly, splitting child-care duties half the week with his wife of nine years, Rachel Greenbaum, a child psychologist, waking at five-thirty most mornings, and no longer writing articles that require an intensive nightlife.

However, Niedzviecki's writing still doesn't really reflect that he's growing up. He's yet to write a story about changing diapers, turning spoons of baby food into airplanes, or the general crises of a slightly balding father—which, with a full mop of hair, he is not.

Niedzviecki explains he's developed a decade-long delay in his writing, taking the time to digest and find insights. Today, he's still writing about twentysomethings; in ten years he'll likely write about thirtysomethings starting families. (The change has already begun to creep in to some degree—in 2007 Niedzviecki published *The Big Book of Pop Culture: A How-to Guide for Young Artists.*) "It's like you call a plumber," he says, "and there's the plumber, and he's nineteen, and the plumber doesn't have as much experience, and it may take him longer to figure out what to do. And now I'm the older plumber—I'll come into your house and I'll know what's the problem with your pipes quicker." Niedzviecki pauses. "I don't know—that was the dumbest analogy ever."

But a culture gap between Niedzviecki and his intended audience may be beginning to show. In January, 2007, Niedzviecki wrote an article for the *Globe and Mail* on cruel bloggers. The article was written after a university student he had met and casually chatted with at a family gathering went home and described Niedzviecki on her blog as a "typical yuppy, cynical culture critic."

"What kind of medium allows for such a casual invasion of privacy, for such offhand disparagement?" Niedzviecki shot back in the *Globe.* In other words, can't bloggers think of their target's feelings before they act?

Apparently not. The feedback on his article was quick and harsh. Bloggers with on-line handles like "Momo" and

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"SpecialK" posted comments that ran from mean ("You know how 'miserable failure' gives you George W. on Google? Is there a way to make 'simpering pussy' point to Hal Niedzviecki?") to cries of selling out ("He probably got paid to write that piece.")

When asked if he'd seen any of the on-line comments on his piece, Niedzviecki laughs. "I really did enjoy reading [them]. It was a lot of fun. . . . I think in a lot of bloggers' minds they're against the Man. So if someone comes out in the *Globe and Mail* criticizing them, it's the Man."

Although comments posted by bloggers in the aftermath of his article were much more scathing than the blog that prompted them, Niedzviecki says the difference is that he knew what he was saying in the *Globe* would be entering the public sphere. "We're sitting here, we're doing an interview, so I know that everything I say is public," he says. "If I met you in a bar talking about my erectile dysfunction problems, are you going to blog about that? I would think not. . . . There's a blurring of those lines." Besides, he adds, the bloggers were really just proving his point by making the same quick judgments he so lamented in his article.

Even so, there's more than one sad truth here. On one hand, Niedzviecki, who is held up as the bastion of all things hip, smart, and alternative by some, is also not only virtually unknown to the wide Canadian public, hooked as it is into the mainstream through an I.V. in its arm, but also to the group who, arguably, are the zinesters of the twenty-first century. His gripe with bloggers—and their gripe with him—points to a growing generation gap between the hipsters of the nineties and the hipsters of the new millennium. The world twentysomethings live in now is so saturated with easily available personal information—from age, gender, phone number, and sexual orientation to hour-to-hour updates of their relationships, moods, and sex lives—that one more casual observation, mean or not, is no big deal.

In many ways, Niedzviecki's work hits on why it is he is at the same time mainstream and independent, celebrated and unknown, everywhere and nowhere. In his 2004 book, *Hello, I'm*

Special: How Individuality Became the New Conformity, Niedzviecki explored the constructs of this generation's YouTube-MySpace mindset. The formerly independent-minded conduits, he explains, have grown into a mainstream highway to fame. On that highway are droves of desperate and deluded young people the world over, proclaiming their specialness, lining up to be the next Canadian Idol or Top Model.

The result is an "alternative" culture that is asking itself: Alternative to what, exactly? Niedzviecki argues that there is no more underground. Now, he says, "mainstream culture incorporates pretty much anything that anyone will buy, or not." Explicit violence is mainstream, so is homosexuality, drug use, environmentalism, African aid, and gay pornography. Niedzviecki notes there is genuine creative action happening on an independent basis, but adds, "You're fooling yourself if you justify what you do on the basis of being underground, or against the Man. In fact, in many cases you're working to the Man's advantage by creating a false dichotomy between underground and mainstream."

These same ideas, among many, are woven into Niedzviecki's fiction. Random House's Collins says her biggest job when editing Niedzviecki is to flag the "undigested cultural criticism." For his part, Niedzviecki explains that while his earlier fiction was "just [a] burst of emotion," newer works are "animations" that explore how "human beings try to use mass culture to form narrative about themselves." For him, non-fiction is abstract and even the "real people" become abstract because they are "stand-ins for an idea." In his novels, Niedzviecki can put his abstractions into his own fictional world and see how they play out. In the novel *Ditch,* the lead characters are searching for a kind of pop-culture identity. In *The Program,* Danny tries to become a cyborg so he can control his memories, resulting in a story about using memory as a metaphor for technology and the relationship between individuality and capitalism.

Niedzviecki is a man navigating our mass culture meltdown, trying to eke out his own identity—someone who situates himself as an independent creator because he's not dedicated to any one entity or corporation, and a writer who is unknown by many of the people who should admire him most. He is an intellectual interested in a world where people do things on a not-for-profit basis to express themselves—from backyard wrestling to collecting elephant figurines—someone who is more concerned with packaging and style than what he feels is the obsolete notion of "selling out."

Ultimately, Niedzviecki is mired in the same problems as his characters, fictional and real, with one foot in the mainstream world, one in the independent world—both worlds colliding. Nearly a decade after being anointed, Niedzviecki is still the guru of indie culture, but now he is just one among billions, in a universe that is just as likely to turn to the "crap" as it is the "cool stuff."

Lauren McKeon lives in an undisclosed suburban location. She recently graduated from being a poor, starving student to a poor, slightly less hungry freelancer.

BUYING CIGARETTES FOR THE DOG

BY STUART ROSS

You say you don't know why I'm hiding in a stinking alleyway, playing Beethoven symphonies on the lids of garbage cans and masturbating to the memory of my dead wife. I could turn it around and ask you the same thing, Jack: why you're living in a three-bedroom house in Oakville with a blind woman named Elaine Trumbo and painting racing stripes down the sides of your sweatpants.

Consider the damage the war has done. Consider the non-stop cough of car horns shattering the windows of vacant motels. Consider this: with each year, since we were small children drinking warm water from garden hoses and playing croquet until dark, I have become one year older, and there's been no stopping this temporal onslaught. The years pushed me out of my parents' house and slapped me around behind the plaza where we used to buy bags of chips for five cents and *Archie* comics for twelve cents. I liked grape ice cream and you liked spumoni, perhaps because your last name was Spumone.

"Better Spumone than sputum"—the motto that made you school president. Better Jack than jism. Better Betty than Wilma, and Betty than Veronica, too. Better beaten and gasping than dead and impaled on a steering wheel like Bobby Fischbaum, his car crumpled into the monkey bars we used to play on. Better not forget to take your medication, even when you've got to refill your water-glass to get through all those fucking capsules. Better beggar than beagle.

She's dead, but I did not leave her. I stepped out the door, looking back over my shoulder and shouting, "Going for smokes," and you never know where life's journey is going to take you, like you never know how the years are going to shove you around. I walked down the street and sauntered into the convenience store like the happiest man alive, which I was, and I bought a pack of Rothman's, or Rothmans, I can't remember whether or not there was an apostrophe, even though I probably went through several thousand packs, which is to say one per year until I was three thousand and twelve, my current age, though I wear the years well. When I left the shop, I turned right, and I cut through the synagogue parking lot, and I ended up at the highway, where I waited until I could dash across, first to the median, and then to the other side. In the distance, apartment buildings rose black against the inky blue sky, and smoke churned out of chimneys and blended with the dark clouds.

I was thinking about her as I walked back, although "back" ended up being the opposite direction, as I decided to circle the globe and still be home in time for dinner. I was in the land of factories by the time I could walk no more, at least for that day, and I climbed a fence and tried some doors and finally found my way into a building that billed itself as "FOUNDRY JIMINEZ," and I crawled into a mould that fit my body exactly.

Jack, I did not know then that she was dying, she hadn't told me, and you wouldn't have known it to look at her, or even to fuck her, which I hope you never did, though occasionally the glances that passed between you and my wife did not go unnoticed by my bloodshot peepers. Oh, there was sleep that night, and a siren in the morning, and footsteps, and the clanging of machinery, and blows to my face, perhaps by Jiminez himself. I was offered a job and given a small apartment with a dog and a typewriter named Princey—they were both named Princey—and years passed.

I made beautiful things. They were shiny and useful, and you probably have one now in your kitchen in Oakville. I worked and took my morning break and worked and took my lunch and ate a sandwich with cheese and grasped for straws and, finding none, drank straight from the glass and worked some more and went home. I petted Princey—both of them—and after several years remembered I was running an errand.

My journey home was filled with fairy-tale marvels. The world had changed so much I barely recognized it. The sidewalks were filled with tiny desks and computer stations, and seated at each was a child, slumped and pale, tapping the keys while resting his forehead against the monitor. They hummed and rocked and screamed, but their fingers kept tapping, Jack. And when I looked a little closer, I saw that their fingers rarely touched anything but numbers. Imagine a world of numbers and nothing else. A world where "dog," "cat," "spumoni," and "tree" do not exist. Only numbers, endless trains of numbers spreading like viruses across the fingerprints of our youth.

I couldn't help but think that if they'd only kept the price down on *Archie* comics, none of this would've come to pass. And that thought kept me occupied until I finally reached my house, realizing I'd already smoked all those Rothmans and would have nothing to show for my absence. As I reached for the doorknob, I felt something tugging at my ankle, and it was Princey—the dog, not the typewriter. I knelt down and petted his head; he'd come so far, he'd been so loyal. I went to push the door open but it wouldn't budge. I made a fist and banged, then banged some more. I remembered the children tapping out numbers on computer keyboards, and wondered if perhaps I now had children.

The door swung open, and a woman stood there, but she was not my wife. She wore an apron bearing a picture of a carrot and Jackie Gleason. I had never seen her before. I explained my thing and she explained her thing and then she put her hand on my shoulder and nodded sympathetically. She offered me a cigarette and asked me to come in. By "in" she meant away from the outside, to within the walls of the house I used to own, where I lived with my wife, whose insides, although I didn't know it, she'd never told me, were being eaten away by termites. The woman who lived here now, this new woman, offered me a place to sleep for the night, but I asked her only to look after

Princey, and she said her daughter had always wanted a dog, and I told her about the other Princey, the typewriter, and how, if her child was one of those number-tapping ones, she wouldn't even know what a typewriter was.

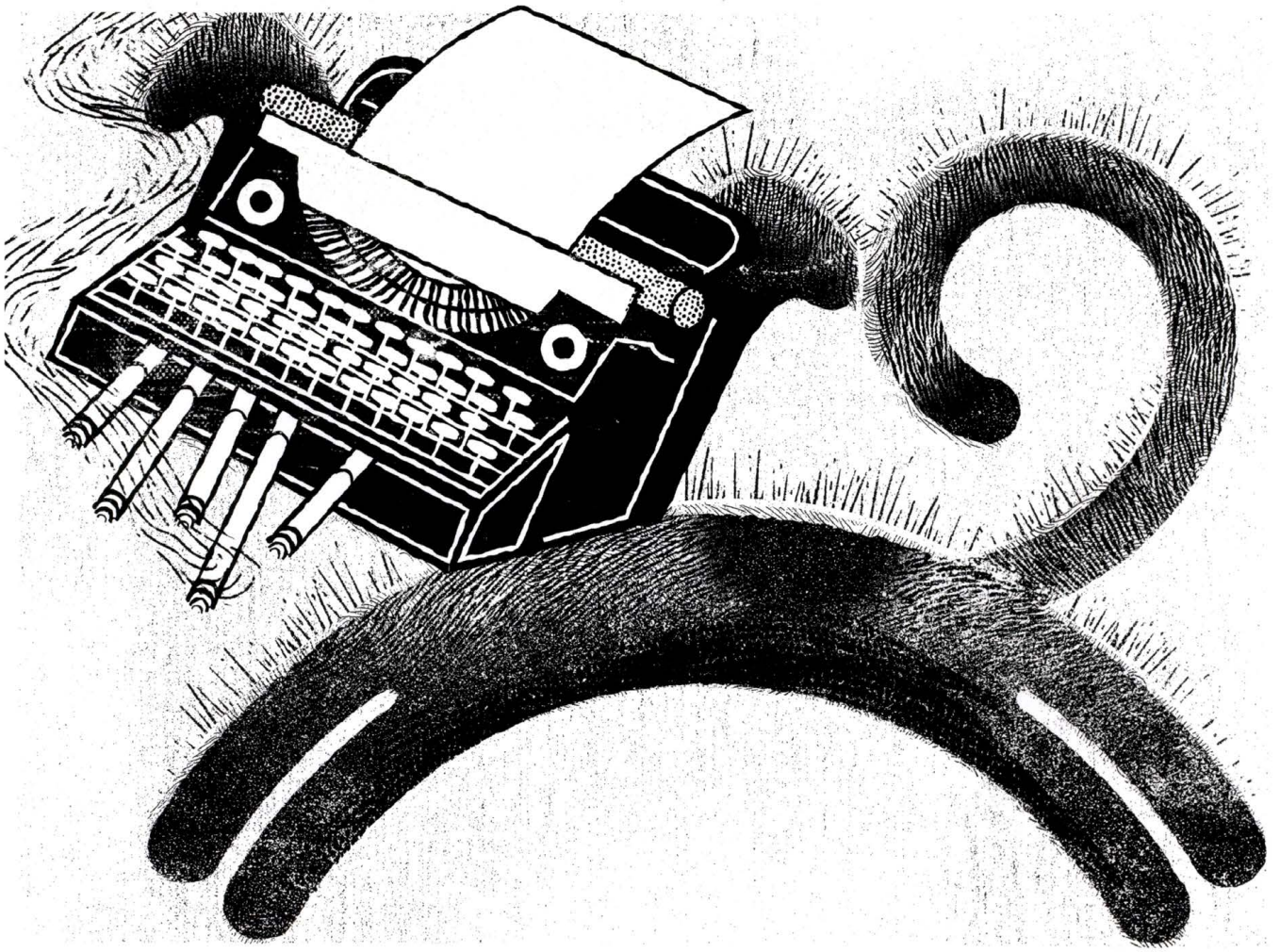
I asked her, "Are there still typewriters? Are there still telephone answering machines? What about Red Skelton and Tony Orlando and Kim Novak and Cracker Jacks? What about the American bald eagle?" I began to weep. Nothing was the same anymore! The woman who lived here now, in my house, gave me directions to the cemetery where my wife was buried, and told me to come back any time.

In the streets, with a light cold rain beginning to fall, I marvelled over the old neighbourhood. It was like I'd never left, except that everything was different. There, just down the block, was the store where I'd bought the smokes. But it wasn't a store any more, it was a sign studio. I crossed the street and pushed the door open. A man was perched in a chair across the room, his back to me, his hand holding a brush suspended over a sign in progress.

"What's it say?" he asked, and I replied that I couldn't see, that he was in the way, and he said, "No, the sign you want—what's it say?"

Did I want a sign? Did I want this man to paint me a sign? He must have been right, because otherwise why had I come into his shop? I had never before imagined having a sign, Jack, but suddenly I knew that a man without a sign is a wanderer, a nonentity, a golem, a bit actor you recognize but whose name you can never remember. I had no money to pay this man for a sign, and no plot of land to drive it into.

"I've got nowhere to put it," I told him. And without turning, he replied, "You don't need no place except your back; I can make you a sandwich board." I told him this was a big decision, and he agreed, and I told him perhaps I'd curl up in the back alley behind his shop, if he didn't mind—that was where, as a teenager, I'd smoked my first cigarette—and I'd ponder the wording, I'd rake my nicotine-stained fingers through my hair and settle on something. I'd choose an epitaph, or a slogan, or a wedding proposal. I'd find the words, Jack, maybe five or six, that would tell my wife why I'd walked out of that house and circled the globe and missed the birth of our children, why I wasn't there to stop the termites that ate out her guts, why I hated myself, and banished myself to a crevice between two garbage cans, where dogs sniffed at my fetid crotch while I slept, and I dreamed of Betty, and of spumoni ice cream, and the perfect six words to express to my wife the exquisiteness of my love for her. ⊳o



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Stuart Ross lives in a housing co-op near Christie and Dupont streets. He is the author of numerous collections and chapbooks, most recently I Cut My Finger (Anvil, 2007), a collection of poems. His on-line home is www.hunkamooga.com. He has contributed to the magazine since 1998.

THE SUPERMAN CURL

BY ANDREW DALEY

Zev's back on Golden Avenue. Temporarily, he'll tell you. He skulks along it in his scarecrow lurch, nodding to the neighbours as he goes. So far no one's asked after his green Saab, and old Mrs. Boccia across the street even praised him for returning to look after his mother. Zev figures that's the best possible spin he can put on his situation. And if anyone asks, he'll say the Saab is in for repairs.

Golden Avenue ends in a garbage-strewn lot that separates the narrow Edwardian houses from the railway line in the west end of Toronto. The Zevbrowski residence is the last house but one, shaded by maples in springtime bud. From the window of his boyhood bedroom, Zev can see the worn footpaths of the baseball diamond and the lilac bushes behind which Betty Leung once treated him to some breathless kisses. On the wall above the bed his mother has replaced the crucifix he removed when he was thirteen. Zev leaves it up. He's just a guest now.

The night before, the most shameful of his life, Zev had met his cousins Stan and Yannick in a borrowed van for a late-night dodge from his Yorkville condo. It was after midnight when he peeled off his black suit and climbed into bed while his mother snored down the hall. First his father, then his business, his car, and now everyone will know the condo has been rented out.

Just as he'd finally drifted off, the first Go train, rumbling in from the suburbs, shook the house at 6:09 A.M. When they started passing in half-hour intervals, Zev got up to face the day. In the living room he piled his furniture over his mother's faded sofa and set up his desk. There were messages on his cell: inquiries after submissions, copy editors looking for work. Nobody called with good news any more. Then it was out the door to the office on Spadina Avenue he'd chosen to keep over his condo. Bedlam Books was nothing without its Chinatown perch.

Out on Golden Avenue, Zev ducked as Mrs. Leung, Betty's mom, waved from her porch. Half a day and his cover was blown. There'd never been any privacy here. That's when he knew he was back. Stuck. Trapped. Damned. Zev's back.

Within a few days his mother was calling him Winicjusz again. Zev came home to plates of corned beef and cabbage drying out under tinfoil in the oven. He'd long ago stopped reminding her he didn't eat meat, or that no one ate cabbage any more.

They never mentioned his father, or how he was found, crumpled by a stroke on a winter night, in his taxi, outside Shorty's Variety, down the street. The neighbours all thought the old man had dozed off reading the paper again. Further indignity awaited Vinicus, Sr., at St. Joe's, where he lingered two months, surrounded by machines that hissed and printed reports. Zev had sat by the bed wishing he had the strength to pull the plug.

In those two months Bedlam Books all but collapsed. Zev missed the London Book Fair and was late in organizing his spring launch. *Wicked Sunday,* his marquee novel, deservedly received brutal reviews. Worse, it had been the best of a mediocre lot. Even then he was struggling to find something unique to publish.

He also learned that Jaroszlaw Szonyi, *the* Warsaw poet since Solidarity, had signed the North American rights of his anthology over to Zev's rival, in Brooklyn. He could hear his father cursing from beyond. Then his grant applications were denied—something about a lack of diversity. Bedlam Books would have to survive on the pittance it generated in sales. Impossible. It was around this time Zev knew he had to give up his condo.

On the rainy March morning of his father's funeral, Zev slipped on the steps of St. Casimir's as he and his cousins unloaded the casket. Thankfully, Father Bajor had been there to catch Zev under the arm. As he lay awake each night, Zev wondered if it would have been better if he'd dropped the casket and spilled his father onto the sidewalk. The accident prevented by the priest might only have postponed more doom.

Now he spent his evenings pouring over manuscripts in his mother's living room. Among the lace doilies and the portraits of John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa, he quickly lost interest in stories of farmers fleeing their ho-hum Prairie hometowns, or of political intrigue in Ottawa. The poetry was also dull. Spring-cleaning metaphors. Flower cycles for victims of American imperialism. None of it had what Bedlam needed.

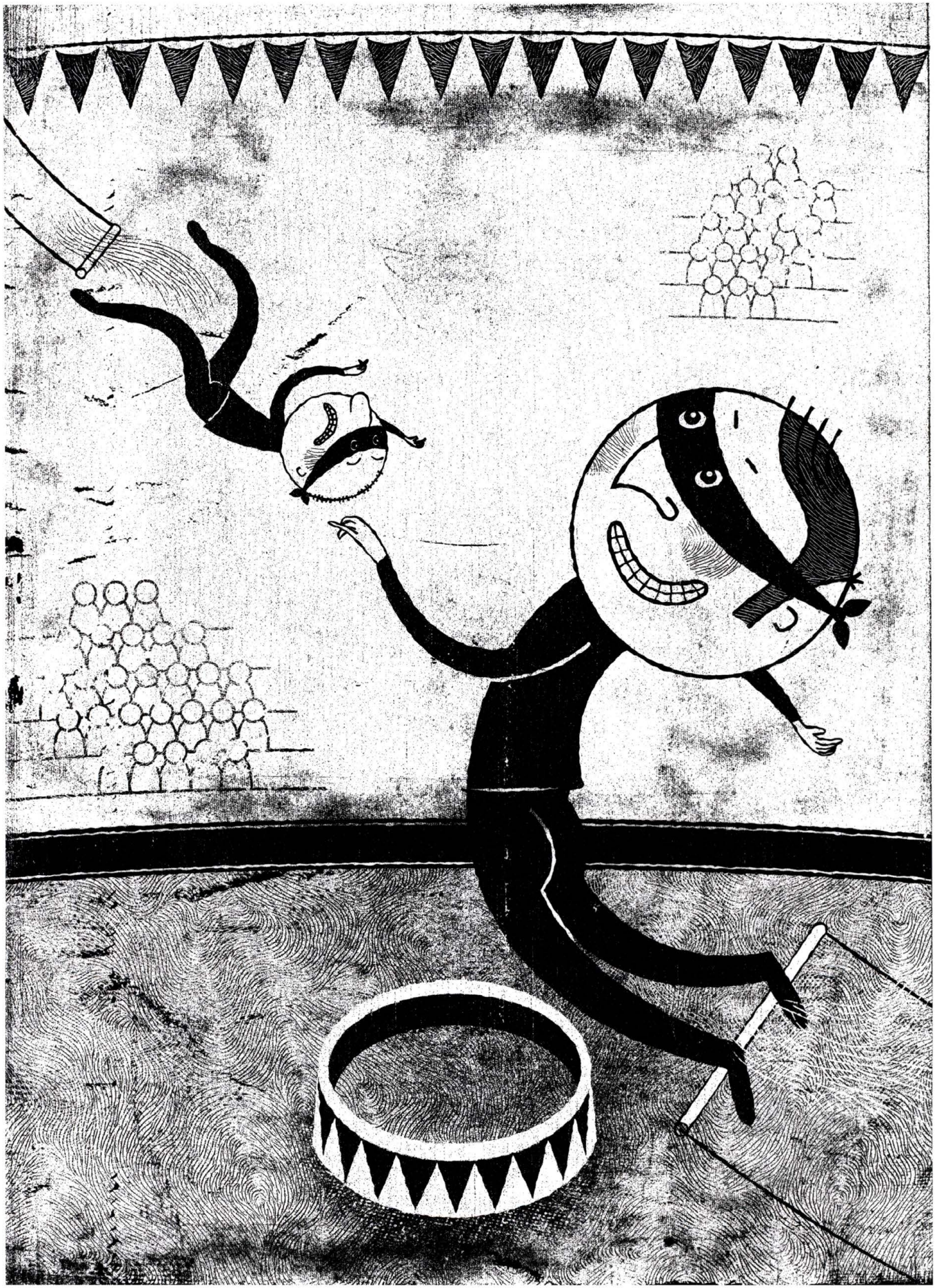
But where to find it? Most of his friends who still wrote had moved on to bigger publishing houses. Others had given up. His ex-girlfriend, the novelist Sarah Willey, now had a marriage to a lawyer and two little girls to manage. The poet Mark Purcel had become the gaming correspondent at a daily newspaper. Zev feared that the good days were over.

One morning in June he woke to find grey in his goatee. His brown hair lay like straw over his shoulders. His face sagged. Three years ago, Katie Shue's *The Redhead* was in its third edition and he couldn't work enough hours. Now he dragged himself downtown to the office every day.

His last remaining employee, Bonnie Hutchins, was making notes in a manuscript as he entered the office. Zev didn't dare reproach her, since she'd scarcely spoken to him since he downsized her last month. Once an editorial assistant, Bonnie was a heavy blond woman of about thirty who called him Vincent, or sometimes Vince. He let her, too, because until his troubles started, they'd been getting along so well he'd considered asking her out.

One of the things he and Bonnie hadn't talked about was how last week the leasing company had taken away the photocopier and the fax machine. Zev settled at his desk in the inner office and opened his laptop between leaning towers of manuscripts and takeout coffee

IAN PHILLIPS



cups. Stacked nearby were boxes of print overruns: the hockey stars' cookbook, the anthology of nineteenth-century railway poems.

Now he had more worry. His father, who'd evidently spent too many afternoons at Woodbine Racetrack, had left the house heavily mortgaged. Unless Zev generated some income soon, his mother, who wouldn't receive her pension for another two years, would have to sell it.

Determined to make Bedlam famous and slightly more solvent again, Zev wiped his round glasses on his shirttail and picked up the first manuscript at hand. *The Dollhouse Songs* was a series of linked sonnets about the pain involved in committing a parent to a chronic care facility. A hot topic, apparently, among aging boomers, but certainly not any fun.

Entropy Man, another story about a superhero, was more a screenplay treatment than a novel. According to the cover letter, the film rights had already been sold. The author, a daytime television anchor who reminded Zev that he'd had him on his show, hoped for a quick response. Zev tossed the whole package into his overflowing recycling bin. Fast enough?

Fishing for Birds was an ornithological treatise and not the steamy memoir of swinging sixties Soho he'd been hoping for. *The Birch Switch* detailed cruelties meted out during a rural Ohio boyhood. It wasn't sexy either. Zev then endured the first ten pages of *Rhododendron,* an Indian doorstop, unsure if it was fiction or not. He dropped his head to the desk.

There was pressing correspondence from translators seeking payment and agents pitching new writers. There were letters from his lawyer, his landlord, and his landlord's lawyer. Even his father's lawyer, which was interesting. Authors accused him of withholding royalties, others of having lost their manuscripts.

Zev flung the letters and faxes into the air and watched them land on the hardwood floor. Problem solved. Bonnie, alarmed, opened the door to his office. Zev smiled at her, and wondered if she was the source of the rumours about his impending demise.

Yet it was his own wavering focus that was to blame. He'd followed up badly chosen books with shoddy marketing plans. To simplify matters, Bedlam was getting out of the translating business, effective immediately. Old Vinicus, descended from centuries of clever peasants, would hopefully understand.

In the kids he passed along Queen Street at lunch he recognized the new readers he needed to reach. Zev spent the next two hours at Pages and Chapters observing that people couldn't get enough of superheroes, sex still sold, and graphic novels were hot. Women liked stories about shopping. Men always liked war. He also found an ad for a magazine launch that evening. There it was: fresh talent just waiting to be found.

The office had been tidied when he returned to it. He really had to find some money to pay poor Bonnie. He read a manuscript about a group of anarchists staging a sci-fi musical, *The Trapeze Thieves,* that needed more of a story. But it had the bizarre edginess of a classic Bedlam book, and he packed it away to read on the streetcar.

The launch was at the Dolphin, in the Annex. Zev sat with his ginger ale at a wobbly cocktail table. *Mudflaps*, a complimentary copy of which he'd received at the door, contained glossy fashion and skateboard ads but very little text. The room filled slowly, most people avoiding the long, ponytailed man at least ten years their senior in the black suit and raincoat. Zev appreciated the respectful distance.

A man in a toque took the mic and announced that audience participation was encouraged. Zev yawned loudly; he'd barely slept since moving home. A fellow with a head of curly hair, whom Zev thought looked familiar, sat staring at him from the opposite side of the room.

First up was a slide show of a Barbie doll, in different outfits, provocatively posed in front of various fast-food outlets. A skinny kid with sideburns and an American accent announced the name and location of each restaurant and what he'd had to eat there. The Steak 'n Shake in Muncie, Indiana: double burger, large Coke. Or the Burger Barn, in Joplin, Missouri: catfish on a bun and a sweet tea. The slides were accompanied by a light show that uncomfortably reminded Zev of *Laser Floyd* at the planetarium.

He searched for the message in what he was seeing. Fatty foods and skinny dolls, legs like French fries. Maybe. It was probably important somehow that Barbie's tour ended in California.

THE PORCUPINITY OF THE STARS

I scoop out the inside of my face
spit the seeds
at the Welcome Wagon

Children, enter my empty head
I have dangerous zits and a porcupine
also a hammock of great ideas

Some kind of emotion whirs like cards
stuck between the spokes of my teeth
or the library

They ask me
what will we see
through your one blind eye?

And I say the childless stars that spangle
the dark thong of the faceless sky
the pole-dancing god who made me

—Gary Barwin

Loud music started and people flitted between tables. Apparently readings no longer occurred at magazine launches, and no one had a book for him. Too bad: it wasn't often that publishers went scouting. Rising with a minor flourish, he positioned his fedora and felt the eyes of the crowd follow him out. Leave them talking.

At home, his mother was asleep on the couch again. Zev turned off the television before removing her glasses and settling the afghan around her. Every night her loneliness was as plain as his inability to comfort her. In the darkened kitchen he carefully ate whatever crusted mashed potatoes and creamed corn hadn't been corrupted by the dried-out sausages. Then it was back to the manuscripts.

The following week he took the streetcar to Yvan DeSoto's launch at the Parkdale Arms. Zev had read Yvan's poems a year ago but hadn't thought they were ready. Apparently someone at Cathedral did. The other two writers reading that night were unknown to him and, hopefully, unsigned. He had begun to suspect that Bonnie was funneling the better material to one of his rivals. Cathedral, for example.

As he took his seat he spotted the curly haired fellow from the week before. A woman read poems about an army of robot Amazons pillaging the training camp of the Arizona Cardinals, then a man old enough to know better read a clumsy story about the masturbatory habits of a teenager, presumably himself, obsessed with Lisa Bonet, from *The Cosby Show.*

Disgusted and bored, Zev fled. So too did the curly haired fellow, who followed him to the streetcar stop. Zev spun to confront him. "Is there something I can help you with?"

The guy skidded to a stop. "You can give my book back if you won't publish it."

Zev knew his own face revealed he'd drawn a blank. To compensate, he whipped out his notebook. "What's your name?"

"Derek Weiner."

"My secretary makes note of every manuscript we receive. It's not the only copy, right?"

"No, but—," Weiner started.

"So there's not a problem, is there? We'll get it back to you, Mr. Weiner. Good night."

Zev had been stalked before, notably by an older woman writer of gory Stephen King imitations with whom he'd been briefly involved. He raised his arm for a taxi. The sooner he put some distance between himself and this man, the better.

But Bonnie hadn't heard of Weiner. Zev and his assistant were talking again, perhaps because of the cheque he'd written her from what was left in his personal account. Over lunch at Peter Pan he'd learned that Bonnie was from Moncton and listened patiently to her fears for her brother, fighting in Afghanistan. It was all part of Zev's plan to determine where the good manuscripts were going.

The situation at home had gone from sad to bizarre. He found his mother's pink slippers in the microwave and the toothpaste in the fridge. The poor old girl wore track pants all the time, and gave off a sour odour. After evenings on the front porch with his manuscripts, Zev stretched his legs in the neighbourhood. Twilight often found him at Shorty's, head buried in the ice-cream freezer. The present Shorty, a Korean, was the man who'd discovered his father.

Zev ate his Nutty Cone on Dundas Street. A streetcar stopped near the Esso station, and a single figure emerged from it. The guy from the Parkdale Arms. Zev hid behind a payphone as Weiner walked off toward Roncesvalles. This was no coincidence, this was a warning.

Terrified, that night Zev lay sleepless, wondering if he should drive a taxi, like his old man. He could marry Bonnie and move her into Golden Avenue. He'd done his bit for CanLit.

At another reading the following week, a woman with a Scottish accent too thick to understand read poems about ghosts eating curries in the Shetlands. Zev contemplated the cracks in the soles of his shoes. Maybe too many people were writing these days, producing literature as weak as Mexican beer. And every day he expected the sheriff to lock him out of his office, or for Weiner to step out of the shadows and finish him off.

One Monday, Bonnie's desk was empty when Zev arrived. With her betrayal now complete, Zev trashed all the manuscripts on his desk. Bedlam Books was all but finished. Pages covered the floor and drifted like snow into the outer office. He slipped on them when he came back in from lunch, sad that Bonnie wasn't there to clean them up.

Later that week, after his telephone

was disconnected, Zev started a list of what he liked in each manuscript. One had a matron named Rose who opens her house to runaways in nineteen-sixties Ottawa, though there was little else to recommend it. He liked the dialogue in *All Night Gardening,* a story about a boy and his father in a Maryland fishing village. Another author brought a whiff of magic realism to an Appalachian mining town. In *The Fickle Dentist,* linked stories about a Houston dental clinic, the characters shone even though the plots read like television hospital dramas.

Suddenly he knew what to do. Zev would create the stories and the author he needed to rescue Bedlam by plundering manuscripts of the characters, settings, and plots he admired. All he had to do was switch them around.

Armed with a highlighter, he got started right away. In one manuscript he liked a kitchen fire that kills the family cat; in another, how a Glasgow girl dispatches a romantic rival. One otherwise weak manuscript yielded a cousin who dealt coke; the next, a flowering magnolia in a southern town. Throw in some mid-nineties Montreal speed-metal bands, some asparagus soup recipes, and a car that won't reverse. Your Journey Prize, Mr. Zevbrowski? Oh, thanks. Set it down there.

There was enough material there to write thousands of stories. This was mathematics rather than plagiarism, Zev rationalized, since he was only stealing ideas and not actual words. Night had fallen when he next looked up. Zev had before him the first story he'd ever written. Montreal had become Seattle; the nineties, the late eighties; and the magnolia, a white lilac. The first person narrative was fastest to write and provided, Zev hoped, an immediacy readers would believe took a rare talent to achieve. He named his effort *The Wastepaper Basket,* after the one on which his feet were propped.

In a week he had his template for literary success: take a character or two, invent some funny and sad things to occur, add a major issue and some clever dialogue. Keep the story and the sentences short, and sound a meaningful or melancholy note three paragraphs before the end. Resonance was key and resolution meant avoiding climactic endings and making sure the hero never got the girl/boy. Poetry would be even easier—he could just shuffle lines.

Zev started a list of elements to be included: cosmonauts, bondage, ice fishing, optimism, vampires, the Kabalah, land mines, pastoralism, and as many references to old television shows as possible. There were likewise things nobody wanted to hear about anymore, like incest, Catholicism, George W., heroin, and suburban sprawl.

Retro always worked. Using Bonnie's calculator, he determined that a continually moving window of nineteen years, three months, eleven days and seven hours separated what was cool then from what was back in again now. Thus, Michael Dukakis and *L.A. Law* became obvious story points.

He wrote night and day, living on falafels and cappuccinos, and catnapping on the office couch. With Bonnie gone he could smoke at his desk, a right he hadn't enjoyed in years. When he felt grotty, he took a bird bath in the washroom, stopping on his way back to pick up pages that had slipped into the hall. When he got stuck for dialogue he visited an Internet café, where he found that someone had meticulously posted the teleplay of every episode of *The A-Team* to the Web. His wrists ached, his laptop overheated, but still he typed.

In a month he'd cobbled together enough stories for a collection, many of them set in Alberta because it seemed to Zev that westerners were often lonely. This was the kind of artistic decision he'd learned to make. One afternoon he saw two men in mesh baseball caps and gingham shirts arguing over the open hood of an overheated Buick out on Spadina Avenue. His title came in a flash: *Country Car Care Manual.* He called his Web host to get the Bedlam site up again and found a printer who agreed to an initial run of eight hundred on a modest deposit. The proofs went out to reviewers with some stamps

THE KIND OF MAN

What's he like?
Hard to describe.
Try.
He has a face.
Uh-huh.
With eyes in it. Nose, mouth, brows; all positioned correctly.
What else?
Skin. The customary organs, limbs, and appendages. He drives a car sometimes.
But what's he about? What's he really all about? Really?
Um . . .
Push.
Well, I guess you could say he's the kind of man who knows a lot about art, but doesn't know what he likes.
Hmm.
The kind who would dance on your grave, but in a good way.
Would you say he's the kind of man who would buzz you five or six times a day just to say "onomatopoeia"?
I would say he's the kind who could make the tow-truck driver lie down with the organic-pillow salesman.
Can he cook?
He can cook.
Specialty?
Grilled apple.
Is he the kind of man who would sleep on the fire escape in the middle of the summer in the middle of the fire?
Yes. The kind whose toes range from large to small. The kind of man who would shave again and again for years and years, and then one day, just stop. The kind who would trade life's little luxuries for life's big ones.

He sounds like the kind of man who would attract the kind of woman who would spin at a spin class and then drink a foamy coffee.
No. But he's the kind, for sure, to raise ire, eyebrow, and skirt.
Is he the kind of man who would massage your fiction, and then request a fondle?
Let's just say he's the kind who used to be good at things, and is now very good at things. The kind who likes to smell the smell of Elmer's glue. The kind who would dig deep into the pumpkin with both hands. The kind, of whom it is said: "There goes the man with the smile that launched thirteen hundred other smiles—twelve hundred and eleven of them genuine."
Is he clean?
He is clean. Except for the mouth.
Will he give you a trinket?
He will not give you a trinket.
Is he the kind of man who would look in three directions at the four-way stop?
No. But he's the kind who could make a molehill out of a mountebank.
The kind who would allow the tuba to play play play him. The kind who would take a shining to a magpie, or forget entirely about East Anglia.
I don't suppose he's the kind of man who has an outer child, but believes it to be inner?
He's the kind who would perform a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the neighbour's garage, with the blessing of the neighbour while the neighbour was in Florida.
Would he jump out of an aircraft?
He would not jump out of an aircraft. But he would eat soft cheeses, unpasteurized, from Quebec.
Would he call his dog: Rufus, Dylan, Octavio, or Snuffy?
He would not have a dog. He would not call it Shadow.

—Elyse Friedman

he found at the back of Bonnie's desk.

The author he credited the work to was Warren Moran, a twenty-eight-year-old son of Canadian diplomats who'd lived in Myanmar and Italy. He'd attended Cambridge for his masters in comparative literature and had since taught English in Thailand and Peru. Presently, he was finishing a Ph.D. in French literature, at Columbia, and was also a much-in-demand D.J. on the European circuit. Zev chose the academic credentials to account for a formalism he'd detected in his own prose.

Yet what if someone wanted to meet Mr. Moran? Zev sauntered up Golden Avenue on a mellow evening considering the potential dilemmas his new author posed. His mother had fallen asleep in front of *The Rockford Files,* the oven crammed with plates of food. Because there wasn't much to do until he saw the reviews, Zev would stay home with her for a few days. The tears came as he scraped blackened, rock-hard pork chops into the garbage. Creativity left him so emotional.

That night the summer heat and his own excitement kept him awake. He hadn't felt this vital in years. Yet how to do a nine-city Canadian tour without an actual author? More problematic was what he'd do when the foreign rights were sold. By the time the first Go train rolled by, Zev had decided he'd hire an actor if it came to that.

His mother was dressed in a mauve suit when he finally came down, a sign she might be feeling better. "I've been waiting all the morning to make your breakfast," she said. "What do you expect to accomplish sleeping so late every day?"

Zev sat at the place set for him. It was possible that she hadn't noticed he'd been away for a month. "Just one egg this morning, please," he said.

"You should let me wash that shirt," his mother said. "The collar's looking very greasy."

After she was gone, Zev packed up the manuscripts in the living room to bring them to the office. A novel from Warren Moran would complete Bedlam's comeback. Then Zev would send Warren on a permanent vacation or, better, cook up a sudden, tragic death to spike sales. If he still couldn't find worthy authors, he'd start writing himself and finally live the good life.

That afternoon he napped, the long hours of writing having worn him down, until heavy footsteps downstairs woke him. Weiner! Zev grabbed a slo-pitch trophy on his dresser and charged off to deal with the home invader.

Halfway downstairs he saw the police cruiser in front of the house. He let the trophy fall to his side. How had they found out so soon? Two big cops and a sallow man in a shirt and tie were with his mother in the kitchen. "Are you the son?" One of the officers checked his notepad. "Are you Vinicus Zevbrowski?"

"That's me," Zev said. "What's going on? Am I in some kind of trouble?"

"Your mother's been caught shoplifting," the officer said.

"It's the third time this month," the sallow man said. Zev now saw that his tie had the Loblaws logo on it. "She's rude, too. I can't keep pretending it's not happening."

"No, of course not," Zev said, scarcely containing his grin.

"This is one last friendly warning," the other officer said. "I understand there's recently been a death in the family. Next time we're going to have to lay charges. Understood?"

"Definitely, officer." Zev put a hand on his mother's shoulder and waited until their guests were gone. "Ma, I thought you were going to Aunt Helen's. Why didn't you say you needed money?"

"You don't have any," his mother said. "Anyway, it's their fault—they charge too much for everything. Five dollars for chicken legs."

Zev stayed at the table after his mother left to watch her afternoon soaps. If this were a short story, crucial decisions would have to be made about whether he and his mother would ever reconnect. He'd never seen so clearly how the creative process worked.

Another day at home was all he could take. Zev burned to write again, but first the new Zev needed an new image, especially if, without an author, he had

to fill in at awards ceremonies or interviews. His last credit card was good for eight-hundred-dollars' worth of baggy jeans, running shoes, and athletic wear. He even got one of those trucker caps, like a modern B. J. McKay. Properly outfitted, he'd be unstoppable.

The first reviews appeared that weekend. Two were glowing, and only one suggested that the stories were almost formulaic in their inventiveness. Zev also received three offers to profile this talented young author. Tears in his eyes, he explained that he would try to contact Moran, who was travelling in Mongolia. Yes, he was hoping for a novel from him. In the meantime, watch Bedlam Books for more fantastic new releases.

Great reviews were useless without an author. Back to work, then. Zev removed the staples and bindings from every manuscript in the office and piled them onto his desk. Then he flipped each stack onto the floor and dove after the mess, tossing pages into the air until they were all jumbled together. With a broom from the janitor he swept any strays in the hallway into the larger mess.

It was dark when he'd finished restacking the pages regardless of their original order. His first novel. All it needed was to be typed into his laptop and edited down. Zev was hoping for four hundred pages. Nothing too ostentatious.

A few days later he heard someone enter the outer office. The sheriff, finally. Now he'd have to get the manuscript pages back to Golden Avenue. But it was Bonnie who stuck her head into his office. "Jesus," she said. "What happened to you?"

"I should be asking you the same question," Zev said. "Traitor. Where have you been?"

"In Moncton, visiting my mother," Bonnie said. "You know I always take September off. What the hell are you wearing?" She took another step toward him, then placed a hand over her nose. "Oh my. Vinny, how long have you been in here?"

"Long enough to get the job done." Zev led her to the door. "You're welcome to stay on, but you'll to have to keep out of my office. Oh, and there should be some money in the account now, so don't forget to pay yourself."

It took three weeks to cut and paste the novel together. In it, a young American man teaching English in China learns that his parents have been killed in a car accident. He foolishly gets involved with the daughter of the local communist boss and the doomed peasant revolt she's planning. Zev loved how he—or Moran, rather—contrasted the thematic bankruptcy of early-twenty-first-century Western culture with the austerity of the East.

Near the end of the novel, the hero is invited to Los Angeles to develop *Who's the Boss?* for the big screen and leaves China torn in his politics and his affections. Zev had his hero detect a symbiotic relationship between LAX and the music of the Bangles, but couldn't find a suitable ending. If no one else could write good endings, how could Zev? Yet the world could wait another week for what he had tentatively titled *The Valedictorian.*

Happily, *Country Car Care Manual* was receiving interest from U.S. publishers. Zev now knew using an actor wouldn't work, and was having difficulty hiding the truth from Bonnie, who was being unusually friendly to him. It was true: women loved success. With money from sales he paid a month's worth of back rent and got his phone reconnected. Some nights, anticipating the commuter trains, Zev dreamt of taking credit for the stories himself.

He wanted *The Valedictorian* to be thrilling rather than merely profound. Everything he'd read lately had been overly moving. Time passed. The evenings were too cool to read on the porch and leaves lay scattered along Golden Avenue. His mother was a ghost, oblivious to anything beyond the television. He had to get out, but the only way he could raise the money for a new apartment was to publish the novel.

In the absence of any new Moran material Zev held his nose and wrote the titles of five manuscripts on scraps of paper. These he placed in an empty coffee cup and closed his eyes as he made his selection. *Yogic Hearts,* presumably a romance, won. Zev asked Bonnie to draw up a contract, happy to see his girl busy again.

Within a week he had met the young woman author of *Yogic Hearts* and arranged for a first run of one thousand copies. Still, an ending for *The Valedictorian* wouldn't come. He had the urge to tell his troubles to the books editor of a

HANDS

I dreamt of finger bones
as thick as treesnakes,
of hands that possessed
a fierce, primeval strength,
and I awoke with swollen
knuckles, as though I had
smashed them hard against stone.

But my bed was soft and my back
ached from the excess of comfort.
Each night, the dreams grew worse.
I saw, severed from their body,
the heavy, black hands
of a mountain silverback.
It felt like wires tightening
around my wrists as I slept.

—Paul Vermeersch

city paper he had on the phone, but to do so would destroy Bedlam Books. No one had told him a writer's life involved so much loneliness.

As he put down the phone he heard a loud male voice in the outer office. A creditor, no doubt. They were creeping closer now that Bedlam was active again. He heard Bonnie shout his name and opened the door to find a man brandishing a manuscript backing a terrified Bonnie into a corner. Weiner! "Get away from her!" Zev shouted.

Weiner charged at him. As they skidded across the floor into his own office, Zev was overcome by the odour of unwashed clothing. Eyes watering, he pushed the crybaby author off him as Bonnie cringed near the door. At least she was safe.

The two men circled each other, Zev noting the vacant, zombie look in Weiner's eye. "I want my book back," Weiner said.

"It's not here, Weiner," Zev said.

"This is for me and every writer you've ever burned," Weiner shouted.

The accusation paralyzed Zev. Could the weasel know his secret? Weiner used Zev's hesitation to attack, his open hands landing weak blows on Zev's face and arms. At last Bonnie showed her true colours by slapping at Weiner to get him off Zev.

Somehow, Weiner ended up on Zev's back, his hands over Zev's eyes. They careened into the hallway. Blinded, Zev spun out of control as he tried to throw the wailing writer off his back. He sensed daylight and fresh air ahead, then heard Bonnie's cry. In the same instant, he banged into something and the great weight was lifted from his back.

Zev blinked into the sudden brightness. He had slammed into the railing of the fire escape, which had knocked Weiner off his back and into the laneway below. The late writer lay in a twisted pile atop the crumpled roof of a car.

Zev stared into the deep blue autumn sky. Bonnie stepped onto the fire escape, her arm slipping around him, her head nestling against his chest. He had earned his freedom, and the girl.

The rest of *The Valedictorian* came easily now. After establishing his hero working with Tony Danza in a Brentwood bungalow, Zev had the outraged communist boss send assassins stateside. An elaborate chase across L.A. ensued, with the hero rescuing his kidnapped secretary after eliminating dozens of Red Army specialists in a monumental clash at Anaheim Stadium.

A week later, Zev chose *Red Dawn* as a new title, cut much of the dialogue with the communist's daughter, and changed China to India. Soon what he'd written earlier became a short prologue to the action sequences in L.A. It was sometimes necessary to provide a little back story.

Yogic Hearts turned out to be for people recovering from heart attacks. Zev had Bonnie arrange a promotion with the Heart and Stroke Foundation and the book sold so well that he started a series of health titles. To free up time to write, he made Bonnie vice-president of development. Unfortunately, saving the house on Golden Avenue didn't provide her with much of a raise, and there was also the matter of leasing another Saab.

To celebrate the completion of *Red Dawn,* Zev put his refurbished reputation to the test at a Halloween evening of scary poems and stories at the Parkdale Arms. He ditched his Snug jeans and hoodie for a red cape and a blue T-shirt with a hand-painted "S" on it, relics from his student days. Worn under a black suit, with his white shirt open to the waist, he felt it was the perfect metaphor for the new Zev emerging from the old.

Unfortunately, no one else was in costume at the hotel. Zev was a day early. He had messed up his dates. Or Bonnie had. Writers can be so isolated.

The next evening, while shaving after his shower, Zev found his mother's scarlet track pants hanging on the back of the bathroom door. They fit perfectly as tights, but were too short. He compensated by digging out an old pair of blue Doc Marten boots, tapping back into the energy of long-ago punk shows at the Apocalypse Club. Dressing up like a superhero was bringing out the kid in him again.

Still, he could go further. Deeper. He could bring out the real superhero. Zev donned the cape and T-shirt again, having dispensed with the suit—this was no longer about emerging—but it wasn't enough. He found a pair of scissors and returned to the bathroom to hack off his ponytail and trim the rest of his hair. He stuck his glasses in the pocket of the track pants. Almost.

With his father's tub of Brylcreem from the medicine chest, Zev parted his hair over to the side and used a comb to sculpt that single thick curl on the right side of his forehead. There. Just a second for it to set. Now he was ready. ⊳

Andrew Daley lives in Dovercourt Park. He is Taddle Creek's associate editor, and has contributed to the magazine since 1997. His first novel, Tell Your Sister, was recently published by Tightrope.

THE CITY

HAND FINISHED

From cat pans to lingerie, Honest Ed's offers the most artful bargains in town.

BY CONAN TOBIAS

Once the tributes began to fade for "Honest Ed" Mirvish, the local proprietor and showman who died this July, at the age of ninety-two, the speculation began: what would become of his eponymously named, block-long store, located on a coveted piece of real estate at the corner of Bloor and Bathurst streets? The loss of Mirvish will surely make Toronto a little less colourful, and the razing of this wonderfully garish landmark could only add to that loss. And anyone touched by Mirvish's generosity, such as the famous Honest Ed's Christmas turkey giveaway, would surely lament the emotional and social gap the store's closing would bring. But the end of Honest Ed's would also bring about the end of an art form most other department stores have long considered a thing of the past.

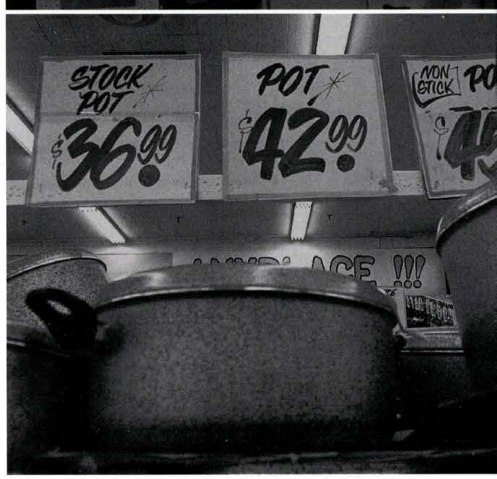
So plentiful is the signage offering up bargains throughout Honest Ed's, and so perfect and identical is the lettering on each, at first glace, one might assume they are printed by machine. But a closer look reveals the strokes of a paintbrush and the slight imperfections that come only from being created by hand.

Wayne Reuben estimates he paints seventy to eighty of these price signs a day. He is one of two remaining sign painters who work in the Honest Ed's sign shop, a small, narrow room perched high above the shoppers in the store's west building, and accessible though a low-ceilinged, second-floor labyrinth. Packed into the room are piles of blank, white cardboard, jars of paint, and stacks of previously used signs offering an "'Ed's' Bargain!" on everything from T-shirts to vacuum cleaners.

"They change the prices so often, it's faster to do it by hand," says Reuben, who estimates a single sign can take anywhere from four to twelve minutes, depending on the size. "It's a fun thing he's had since he opened the store. We've never really had computers here."

With only a few high-school art classes as training, Reuben landed at Honest Ed's immediately after graduation, in the late nineteen-sixties. He left the bargain warehouse in 1970 to work on window displays for Simpsons and other stores, eventually returning to Honest Ed's as a sign painter in 1994. Now sixty, he mainly paints signs for the store's east building, while his coworker Douglas Kerr takes care of the west building. "At one time, there were seven guys working here," Reuben says. "It's something of a lost art."

Catch it while you can. ⊳



ALFRED HOLDEN, CONAN TOBIAS


NON STICK POT
10.99
9.99
8.99


PLATE
2.99
STACKING TUB
2.99


Please... BE SURE
-ABSOLUTELY-
NO· EXCHANGE
NO· REFUND
ALL MERCHANDISE GUARANTEED BY MANUFACTURER OR IMPORTER


6


HI-BALL PITCHER
15.99
DECANTER GLASSES
15.99
SWISS PLATTER
8.99
19.99


MENS CHANGE ROOM
DUE TO HEALTH REGULATIONS UNDERWEAR UNDER GARMENTS & SWIMSUITS DEFINITELY CANNOT BE ENTERED
SHOP-LIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED
IN USE
I PANT ONLY Please NO TOPS!


2 PC. NEGLIGEE SETS

THE SHOW THAT SMELLS

An excerpt.

BY DEREK McCORMACK

Jimmie Rodgers.

Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers.

Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers.

Jimmie Rodgers in a Mirror Maze.

Jimmie poses like he's shooting publicity. Blazer buttoned, blazer unbuttoned—he tries it both ways. Plumps his pocket puff. Picks lint from lapels.

"You're fine," he says.

"You look fine," he says.

"Everything's going to—" He coughs. "Everything's going to be—" Coughs up crap. Splat. On spats.

Jimmie Rodgers.

Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers.

Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers.

Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers.

Jimmie Rodgers and Carrie Rodgers in a Mirror Maze.

Carrie Rodgers winds her way through the maze.

Jimmie's in a dead end. Doubled up.

"Darling, no." She sinks down beside him. His sleeve's sopping. Sputum. It will dry stiffer than starch.

"The carnival is killing you," she says. "You have to leave." Sputum smells like socks. From her purse she pulls a bottle.

He sticks the neck up his nose. Chanel No. 5.

"Never," he says.

"Look at yourself," Carrie says.

"I'm fine." Jimmie sniffs Chanel No. 5. He spits. Sputum smells like Saks.

"You're thin. You're pale." So is she. She's supposed to be. Her suit is Chanel. Spring show. "You should go back to the sanitarium."

"So they can what—slice me up?" he says. "Stick me with needles? Shut me in a room to rot?" He pours perfume on his sleeve. Don't pour perfume on fabric. "I'm Jimmie Rodgers! The carnival singer! Who would I be if I stopped singing?" He hacks. "Nobody. Nothing."

"A carnival is not a cure!" she says. "Chanel No. 5 is not a cure!"

Jimmie Rodgers.

Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers.

Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers.

Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers.

Jimmie Rodgers and Carrie Rodgers and me in a Mirror Maze.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat!" Jimmie jumps.

"Where did you come from?" Carrie says.

"Paris," I say.

"The mirrors!" Carrie says.

"You're not there!" Jimmie says.

"I'm a vampire," I say. "I write for *Vampire Vogue* magazine, the style bible of the fashionable fiend."

"There's *Vogue* for vampires?" she says.

"We wear clothes," I say. "We're not werewolves."

"Stay away, devil," Jimmie says, "or I swear I'll—" Cough.

"I haven't come to kill you," I say. "I've come to write about you." In mirrors, I look like nothing. I look like lamé. "A carnival, a singing star, his lady—why would Elsa Schiaparelli summon me to such a place?"

"*The* Elsa Schiaparelli?" Carrie asks.

"The Vogue Vampire," I say. "The Dracula of Dressmaking."

"But she's famous!" she says.

"Famously fiendish!" I say. "Fashion is her feint. A demon who dresses well-heeled women around the world. She makes them look beautiful. She makes them smell beautiful. Then she eats them."

Jimmie Rodgers.

Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers.

Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers.

Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers.

Jimmie Rodgers and Carrie Rodgers and Elsa Schiaparelli and me in a Mirror Maze. Elsa Lanchester plays Elsa Schiaparelli. There's a resemblance.

"Am I late?" Schiaparelli says.

"Fashionably." I kiss her hand. "You smell divine."

"I am divine." She fans herself. "The latest fragrance from Maison de Schiaparelli. I call it Shocking!, as in freak shows—shocking and amazing!

Jimmie and Carrie act scared.

"How do I look?" Schiaparelli's dress is orange, yellow, and pink. Mostly pink. Sleeves sparkle. Sequins are celluloid. "I cut it from sideshow banners. 'Valentines,' freaks call them. Isn't that quaint?

"I learned this from my new assistant, Mr. Renfield. He's a geek. He beheads rats. By biting them." Scuttling along the corridor behind her—Lon Chaney. White skin, white eyes. Hair? Detergent would be jealous. Blood crusted on his chin. Rat fur stuck to his teeth. Looks like decay.

"He has a way with accessories." Schiaparelli points to his suit. It's white. Was white. Bib of blood. Blackflies embellish it. Fruit flies flit. Living lint.

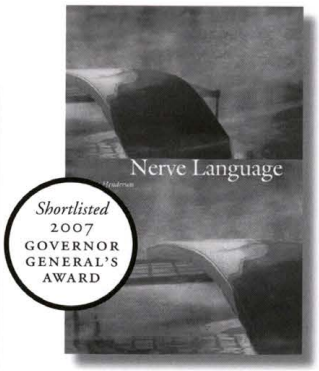
"And it's not only him. The Fortune Teller's turban! The Witch Doctor's skull stick! The Ubangi's lip plate! The Snake Lady—her anaconda is a boa! The Alligator Man—what a purse he would make!

"Freak fashion. Geek chic. It inspired my new haute couture collection for humans—the Carnival Collection! Soon Schiaparelli clients will dress like the Half-Man Half-Woman and the Mule-faced Lady. Ostrich girls in ostrich plumes. Lobster ladies in lobster gowns.

IAN PHILLIPS

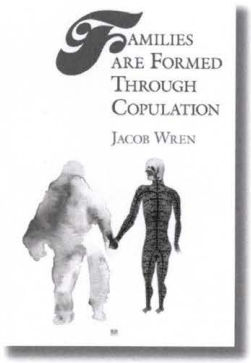
Found
poems by
Souvankham Thammavongsa

"Almost pointillistic constructions... this is more than history and even less than that; how does she get her moments this good, this right?"
— rob mclennan



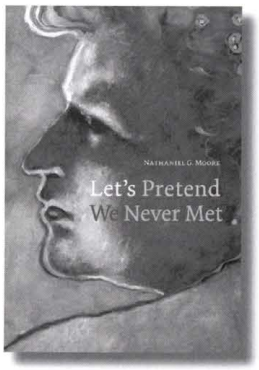
Nerve Language
poems by Brian Henderson

"[A] meditation on sanity (and conformity)... a powerful jolt of a book— both harrowing and thought-provoking."
— Barbara Carey, The Toronto Star



Families are Formed Through Copulation
drama by Jacob Wren

"What we are doing in performance is the official opposition."
— Jacob Wren



Let's Pretend we Never Met
poems by Nathaniel G. Moore

"Canada has a major new literary innovator to fear, admire, even desire."
— Todd Swift

The Drowned Lands
a novel by STAN DRAGLAND
March 2008

Against a 1913 background of bitter feuding over water levels along the Napanee River in eastern Ontario, two young people find themselves persuaded to a hut in the Long Swamp south of Bellrock. A third youth, deaf and untrained in speech, imagines he can keep them safe from a danger he intuits but cannot understand. This finely considered new novel by one of Canada's best writers and thinkers is centrally about the young people's interactions and, more generally, about the power of story and the beauty of true communication.

Skin Room
a novel by SARA TILLEY
January 2008

Whether Sara Tilley is describing the mores of Inuit schoolchildren or the contemporary downtown St. John's arts scene, she carries a reader close, every step of the way. *Skin Room* grabs and never lets go. The novel is hilarious at times, despite the heart-rending central event and aftermath. Coming of age has not been more searingly rendered. *Skin Room* is the work of a formidable new talent.

PEDLAR
PRESS

TORONTO

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

The Canada Council for the Arts since 1957 | Le Conseil des Arts du Canada depuis 1957

"It's like I always say: 'Clothes make the inhuman.'"

"Women won't wear freak clothes," Carrie says.

"Women wear what I tell them to wear," Schiaparelli says.

"When all the world's well-dressed women are dressed and perfumed like freaks," Schiaparelli says, "I will make them freaks—in a carnival—a vampire carnival—a carnival of fashion and death!" She changes. Fangs flower. Pupils as pink paillettes. "And freaks are only part of the fun!

"Humans will be rides.

"Humans will be games.

"Humans will be snacks."

Schiaparelli's face is a special effect.

"What would a carnival be without a tent show?" Schiaparelli says. "Jimmie Rodgers, the Midway Minstrel, America's Carnival Crooner—I want you to sing at the carnival to end all carnivals."

"Why would I?" Jimmie says.

"You're ill, Mr. Rodgers," Schiaparelli says. "Ill with tuberculosis. I know this, I have heard your record—*T.B. Blues.* Catchy. But I am stronger than T.B. I will drain you of blood. Without blood, the disease will die. I will feed you my blood. And you will live forever—singing!"

"Go to hell," Jimmie says.

"Mr. Rodgers," Schiaparelli says, "you will sing for me whether you want to or not. You will sing for your supper—and you'll be supper!

"Renfield! See that he's comfortably imprisoned." She points a pink fingernail. A pink dinner ring. Dazzles. Pink, pink, pink! "And bring Mrs. Rodgers, as well. She's comely, yes? She will star in my sideshow."

"I'd rather die!" Carrie says.

"You don't say," Schiaparelli says. "Then I shall put you on the midway. Slit you open. Twist your intestines into animal shapes. When you rot, you'll give off gas, your insides will inflate. Abracadabra!—animal balloons!

"I shall drag the midway with you. Do you know what that means? I will stick a meat hook in you, then lug your bleeding, barely breathing body through the sawdust to the wild animal show. The animals will go wild when they smell you coming. The audience will go wild when they smell you, too.

"I shall put you in the animal show. Do you like animals, madame? Lions, tigers, hyenas—and you! They will snap your neck, then eat your meat, your bones, your brain. Carrie carrion. You'll be dinner, then droppings. Do you know what carnies call an animal show? 'The Show that Smells!'"

"A sensational name," I say.

Jimmie Rodgers.

Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers.

Carrie Rodgers. Jimmie Rodgers. Cornered.

Lon Chaney closes in. Nosferatu fingernails.

"Stay away, you fiend," Jimmie says, "or I swear I'll—" A cough cuts him off. "I'll—" He has a fit. Falls to the floor.

"Leave him alone!" Carrie's pink with panic. Perfume floats from her throat, wrists, soft spots in her elbows. Where blood abounds. It rises from Jimmie. A screen of scent. Screen or scream?

"Aaarrrggghhhh!" Chaney says. "Chanel No. 5!" Worse than wolfsbane. Gruesomer than garlic. Chaney clutches his throat like he's strangling himself. All vampires act like silent stars.

Cowering, cringing, crying—Chaney acts like an actress.

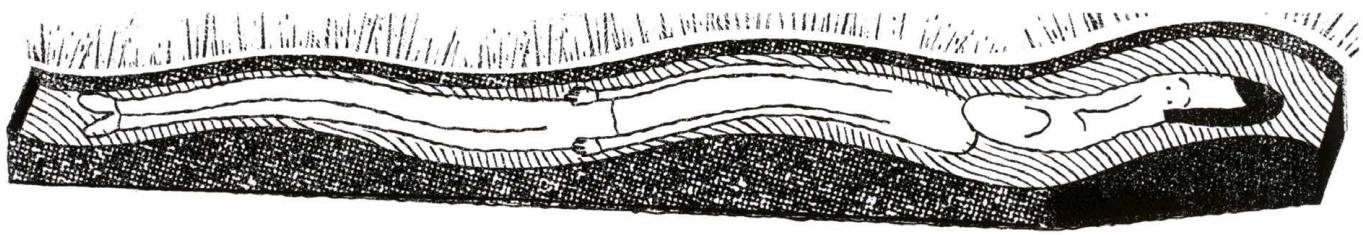
"You're afraid of perfume?" Carrie lords the bottle over him. She drips a drop onto him. It burns like battery acid. Blended with bleach. Skin smokes. Seared hair. Seared skin. Seared seersucker. Stinks. Chaney No. 5.

"It's been blessed!" I say. Anointed perfume. Holy eau de toilette.

"Chanel sanctifies her scents!" Schiaparelli says. "She thinks she can protect her clients from me! She can't! No one can!"

"We'll see about that!" Carrie splashes Chaney. An ounce costs. He screeches in close-up. He's a master at makeup. His forehead flames. His forehead was frog skin. His nose—mortician's wax. It drips down his lips. His jaw drops. Off. The things he does with gutta percha! He hurls himself at a mirror. Smashes through. Splinters stick him. He bleeds, borrowed blood. It's brown syrup. Brown looks red in black and white.

"Chanel can't keep you alive forever!" Schiaparelli floats up off of floorboards.



André Perugia designed her shoes.

"Your perfume will fade!" she says, suspended like a chandelier. A chandelier in a Mirror Maze? It's overkill!

"Your perfume will die! Your perfume will sell out or be discontinued!" Sequins! She shines chandelierically, the maze shot through with thirteen shades of white light. "Mark my words, madame—the moment you find yourself without Chanel No. 5—"

She makes herself into mist. Vampires, like perfumes, vaporize.

"I will have you on the cover of *Vampire Vogue,*" I say to Carrie. "Circulation will soar. Madame Schiaparelli always sells magazines—her fans are fans forever—undead couture clients never die!"

I vanish. It's done with mirrors. ☞

Derek McCormack lives in Sussex-Ulster. He is the author of Christmas Days (Anansi, 2005), The Haunted Hillbilly (ECW, 2003), Wish Book (Gutter, 1999), and Dark Rides (Gutter, 1996), among others. He has contributed to the magazine since 1997.

CIRCLE OF STONES

BY SUZANNE ALYSSA ANDREW

Hélène finishes the second sleeve of the sweater and thinks of her grandson. After counting the rows of the cuff out loud *en français,* she takes hold of it with both hands, making sure the knit two, purl two rib pattern is even. She casts off the final row with black yarn, knowing it's Nikky's favourite colour. The deep charcoal grey of the rest of the sweater will match his eyes. With aching, shaky hands progress is slow, but she has time. Aside from her neighbour Charles, no one—not even her son, Geoff, and his ex-wife, Annette—has come to visit in the past two weeks. Not since Nikky went away on his travels. Hélène fills her long afternoons instead with the rhythmic conflation of knit and purl, sips of tea, and her circular thoughts. She frequently thinks of having a drink—a happy hour Scotch and soda, a glass of evening wine, a shot of brandy for her tea—but it's Nikky she thinks about most often. Twisting yarn and the clack-clack of her needles ease her worries like good conversation. Hélène is certain Nikky's sweater will be ready for him by the time he comes back.

Hélène often thinks of the day she saw the first circle of stones. After it became clear Geoff had forgotten to bring her groceries, Hélène had ventured out for a rare stroll on her own through the coastal mist. Slowly rounding the corner of the sea walk where the path widens into Rotary Beach Park, she noticed a circle of white stones at the foot of an aged evergreen. Inside the circle, a toy truck decorated with glitter glue, gaudy plastic flowers, and a glass Mason jar of messages from family and friends nestled on a tidy patch of bark mulch. When she saw the name "Mike the Trucker" scrawled on the toy rig she made a tut-tut sound, remembering reading about the unfortunate fellow in the newspaper. Mike was on the side of the road trying to fix a blown tire when a young man speeding to make the Vancouver ferry hit him, dragging him under his sports car for hundreds of metres. The young man kept driving. Mike's crumpled body rolled into a ditch, and still, he kept driving. It made Hélène think about how many kids grow up without learning the right kinds of things in life, which made her think of Geoff. Hélène believed that somehow, as an elementary school vice-principal, charged with the responsibility of a school full of children, she had failed her own son.

It began to get dark, and Hélène walked home in the early winter twilight, taking one slow step at a time so she wouldn't trip or fall. The bright lights of her oceanview condominium were a beacon, and coming home to the crisp and immaculate lobby, she took a deep breath of its fresh laundry smell. Picking up the weekly flyers from the stack on the oak newspaper table, she frowned at her mist-melted silver curls in the antique mirror above. Then, glancing up the curve of the grand, milk-coloured stairway on her way to the elevator, she began to shake violently at the sight of a pair of brown Florsheims. Charles was lying on the carpeted steps in his suit, his briefcase upturned beside him, files scattered. Stumbling down the hall, Hélène found she could barely lift her hands and make fists to bang on the superintendent's door for help. Later, standing over Charles' inert body, waiting for the ambulance, she would have lost her balance entirely had it not been for her ugly but solid orthopedic shoes.

The blaring ambulance sirens were followed by a week of hushed hallway whispers and stares. Charles returned after a night in hospital and avoided eye contact, keeping to himself, even after his Coast Tyee Insurance office published his retirement notice in the *Courier-Islander.* After watching and waiting for her moment to find out if he was all right, Hélène finally cornered him in the mailroom.

"Congratulations on your retirement, Charles," she said, enunciating each vowel as though making an announcement over her school's P.A. system. "We'll be seeing more of you around here, I expect." And, as a rare patch of sun shone through the lobby windows and glinted off silver mailboxes to make patterns on the carpet, Charles fiddled with his new cane and told her about his diabetes, as though admitting it for the first time.

"I had a diabetic attack last week," he said, in his slow, steady business voice.

Staring past Hélène in the mailbox gleam, he added, "Thank you for helping me. I've had to make some changes, and now the doctor says I have to start walking every day to control this condition. But no hills and no stairs."

He looked at her then, lowering his chin and casting his eyes down to meet hers, his white eyebrows pinched. "Sounds boring," he said.

The fact Charles said exactly what he was thinking reminded Hélène of her grandson.

"I'll walk with you," she said. "I start to fidget when I stay inside too much."

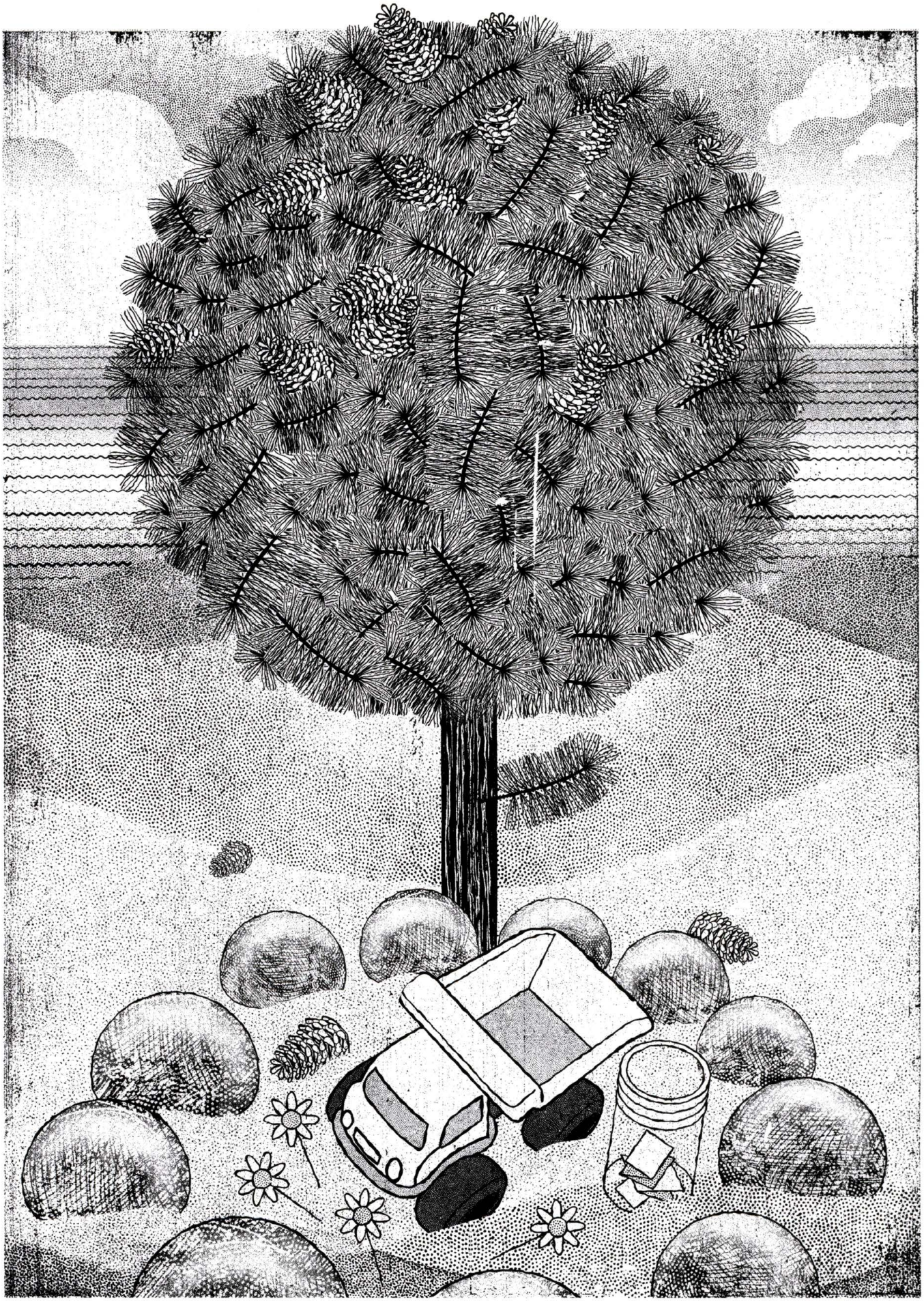
She did not add that her son had taken her driver's licence away because of her advancing Parkinson's, or that she felt housebound as a result.

Charles and Hélène began meeting downstairs in the lobby at ten every morning to go for a stroll. They chose the Seawalk as their route, a long path following the Georgia Strait from one end of town to the other where the sound of the tide somehow always drowned out the buzzing traffic. They rarely talked. The view of the Pacific, the mainland mountains, the bobbing fishing boats, and the occasional sleek cruise ship seemed enough.

A few months later, Hélène's Nikky, on reading break from his studies at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, in Vancouver, came to town by bus and chose to stay with her. He called her on his cell from the bus station to tell her.

"Mom's got a dog show this weekend, and when Dad saw me with metal in my face, he turned around and got back into his

IAN PHILLIPS



truck," Nikky said. "Can I stay with you?"

"Of course, dear," Helène said, feeling a quivery thrill to hear Nikky's young man's voice. When Nikky arrived at the door she gave him a big hug, pressing a ten-dollar bill into his hand to pay for his cab ride from the bus station. Looking up into his face, she wondered how a little piece of silver in his eyebrow and another in his nose could be any worse than the dragon tattoo his dad came home with from a logging camp up north in the seventies. Back then she'd been upset at her son, but her ex-husband, Tibor, had been furious. Remembering, she noted the circularity of the moment, realizing the cycles that span generations were something only grandparents could see.

On Nikky's first full day back in town, Helène made a big breakfast of toast, scrambled eggs, and beer. Nikky was quiet, and every time Helène thought of a question she wanted to ask him about school, his apartment, or whether he had a girlfriend, she stopped herself and instead offered him more blueberry jam. When his plate was finally empty, Helène stood up from her chair at the head of the dining table.

"Now, dear," she said, looking at him over the rims of her glasses. "Would you like to go for a walk with my neighbour Charles and myself?"

She didn't wait for his muffled reply before reaching into the metal stand by the door and handing him her spare umbrella—she knew the beer would help convince him—and once downstairs, they started out like every other day, by popping their umbrellas open. Even though the mist still got in everywhere, it was Helène's ritual.

"Those are some sturdy-looking boots," Charles said, eyeing Nikky's tall black military-style steel toes. Helène was surprised when he didn't say anything about the pointed spikes sticking out of Nikky's jacket.

"Thanks," Nikky said, putting his head down, flipping his collar up over shrugged shoulders.

Charles began walking on one side of Helène, Nikky on the other, neither saying anything else. She knew the three of them were quite a sight walking down the path: an elderly man in a ball cap, a shaky old lady in a proper cashmere twin-set and matching silver overcoat, and tall Nikky, clad in black

TO THE BEAUTIFUL MEN IN SOHO, WITH WHOM I RODE THE ELEVATOR

I forgive you your BlackBerrys, your iPods and shoes.
I'd never wanted shoes until I saw your shoes, and,
well, let's just admit it, once I wanted your shoes
I checked out your trousers as well.

Not pants at all, like my corrupted, crotch-worn jeans,
but fine, tailored trousers of high grade silk.
The three of you are terrible. So perfect in appearance,
with all those well-designed facial bones and teeth.

Here I stand, miserably understanding. I forgive you
so much. How the elevator prefers your floor to mine.
How you are really flirting with each other while seeming
to flirt with me. I forgive you the glimpse through the doors.

The eighth floor loft; the show for which you are contracted;
the gleam of skin and mirrors; the whiff of champagne and meat.

—JOHN DEGEN

from head to toe, like a cartoon villain.

At the beach park, Helène stopped and pointed a gloved hand at a new circle. Clean beach rocks surrounded a miniature organ, a framed photo, and a small, freshly planted tree. A dozen small stones clustered in the middle were each painted with a black musical note. A card-sized plaque read: "IN MEMORY OF MRS. MARILYNNE MANSON, WIFE, MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER, ORGANIST."

"It should be the other way around," said Helène. "Organist first." But both Nikky and Charles were chuckling, and the fact they both seemed to get a joke Helène didn't understand made them laugh even harder.

Charles finally sat down on a tree stump.

"Marilyn Manson is the name of a goth rock musician," Charles explained. "I saw him on MuchMusic the other day. Quite the sight."

"I can't believe this old dude got the joke," Nikky said, looking approvingly at Charles. "I can't wait to LiveJournal my friends."

After their walk, Helène, emboldened in the presence of her grandson, invited Charles in for a cup of coffee. She served Charles black coffee first, on account of his diabetes, then slipped a shot of Baileys into the china cups for Nikky and herself. She efficiently whisked up a batter in the kitchen, and then reappeared a dozen minutes later with fresh blueberry scones piled high on her Limoges platter.

Nikky stayed for a week, during which time Charles and Nikky spent coffee time talking about music videos and horror movies, which they both seemed to know a lot about. Helène, who also watched a great deal of TV, but who was partial only to BBC mysteries and *Coronation Street* reruns, was content to listen. Nikky was good company for her—together they sipped fine liqueurs and tried to decide which one they liked best, arranging the bottles on the table from least to most sweet. One afternoon, as Helène was taking Nikky's new measurements to write in the *Growing Up* scrapbook she'd kept for him since he was a baby, he told her about his girlfriend, Jennifer.

"She's amazing, Grandma," he said, and as Helène measured up his shoulder for his arm length she noticed goosebumps on his skin. Embarrassed, Nikky changed the subject.

"I wish you could see some of my new paintings, Gran," he said. "The stuff I'm doing now is way better than what I was doing in high school."

The morning Nikky left to go back to Vancouver felt worse for Helène than the last day of school before summer vacation. Helène had tucked a bottle of crème de cacao in Nikky's suitcase and told him to bring his girlfriend to meet her at the end of term. Later, in the parking lot, Helène thought she saw Charles slip a twenty-dollar bill into Nikky's palm like a proper grandfather would do. And then she and Charles stepped back onto the curb and waved as the cab sped away. She stared at Charles for a moment, knowing it probably wouldn't have occurred to her ex-husband to even pat Nikky on the back or shake his hand.

For weeks after that, the days alternated between the greys of rain and cloud typical of northern Vancouver Island. Although Charles and Helène continued to visit after their walks for what they called B. & B.—beverage and biscuit—they began to run out of things to discuss.

The third circle of stones was a vision of colour in the rain-darkened dirt. As Charles and Helène approached they saw beach rocks painted primary-school blue. The rocks encircled a plastic spaghetti container full of crayon drawings, two Tonka trucks, and a tiny ceramic handprint labelled "NOAH, AGE 5." Helène recognized the perfect, rounded block letters of a Grade 1 teacher. Thinking of what it was like to be a young parent, she knew the boy's mother and father wouldn't have been able to lift stone after stone, put the memory of their son in the middle, leave it behind. Charles stared at the child's photo, which, though laminated, would eventually fade in the sun or melt in the rain. Noah had big ears, messy, overlong hair and a missing incisor. His skin looked orange in that way school portraits make all children look like carrots.

Helène cleared the catch in her throat with a gentle cough and sat down on the park bench. Dampness seeped through her coat and slacks to her skin, chilling all the way to her aching bones.

Charles seemed nonplussed. Undignified with its toys and bright, sloppy

splotches of glitter glue, the circle appeared as though made by "NOAH, AGE 5," but Helène liked the childish sentiments. They reminded her of her former life, when she worked at Captain James Cook Elementary School.

"I give the Tonka trucks two months before someone steals them," Charles said, banging his cane on the cedar chip path.

Helène watched Charles yank on the brim of his cap, zip and rezip his navy windbreaker. He'd lost weight from their walks and his overlarge navy blue slacks rode too low and hung over the laces of his black leather running shoes. He looked like an old kid in school uniform. With white, thinning hair.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe they'll leave them," she said surveying the contents of the first two circles. "The others are fine."

Charles turned pensive and they walked back to the condo in a silence Helène couldn't find a way to breach. She stole a glance at him as he stared up at the L.C.D. light in the elevator, waiting for it to be the third floor. His expression, after years of negotiating insurance claims, was impenetrable.

"What would you like to drink today, Charles?" she said, opening her door with a jangle of keys.

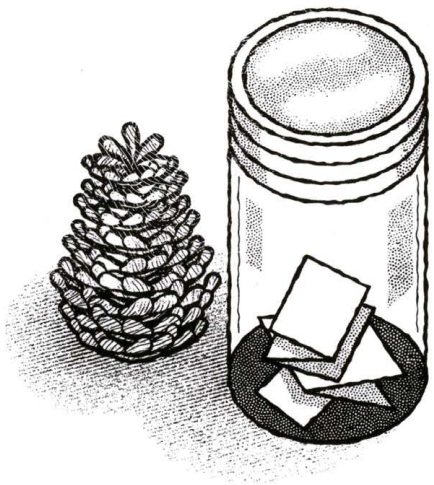
"Thank you, but I have some business to attend to today, Helène," Charles replied, taking his own keys from his pocket.

Helène entered her apartment and tried to will her hands to stop shaking. When she was finally able to wriggle out of her coat, she gasped. The wet spot from sitting on the bench was still visible. Soiled like a small child's coat. She made tut-tut sounds, knowing Charles must have seen it. After struggling to hang her coat on the hook, she stood alone in the dim entryway and hung her head. She cleared her throat and then counted her small shaky steps to the kitchen out loud in French, like she used to do with her students to take their minds off upsetting things. *Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept.* Picking up an open bottle of sherry, she drank two small crystal glasses of it and threw the freshly baked, Saran-wrapped cheese biscuits in the trash. She shuffled to the living room and turned on the television, but couldn't settle, even nestled in the warm pocket of her big chair with her crocheted afghan over her knees.

"Tut-tut," she said to herself. "Tut-tut."

That afternoon, Helène busied herself by organizing her liquor cabinets, lining the bottles up and turning the labels out. Her guest bar was the lower shelf of her large antique china cabinet, but she kept her private bottles in a former safe in the master bedroom, behind a large, gaudy macramé frog wall-hanging she bought at a craft bazaar years ago. She'd always admired his gaping, hungry mouth. It made more sense to her than hanging a dream catcher.

There was a soft knock at the door and Helène returned the frog to its place on the wall and stepped out into the hall to see Annette striding in, holding up two bottles of ice wine from the liquor store she worked at. When her Geoff and Annette divorced, a week after Nikky graduated from high school, Helène had insisted that Annette keep her condo key. Like her own,



Geoff and Annette's marriage had always been tenuous. But Annette was as generous and kind as the friends Helène remembered fondly from where she grew up in Montreal, and she didn't want to lose touch with her.

Annette retrieved the bottle opener from the kitchen and opened both wines for Helène, and they sat at the dining table while Annette fiddled with the sleeves of her oversized sweatshirt and talked about her union's complicated contract negotiations at work. Helène listened until Annette stood to pour more wine into their glasses.

"And how's Nikky, dear?" Helène blurted out between sips.

"Well," Annette said, her fatigue-narrowed eyes widening. "It sounds like the girlfriend left and he's upset, but that's young love, eh, Helène?"

"Oh, such a shame," Helène demurred, "He really liked her. I wanted to meet that girl."

Annette leaned back in her chair and gazed out the picture window at the sea. "I'm hoping Nikky will use the experience to further his art," she said. "He's smart, you know, like all those other romantic artist types."

Helène paused to straighten the coaster under her glass, but her tremoring hands nearly knocked it over. "I would like to see some of his newer art soon," she said, placing her hands on her lap.

When Nikky was in high school he'd painted a cityscape that had reminded her of Montreal, even though he'd never been there. Annette's favourite painting was one he did of the trees around her house, but Helène found that painting oppressive. Something in the way he'd painted the cluster of tall, stalwart evergreens made them look like a small, green army.

Helène fretted privately about Nikky while making a niçoise salad for Annette in the kitchen. Concentrating on chopping lettuce, she didn't hear the door open again, or the heavy footsteps in the hall. She didn't see the exchange of dirty looks passed across the table between Geoff and Annette. But she did hear the loud clunk of Annette's chair hitting the wall as she hurried to get up out of her seat, avoid a confrontation.

"Bye, Helène, I've got to be going back to work now," Annette said, leaning into the kitchen and patting Helène on the shoulder.

"Well . . . ," Helène said. "Well, won't you please take this salad with you in a nice container? You should eat lunch, dear."

Geoff loomed like a big, immobile tree transplanted into the dining room.

"No, no, you have that for yourself, Helène," said Annette, briskly stepping around Geoff and heading toward the door.

"Ma," Geoff said, his voice booming in comparison to the ticking of the clock, the whir and hum of the condo heating. "Aren't you ready to go?"

"I'll be ready in a minute dear," Helène said, hurriedly placing the salad into a bowl and shoving it into the well-stocked fridge before she too ducked around Geoff and into the hall. In her bedroom with the door closed, she freshened up with a little face powder, lipstick and a spritz of Coco Chanel, taking a couple of deep breaths before she opened the door again. It

CHRISTMAS IS A BLACK COAT

Christmas is a black coat with many pockets,
and smells of moths.

Any second it'll flit to the lamp, throw itself against
the light, make crazy shadows, and scare you.

Or it'll idle, alone in the street, its many hands discomfited
in its pockets, waiting for a bus or taxi to take it home.

It might watch, with interest, kids gung-ho over the
first snowfall, who, with their backs, imprint the bodies
of angels, predicting some future fall. It will see wings
snapped clean like a kid splitting pencils.

And the black coat will shake the chill off, like a
tree shedding needles,

but unlike the tree,
which leaves a skeleton,

the black coat doesn't leave such a mark,
and seems all the more comforting.

—ADRIENNE WEISS

wasn't that she had forgotten Geoff was coming—it was that she'd forgotten it was Wednesday. She looked at the nature calendar tacked to the back of her door and crossed out Tuesday with the pencil she usually kept behind her ear. Then, walking into the hall, she focused on straightening her back, making herself as tall as possible—not that it gave her much authority.

Geoff looked at her, his bulging eyes disconcertingly similar to his father's. He stepped toward his mother, leaned down, and put his face close enough to hers that she could feel the grease of his hair, smell his cheap aftershave. His chewing gum and nicotine mouth.

"Ma, you're not supposed to be drinking," he said loudly, shaking her shoulder with his root-claw hand.

"Annette brought a lovely ice wine for me to try." Helène said, taking a step back, leaning on the wall for support.

"Christ! I told her to quit that," he shouted—adding "that bitch" under his breath, as though Helène couldn't hear.

"Well, dear, her visits are enjoyable," she said, "And she lets me know how Nikky's doing."

Geoff looked away. "Let's go," he said, walking toward the door. Trying to keep up, Helène barely had enough time to put her coat on, straighten her collar, and lock the door. She was afraid of Geoff leaving without her as he had done before. Her hands shook and she couldn't catch her breath. When she got to the elevator Geoff had his finger pressed on the door-open button, but he looked away as his mother stepped in. As he stared up at the floor numbers changing, Helène had *trois, deux, un* seconds to feel the back of her coat. She was relieved to discover it had dried.

In the parking lot Geoff opened the passenger door of his truck and pulled out a small plastic step Helène had purchased so she could climb in. He revved the engine while the radio blared the same seventies rock he'd listened to as a teen. The music his father couldn't stand and Helène put up with—until the day she came home from shopping after school and Geoff wasn't there. Tibor had kicked him out for smoking pot—a hasty, stupid thing—considering Geoff was only fifteen and a half. Helène stopped talking to Tibor after that. Geoff left for the logging camp and she didn't see him again until several years later.

All the way to the doctor's office, Helène thought about how her son left home far too young. She had wanted to teach him a few more things about gentlemanly behaviour. She would have liked to see him wearing crisp white shirts. He could have been a businessman. Instead, he was a logger–turned–general contractor—a house builder who lived alone in a small, musty-smelling, rented apartment. He was just like his father, and the allure of brawn, as Annette and Helène both discovered, doesn't last.

Geoff stopped off at the door of the doctor's office, waited for Helène to get out and shut the door, and sped away in his truck without looking back. But the doctor saw her right away for her checkup, and even after she got her prescription refilled at the pharmacy next door, she waited an hour and a half for Geoff to return and take her home. She'd already read all the magazines in the doctor's waiting room, and Cindy, the receptionist, kept looking at her with sympathy in her eyes.

"She looks young enough to have been one of my students, years ago," Helène thought to herself, remembering the days when children were afraid of her and teachers and parents respected her authority. She stared at the low pile carpet, trying to decide whether it was pink flecked with grey or grey flecked with pink. When she got up to use the powder room she chose the one with the oversized handicapped sign on the door, where there were cold metal bars to hang on to. When she looked into the bathroom mirror she thought of Nikky. He had her eyes. Voluminous pools of grey determination surrounded by dark rings of self-doubt. Helène looked away and busied herself with washing her hands, waiting for the tepid water to turn hot.

By the time Geoff returned it was raining again and Helène had forgotten her umbrella at home. During the drive back she fretted about what the rain would do to her hair set. It wouldn't do to arrive home and have her neighbours see her looking as bedraggled as her son. She didn't want Charles to see her that way. But when she walked into the condo lobby, shaking rain off her coat,

she looked up into the oversized, gold-framed mirror and saw her silver curls still bouncing.

Back upstairs, Helène sipped from another glass of ice wine while she made a batch of blueberry scones for the morning. She paced back and forth in the living room while waiting for the oven timer to ring, thinking about Nikky and then about Charles. The timer bleated its staccato beep and she put the scones on a trivet to cool, checking and rechecking to make sure she'd turned the oven off. She flipped the pages in a mystery novel, realizing she was clever enough to have already figured out whodunit, but not enough to know whether her neighbour wanted to see her.

Helène spent the evening in front of the television, the rest of the ice wine her companion. Waking up, she felt something prickling her face. Carpet. The colour of slate. The same shade as the dull morning light streaming through the windows. Wobbly, she pushed herself up to her feet, using her chair for support, and stepped over to the windows to look at the tufts of morning fog coming off the water, rolling up like the spasms in her stomach. Near-invisible cars inched along the highway, cutting through interminable grey with their headlights. She looked around the room and saw that the TV was still on, broadcasting an exercise show. The silent grandfather clock displayed 6 A.M. She sensed an odour. Moving her hand lowly to the seat of her slacks she felt a large damp spot.

In the bathroom, Helène kept the door closed and the shower on long after she finished bathing so she could stand in the steam to warm up, give her skin a refreshed glow. "*Je m'excuse,*" she whispered, like she might have done as an ashamed child. She knew she was too old for a hangover, and that her body had betrayed her. She struggled out of the shower, wrapped herself in a pink towel, and put her pants to soak in the sink with a capful of Woolite. Later, she sat in her robe and slippers at the dining table, sipping black coffee and watching the fog slowly dissipate, along with her headache. Around seven the tide began to change, the waves becoming agitated. Helène thought of the too many ways she had already lost control, and she still didn't know if Charles would want to see her.

Later, after getting dressed in her bedroom, she put her ear up against the wallpaper above her nightstand. She could hear a clock radio tuned to the CBC and realized that if she knocked on the wall Charles would hear her. She sat on the bed and stared into her closet at the old cedar trunk where she stored balls of yarn and knitting needles. Shakily standing and opening it, she discovered she had what looked like enough charcoal grey yarn to make a sweater for Nikky, and it was already wound. She selected a pair of size eight needles from her crocheted needle holder and returned to the living room. Seated in her big chair, she began to knit, counting the stitches out loud as she cast them on. "*Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq . . .*" Without a few steadying drinks in her, each stitch was a struggle, and as she knit row after row, her fingers began to ache.

At five minutes to ten she got her keys from her handbag, dropped them into the pocket of her overcoat, took her umbrella from its stand, and headed to the elevator. She was shaking a lot. Her medicine wasn't working. But when she stepped out of the elevator, Charles was already waiting for her at the lobby door.

"Good morning, Charles," she said, popping her umbrella as she exited the door he held open for her.

"Good morning, Helène," he said, unfurling his.

They walked at their usual slow pace through the mist. Helène caught Charles looking at her and returned his gaze, lobbying it back like a badminton shuttlecock. She had been good at that game in her day.

"Feeling all right?" he inquired.

"Oh yes," Helène said, "Just fine. And you?"

"Well, thanks," he replied.

They walked for a few more minutes,

HELLEBORUS

Hangdog
head, hamstrung
heart, she bends to the faun-smelling
earth for the comfort of dirt.

Were there no
real demons
she could quickly decide on light.

Wind clicks,
shadows split
and spill
through quirky trees:
Glyphs and sigils.
Sigils and glyphs.

The sun in her blood is not enough—
she leans to heliopsis,
Lenten rose;
sinks her fingers into the soil,
taps a glassy surface.

Slowly, over the hour,
works a window
out of the earth.
Soap veneered to its panes
congeals the view.

—ELANA WOLFF

stepping to the side to allow a jogger and his big brown dog to dash past. Helène felt Charles looking at her. He stopped. So did she. He reached his hand toward her face and touched her cheek so softly, the sensation got caught in a gust of wind and twirled all around her. For a moment the weather held her steady.

"Helène," he said.

She wanted to touch his hand, but he would have felt her shaking.

"I don't want to be like other old people," she said.

Charles let his hand fall to his side.

"We don't complain, though," he said. "Like other old people and their incessant blather about their aches and pains."

Helène nodded and they started walking again.

"You helped me, Helène," Charles said. "I can help you."

The words were like someone taking Helène's hand, the way she used to take small children's hands in hers and lead their hesitant, trembling bodies to their classrooms.

When they got to the park, Charles took a long sheet of plastic out of his pocket, spread it out to cover the wet bench for the two of them, and sat down. He banged his cane on the carpet of grass at his feet, and even though she looked at them every day, Helène visited the circles. She saw how each plastic flower was fading and tried to remember its original colour. She observed the weathering wood of the picture frames. The Mason message jar had been knocked over and the Tonka trucks were covered in dirt, possibly disturbed by a cat or a raccoon. She stepped back and counted. *Un, deux trois,* knowing there would be more.

"Helène," Charles said when she returned and perched on the bench beside him. "When I had a house with my wife, I hired neighbour kids to come over and mow the lawn and trim the hedges. And after Meredith passed on, I moved into the condo and hired a housekeeper who looks after everything."

Charles took a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed the sea mist from his forehead and nose.

"I'm not a nature person. I'm a numbers man, so I might not know how to do this. And you're an elegant French lady," he said, "so I can't expect you to dig in the dirt."

"Certainly not," Helène concurred.

"But I believe somebody has to start looking after these memorials," he said. "I think we should do it."

Helène looked at Charles. His glasses were covered in mist, but she could still see his grey eyes.

"Everything is deteriorating, Helène," he said with a thud of his cane.

"It's inevitable," she said, remembering how dashing Charles used to look around town in his suit. He was a man you'd notice walking into a bank or restaurant. She realized how difficult it must have been for him to retire, become invisible. Helène knew—when an elementary school vice-principal walks into a room, people look up in attention. People see a silver-haired woman with shaky hands and think, "I hope she doesn't fall down our stairs."

"Let's make it anonymous," she said.

"Our secret?"

"Of course."

Walking back to the condo, the only thing that would have made the moment more perfect in Helène's view would have been if Nikky were there, the two of them flanking her. But she thought of him as she walked. And Charles. Her two good men.

Outside her door, Helène dug around in her pocket for her keys.

"Would you like to come to my place for B. & B. today, Helène?" Charles asked, gently taking her arm. "For a change of scenery?"

It was Helène's first time in Charles' place. She admired his large wooden bookcases, his antique globe, and noted that the floor plan was identical to hers.

"Now," said Charles, fumbling in the kitchen, "I don't have anything fancy, and I'm sorry to say I drained my liquor cabinet of all of its sugary temptations, but I can make you a cup of tea with honey and lemon."

"That sounds lovely," Helène said. And, looking over at Charles, she tried not to notice the long row of medications on the counter behind him. She sat down at the fine oak dining table and placed her hands under her knees to prevent them from shaking. ⊳

Suzanne Alyssa Andrew lives in Dufferin Grove. Her fiction has appeared in Kiss Machine and Draft. She has contributed to the magazine since 2006.

INDEX

Fictional characters appearing in this issue.

THINKING

An excerpt.

BY TAMARA FAITH BERGER

I cut this guy's ass one time with a razor. These are the kinds of things I got into after I thought it was over with Elijah, that one whole year where I thought I'd never hear from him again. It was as if I had to see more blood around. As if I had to have a razor for protection. I had to have them on me just in case. Razors come in packages of five.

I'd cut myself once, a little spot on my thigh. It was like cutting a steak. I think that's why I took the necklace off, the malachite Rastafarian choker that he made me. When I took that thing off, I realized I didn't want to cut myself. I wanted to cut someone else.

I met this guy at the park, sat near to him on a bench and we talked a bit, about the weather or something. He looked pretty young. He was reading a book by Theodor Adorno.

The thing that happened between me and this guy, I guess that was sort of a compulsion. I mean, I'd planned things, but I don't know where the plan came from. I guess the urge to hurt someone has its own plan. I liked this guy for being so willing.

He lay over my lap on a ratty two-seater in his room. We'd smoked up about an hour before. It was really strong stuff—the guy had a system in his closet. The couch was plaid in all shades of brown, it was way too rough for me to be on there naked. The guy's underwear and cords were bunched up at his ankles. His face was smashed into the corner of the couch, in the dirty abyss between the pillow and the springs. It was hard to squeeze even a tiny bit of flesh because his ass was too thin. If he moved, I mean squirmed, I would've gotten up and left. Because he stayed still, the scene went further.

I knew from the back of his neck he was scared. Mushroom patterns of rashes appeared.

I did it quick, pressed the razor blade down and slid it once sharp through his greyish behind. Blood in small bumps pushed up in the line, one by one, like cartoon bubbles. I watched the movement of the blood, not the length of my cut. The blood on the line appeared blacker and blacker. It freaked me out quite a bit, because right then I had the thought that this guy was a witch. And I thought, "What's he going to do to me in the future?" I let go of my pinch and threw the blade to the floor.

The skin of the guy's ass flooded with pink and replenished. The cut I'd made was no bigger than a stitch. I felt his skin prickle. I think he wanted me to cut him again.

It is hard to feel things that happen behind you, but this guy knew what was happening behind him.

I watched his blood dry in a watercolour stain.

Maybe when I was up and out of this room I could duplicate my courage without drugs. I knew he wanted us to smoke up some more. I knew he wanted me to try it again. But I wasn't about to let him convince me to do anything.

The guy was starting to squirm. He'd gotten hard near my thighs.

I could fuck you, he thought.

No way, I thought back. (I kept this thought to myself.)

The guy's entire weight on me changed. I changed, he changed. He felt like a mule now or something, his skin prickling up with short hairs. It happens too quickly that something so hot could turn into regular sex. I thought if the guy shot his sperm in the dirty brown couch, a being would fertilize inside the foam. The nice little creature of a witch and an ass!

Cut me again, the guy was pleading, the razor's right there!

I tensed my legs. He knew not to press. I'd cry if I was too sure of what I was doing in his room. I was not going to cut him again.

Now I realized we were in the exact same position we'd been in when we started. But I am not the kind of person to be able to say something like, "Now I am going to put my finger in your ass." Though I was forced into action by staying in his room. The room was still charged, so I couldn't escape.

He thought I was going to leave, but he convinced me to stay. To act up some more. This is your potential. He thought that hard enough that I heard it.

A naked guy's ass was on my lap. He would've gone down on me or done anything I asked. But I wanted something more spiritual.

I stroked the slit I'd just made with the razor blade. I woke it back up so that more blood came out. Its colour did not make me nervous any more. I drew a line with my finger from the cut to his ass. Blood was the marker. I fiddled in.

Now he was scared. It was that wind in his ass.

Yes, your ass can open, you bitch. I wanted to finger his ass until he came.

If this skinny grey witch was as powerful as me, he surely couldn't show it now.

As I fucked in with my fingers, I let the guy moan. I didn't care.

I thought of a place when you are young, when you're scared of a dog so you run away, run into your bedroom, people put you to sleep.

I'm not going to stop.

With that little attention I made him relax.

The muscles in the back of his legs were spasming.

Sometimes you just have to relax.

Relax. Relax.

I'm in control.

The air in his room was buzzing with sound. We'd forgotten to turn the radio off.

Now grab yourself, it's O.K.

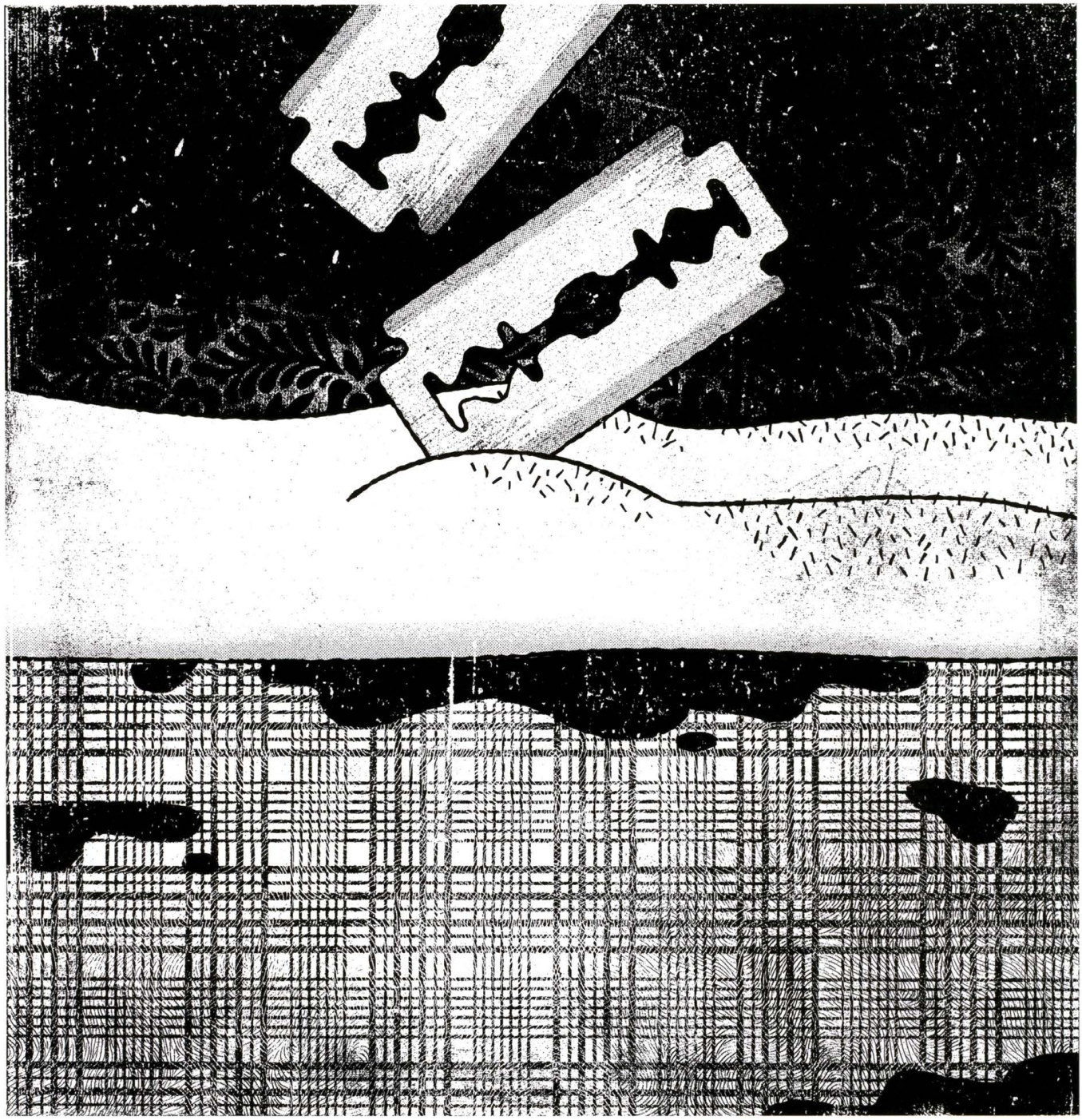
The guy held his dick and he started to breathe as push by push I embedded my finger. I spit in his hole. I could jab hard enough.

Relax, relax, you have to relax.

I felt like leaving this wretched fuck. If I'd had oil, he would've relaxed. Think of the woman who's really relaxed. A woman who'll wiggle her hips, her big pelvis and tits. A woman, she can really relax.

"All right," I said, finally speaking out loud. "Now you can move!"

I'd never felt a body so stiff. Relax you fool! I'm good at all this.



IAN PHILLIPS

The guy let out a croak from the back of his throat. Finally he was getting used to being diddled. His back looked elastic, I went in and then out. I added a thumb, he added a wave, the rhythm together accomplishing a twist. I tickled him there as deep as I could. I felt a region of opening grey.

Suddenly, his asshole clamped around my fingers. The sounds were unbearable, even to him.

When I slid my fingers out of his ass the guy fell off the couch, writhed around on the floor. Sperm threaded through the creases in his fist. I crouched down beside him and watched him up close. He kept his eyes hidden in the crook of his elbow.

"God I love you," he said.

I breathed. It felt pink.

"You're powerful," I told him. I told him the truth.

The guy let me see one blue spot of his eye. I knew he would've done anything I wanted. But I also knew if I let him touch me then, I'd be cooped up with him, a violent dog, for hours and hours.

As I stood up to go, he started breathing extra fast. His mouth was misshapen. He took his arm off his face.

I'll admit that he was a beautiful boy, with those blotchy cheeks and rabid eyes. He was in shock. We stared at each other. Now I was tired enough to go home and sleep.

I realized after this encounter, I had a major excess of energy to account for. ♉

Tamara Faith Berger lives in the Grange Park area. Her second novel, The Way of the Whore, was published by Gutter in 2004. She has contributed to the magazine since 2002.

Holiday Arts Mail-Order School

You can learn about Hallowe'en right at home by studying the splendid new "Hallowe'en Arts" course recently prepared by the Holiday Arts Mail-Order School – H.A.M.S. – of Peterborough, Canada.

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MARY WILLIAMSON

THE DEPT. OF ETERNAL REJECTION

SUBMISSION HOLD

Taddle Creek's most-rejected author can't catch a break.

BY NATHANIEL G. MOORE

Since he began submitting his fiction and poetry to *Taddle Creek,* in 2001, Nathaniel G. Moore—Toronto's favourite son—has been sitting in a side headlock, waiting.

But a recent solicitation from the magazine to contribute to its tenth anniversary issue has happily caught Moore off guard.

"I couldn't believe it when they wrote me," says Moore. "I thought maybe someone had signed me up for the Make-A-Wish Foundation."

Moore has submitted approximately twenty poems and seven short stories to *Taddle Creek* to date, every syllable rejected. After his first year of rejections, Moore took to including a Photostat of his passport, showing his Toronto birthright, along with his submissions. Still, nothing worked.

The closest Moore has come to acceptance was in May, 2003, when the magazine's editor, Conan Tobias, told him his most recent effort was his best to date.

"I remember talking to [the associate editor] Andrew [Daley] and Conan at one of the small-press fairs, around 2005, and just point-blankly saying, 'You're never going to publish me are you?'" says Moore. "They just smiled like jackals at the Keg Steakhouse."

Despite a very clear indication he was barking up the wrong Canadian masthead, Moore, ever the anti-hero, continued to submit. But his submissions led only to more suffering.

"He'd write about *Taddle Creek* rejecting him in his *Danforth Review* byline for his interview with Camilla Gibb," says a Toronto literati insider. "It was hard to watch. Nathaniel is a very insecure person, and I know he was in considerable pain."

In the summer of 2006, despite being between publishers and books, Moore confidently accepted the role as host of the Small Press Dating Game, a prelude event to that year's legendary Scream in High Park festival. Arguably Moore's worst performance in the history of feedback, the writer-poet-heel took what many considered to be several cheap shots at one of the event's absent sponsors: *Taddle Creek.*

"I think he was supposed to say that the raffle winner won a year's subscription, and he said it was for eleven years or something ridiculous like that," remarked one hipster who was in attendance that night. "And he did really bomb. He was so annoying."

When confronted about the prize inflation, Moore says calmly, "Why did I do it? Because I like the magazine, and people should read it for twelve years. I didn't do it to be rude or exploit *Taddle Creek,* like the festival lawyers seemed to think I was doing. And to be honest, I figured my chances of getting published by *Taddle Creek* were as likely as having Emily Haines in a bridal veil special-guest refereeing the never-gonna-happen steel-cage match I am trying to book with [the poet and editor] Michael Holmes at the Rogers Centre [formerly SkyDome].

"I started feeling really bad about myself," Moore says. "Even to the point of briefly giving up the writing career and becoming a George Michael impersonator, which unfortunately wasn't very hard to do. I thought that the magazine was practising the often-used operative known as 'N.G.M.P.' [Nathaniel G. Moore Prevention], a free service initiated by Magazines Canada. I believe cover stickers are available from their office."

As for his ruined literary career, Moore says that, in all fairness to the magazine, he only has himself to blame. "It was ruined long before I ever assumed *Taddle Creek* would publish my work," he says. "I realized that its consistent rejection of me was not a reflection on the quality of my writing, but in fact had more to do with a fear of me taking over the magazine, which is a fear many magazine publishers have, because I've dominated the magazine landscape here in Canada for so many years."

"I'm not saying all is forgiven," confesses Moore regarding his upcoming victory, "but it's a start."

Taddle Creek is quick to point out that, although Moore's story of his inability to be accepted by the magazine will appear in its tenth anniversary issue, the magazine still considers him a rejected author, promising not to publish any piece of fiction or poetry by Moore that doesn't deserve to be in the magazine. Which, apparently, is all of them.

Nathaniel G. Moore lives in Cabbagetown. He is the author of Bowlbrawl (Conundrum, 2005) and Let's Pretend We Never Met (Pedlar, 2007). He is the features editor of the Danforth Review and a columnist for Broken Pencil, and is currently working on a coming-of-rage novel, called Randy Savage's Moustache.

THE GALLERY

PHOTOPUNK

Jack Martin captures the vitality and spontaneity of Toronto's club scene.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACK MARTIN

It was probably the New York Dolls who did it. Or maybe it was the Ramones. Or Patti Smith. Whoever it was, somebody inspired Jack Martin to start taking pictures.

His first camera—purchased with his brother in 1975, when the latter was attending Ryerson University and couldn't afford the full cost himself—closely coincided with the original wave of New York punk acts making their way to Toronto's club scene.

"There were no hassles back then," says Martin. "There weren't that many people with cameras, either. I remember being at the Clash and having a zoom and people were like, 'Wow, must be a professional.' And in contrast to things later on, the bouncer was actually clearing space for me."

The casualness of the punk era was perfectly suited to an amateur shutterbug who did his thing simply because, as he puts it, "I liked the band." In the decades that followed, it wouldn't always be so easy.

"There was a period when the performers themselves—or the people working for them, their media people—got really paranoid about people taking pictures," says Martin. "I find it ironic now when you get stopped because the bouncer says, 'You can't take that in, it looks like a professional camera.' Then you go in and everyone's got their little digicams, and they're actually shooting video, which I'm not. Why are you worried about me, people? I remember going to the New York Dolls at the Phoenix [in 2005], and I was hassled by the bouncer. I thought, I don't think the New York Dolls have any objection to any publicity they're gonna get *anywhere.*"

Yet Martin, who switched from traditional film to digital photography in 2005, has somehow managed to shoot most of what he's wanted to shoot over the years. In so doing, this refugee-lawyer-by-day gradually amassed one of the city's unique and least-seen collections of concert photography. The Ramones, Johnny Thunders, El Vez, Jon Spencer, the Mekons, the Sadies, Lou Reed—all photographed in ways that reveal the artists' vitality and spontaneity as performers. "I'm trying to capture something on the edge," says Martin. "I try to get something that's kind of gritty, as opposed to slick shots."

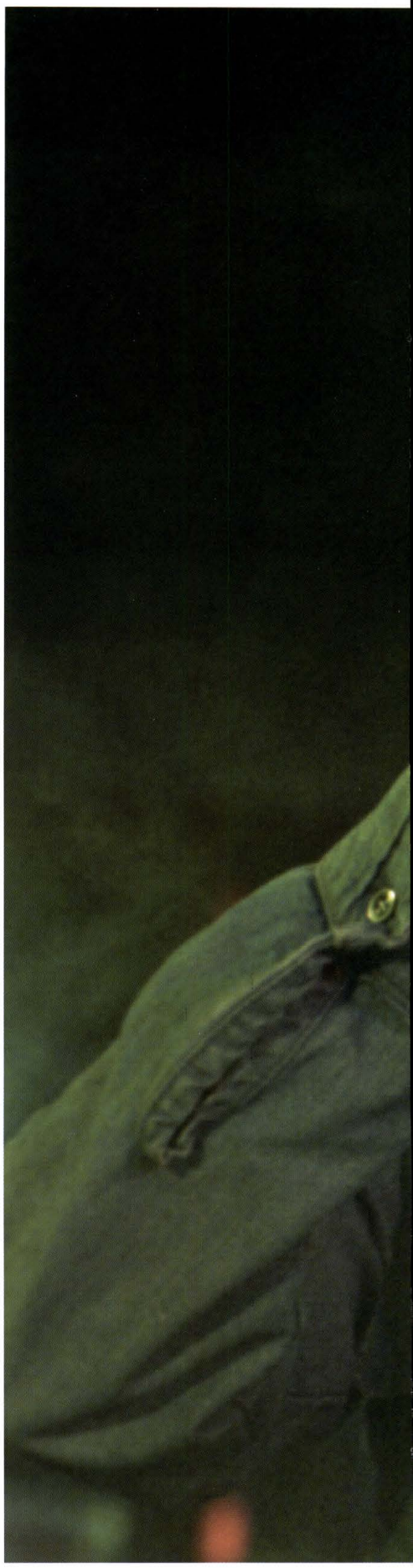
When asked to name the most exciting performers he's seen, Martin ponders what qualities make someone magnetic onstage. "I think people have a tendency to confuse movement and action with excitement," he says. "The Sadies' shows are really exciting, but I wouldn't consider them really active performers. I think that's also true of Jon Langford in his various incarnations. And I've enjoyed the Rizdales, going to see their shows and capturing them at different venues."

Inevitably, mistakes do happen. "I saw Bruce Springsteen at Seneca College, and that's where I learned about film exposure the hard way," Martin says. "Clarence Clemons' white suit is gonna make everything else really dark unless you compensate. And I shot the Mekons at Lee's Palace with no film in my camera. I blame it on the flu."

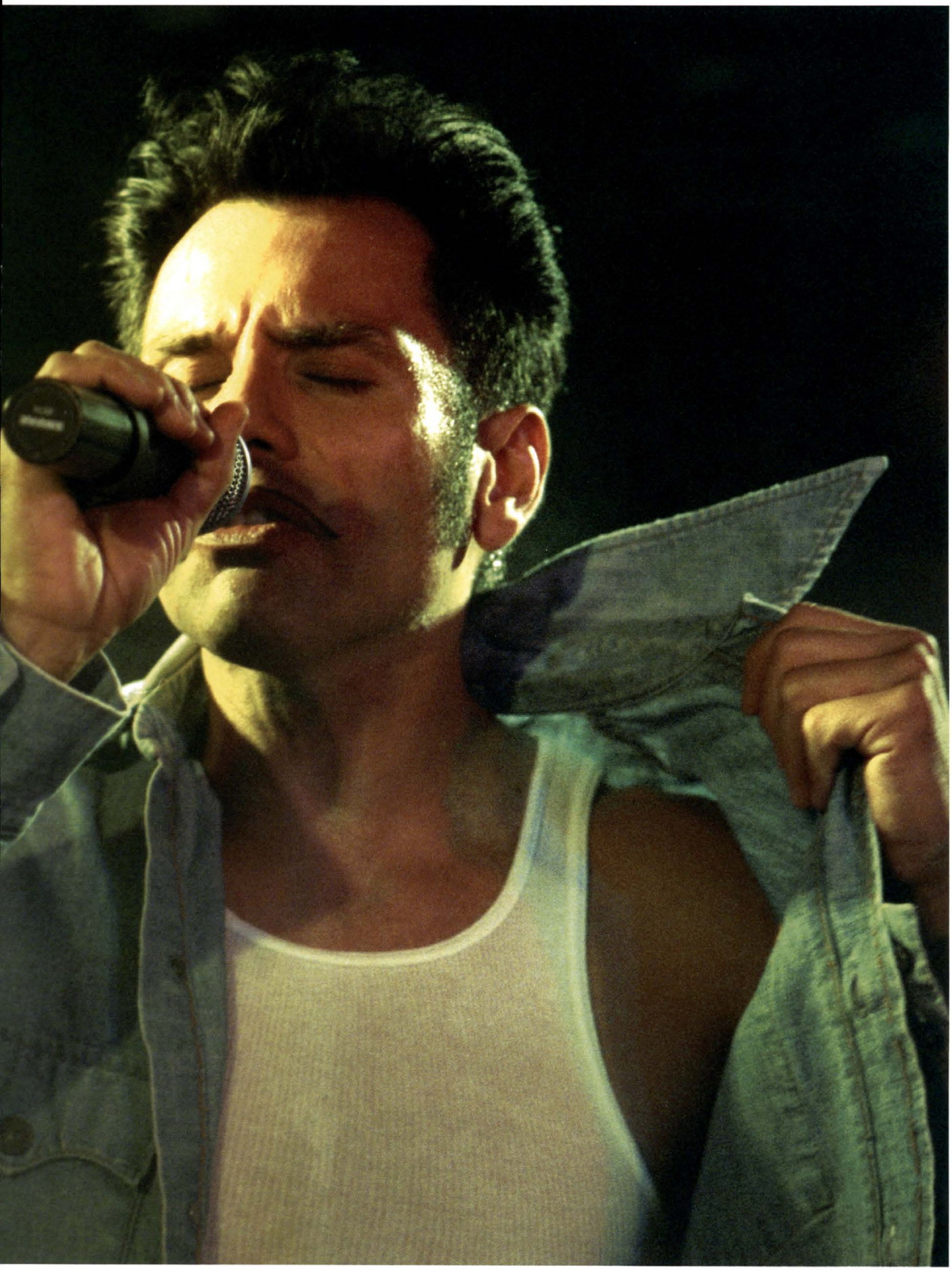
On nights when he's feeling clearer, Martin is still out at the clubs, adding more shots to his collection. When it is suggested that his habit adds something to the act of gig-going, that having a camera at the ready forces him to be in the moment as fully as the performers onstage, he agrees.

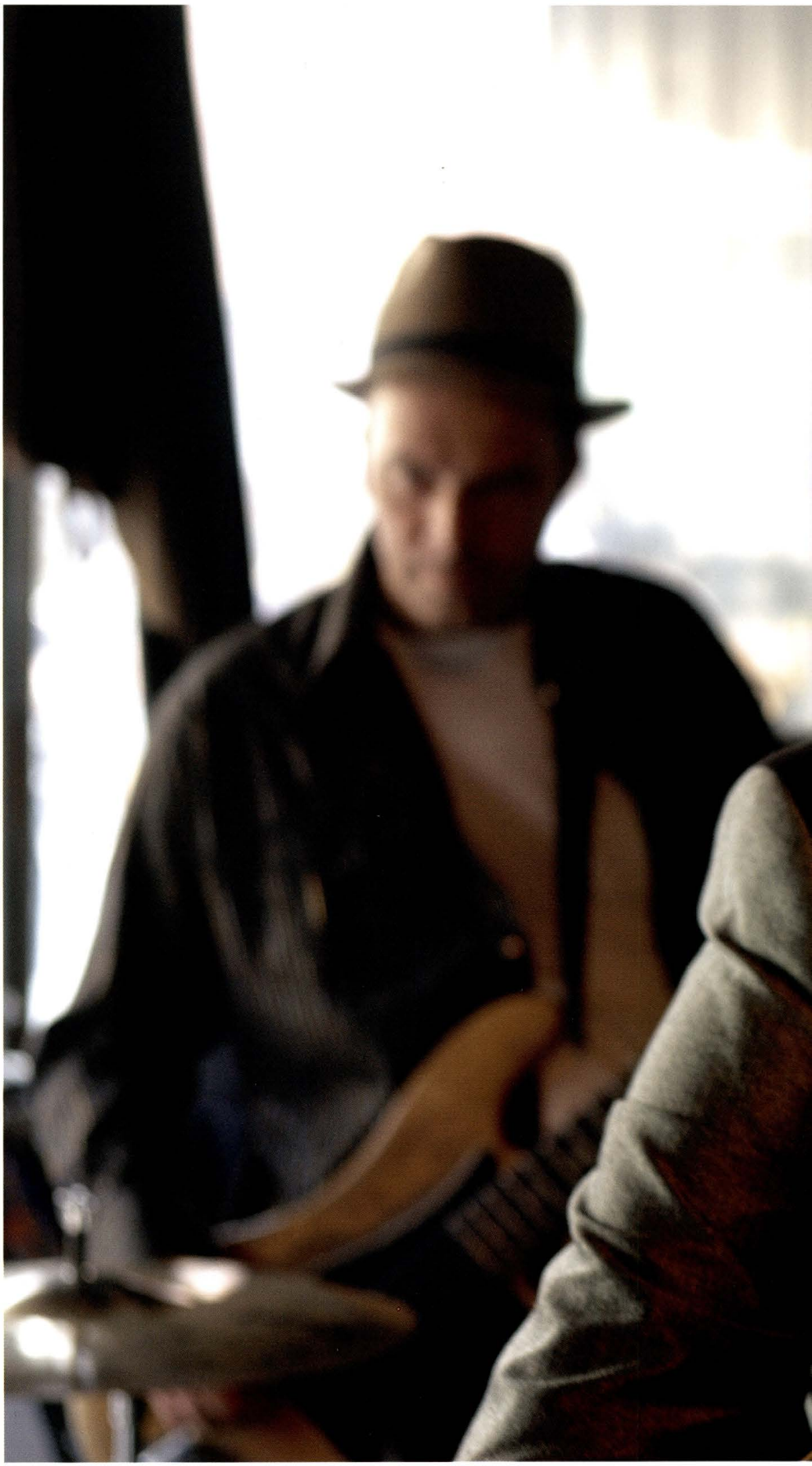
"The problem is it works both ways. I remember a friend of mine who was a photographer but who didn't take a camera when he went to Europe because he wanted to remember things. Taking photos can take the place of remembering."

—JASON ANDERSON



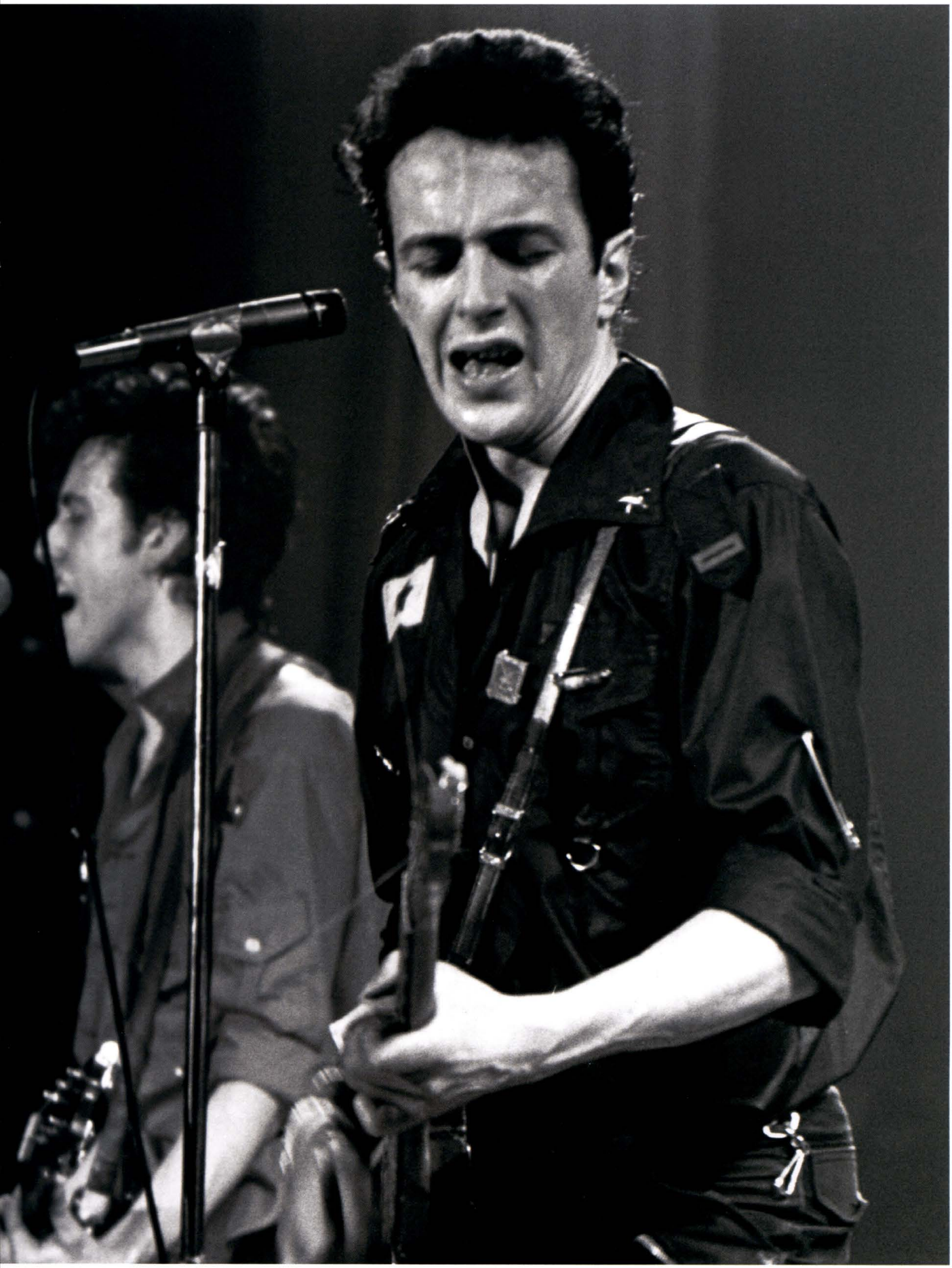
El Vez makes a post-election stop on the 2004 El Vez for Prez tour, at the Horseshoe.





The Rizdales,
at Graffiti's, 2007.

Wanda Jackson, at the Cadillac Lounge, 2005 (top);
the Clash, at the Rex Danforth, 1979 (right); Johnny Thunders, at El Mocambo, 1988.



Erika Wennerstrom, of Heartless Bastards, at El Mocambo, 2007.

David Johansen, at El Mocambo, 1978.

THE OUT-OF-TOWNER

NO POWER

BY MARGUERITE PIGEON

She is suddenly awake. Consciousness pulls over her eyes like a screen coming down, and a rough-cut version of their afternoon plays back. What she sees shocks her. The room is lit the gold of late evening. The air is still and oppressively hot, and she is sweaty.

He gets up first, limps down the hall to his bathroom. When he returns, he is that different person she also knows. He wants her out. "What time is it?" he says, looking at his bare wrist, then rooting around aggressively for where his watch might have dropped.

"It's late," she says, helpfully. "I'd better take off."

Franklin seems scattered. He abandons his watch search almost before it's begun and looks around the room as though trying to tell if it really is the one he normally shares with his wife. "Something's wrong with the central air," he says, walking gingerly over to the temperature control near their door. Nicole can see he is sore.

She picks herself up off the bed. She doesn't have any bruises that she can see. "Your clock's gone off too," she says, staring into the dead face of the bedside alarm.

"Hmm," he says, but he's distracted again. He is now absorbed in the task of pulling the sheets off the bed. As if his wife will be home any moment. As if he needs to neutralize the damage. They both know she doesn't fly back until tomorrow morning.

It's Nicole's turn to go down the hall to the bathroom. She flicks on the light switch. Nothing happens. She leaves the door slightly ajar, letting in what little natural light is left in Franklin's hall. Sitting on the toilet, naked, she wonders how long this business with him can go on and is surprised to find that she still can't imagine an end.

When she gets back to the bedroom, Franklin is standing beside the heap of sheets. He has puffed himself up in the way she's seen him do many times when dealing with contractors, his glasses returning to him, now, some of the authority of his job. But from the head down, he looks like a boy, not an architect. He has obviously thrown on the first thing he found in his dresser drawer—a yellow T-shirt and faded red shorts. He looks at her as if to say, "Where are *your* clothes?"

"Power's out," he says instead.

"No kidding," she says. "Guess we really lit it up. Ha ha."

Franklin ignores this. "I hope to God we won't lose a fridge full of food," he says, like whatever is in the kitchen represents the last rations he and his wife will ever be allotted.

"That would suck."

"Look, Nic, I . . ."

"Whatever. Don't bore me here. We'll have coffee at work tomorrow," she says, her back turned, pulling on her skirt.

"O.K. Great. Yeah," he says, his voice looser now, confirming something to himself. "I just gotta get this mess cleaned up." She can't see his face but is sure it has been recalibrated to contrition. On that same screen in her mind, Nicole sees Franklin, fifteen minutes from now, on his knees again, this time scrubbing away the evidence of where she first pushed him down, just inside his front door. "Ah, Franklin," she says to herself, depressed by it.

She buttons up her rumpled work shirt, thanks God she had the foresight to keep a hair elastic around her wrist, and looks into Franklin's wife's mirror, where she adjusts herself as best she can. Franklin hovers, silently hurrying her. She defies him, taking the time to straighten her suit jacket, says goodbye, for which she receives a dry, relieved kiss on the forehead, and is escorted to the back door. She thinks, "I'm the recycling bin," but reminds herself that this is part of the bargain and that she entered into it freely.

Outside, the heat takes her in its grip and she is jarred, disoriented, but glad anyway. It makes her feel sane. She has a six-block walk to the subway, during which she can also recalibrate. She wants her face to read uninvolved, unknowing. The heat will help her sweat out the rest.

All the houses she passes look like Franklin's. Many have stone vases on the front step that hold unlikely, competitive combinations of flowers and plants. In the fading light, they strike Nicole as funereal. She is suddenly anxious to get back downtown.

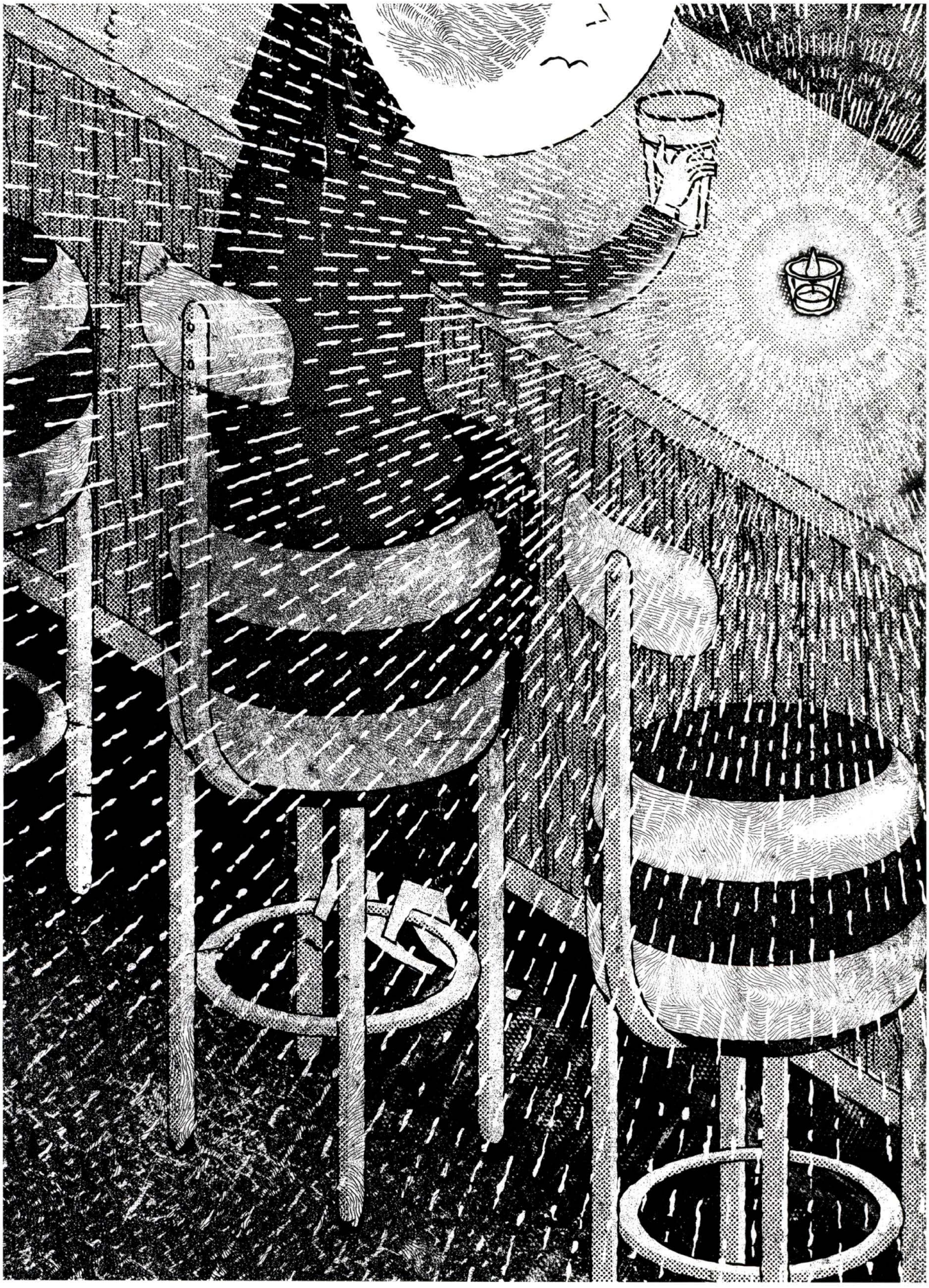
It is only when she finally gets to Yonge and Lawrence that she realizes something odd is going on. The stores she passes all have makeshift signs saying, "CLOSED. NO POWER." Outside the subway station, people are scuttling around like ants disturbed from their hole. Nicole goes past them to the turnstiles.

"Trains aren't running, miss," a T.T.C. worker says as she approaches, looking exasperated. "Haven't been since late afternoon."

"What's going on?" Nicole asks, but the worker has already turned around and is advancing toward some older women, waving her arms at them in a depleted "Don't bother!" gesture.

Nicole walks back out to the street corner where, squinting at the scene, she sees a man in a sweat-soaked work shirt directing traffic. He clearly has no idea what he is doing. Traffic is bunching up in every direction. As she watches, someone gets out of their car and hands him a child's twirling baton, but it is pink and sparkly and just makes him look stupid as well as inept. People start to honk, and Nicole gets the strange feeling that much has transpired since she left the office with Franklin at three o'clock for the site survey that never happened, which turned into the caution-to-the-wind stop at a liquor store, which became giggling, drinks, and fondling on a park bench,

IAN PHILLIPS



which, in turn, became twin, conspiratorial cellphone calls to cancel their late meeting with the senior project coordinator, and ended with she and Franklin driving, rather too drunk, the short distance to his house. Though they have not courted, have not assumed the nitty-gritty regularity of picking times and places, and have never discussed their uncommon approaches to pleasure, still, somehow, every so often, they hear a single, fervent thought pass between them: opportunity. They take it. He gives her control. She uses it. They fit. But only that way. Briefly.

"You need water?" someone says to her now.

"Excuse me?"

"Water. Four bucks a pop. If you're one of them that's walking home—you're gonna need water."

"I'll take a taxi, thank you."

"No cabs. You'll be walkin'," says the morose, chinless woman, as though pronouncing a sentence. She turns and plods away with her two big bags full of bottled water. The crotch area of her flood-length khakis is dark with perspiration.

Nicole suddenly feels dizzy. She needs a shower. She might still be just a bit drunk. And she *is* thirsty. "Actually, wait," she calls to the woman, "I'll take one—please." The woman turns and pulls out one tiny, lukewarm Evian. Nicole pats her side and realizes: her purse—she's left it at Franklin's. An icy tingle travels up from her feet. "I don't have any money," she says, more to herself than to the sweaty woman.

"Sorry to hear that."

Furious with herself, wanting the water very badly, and trying to determine whether Franklin will be kind enough to resist burning her things before his wife gets back, Nicole riffles through her satin-lined suit pockets and comes up with a crumpled ten-dollar bill, two quarters, and four pennies.

"Another one who lives by the almighty bank machine," says the woman, sounding disgusted.

Nicole hands her the ten-dollar bill, but the woman waves it away. "This heat'll do you in. Shouldn't be out without any I.D. or cash during a power outage like this one." She hands Nicole a free water. As she does, the woman's eyes shift in a way that indicates she has received payment of a different kind, having seized her opportunity to chastise the better-heeled woman. It should not, Nicole thinks, feel like such a bad deal. But it does.

Still, unwilling to beg this woman to take her last earthly coin, Nicole doesn't protest. She opens her water bottle and drinks its contents in one long gulp, then looks around. Among the many people at the intersection, she makes out a steady flow of business people walking north. But they can't *all* be walking home, she marvels. She herself lives on the waterfront. It will take hours. Looking west down Lawrence she feels a kind of panic tighten in her stomach. Her hair has begun to extract itself from the elastic in sections that flutter around her face, getting caught at the edge of her lips and making her nose itch. She pushes them back and glares. It is as if the street has become part of a foreign city to her, and she, a disoriented, clueless tourist who doesn't know the language. She begins to crave, doubly, the comfort of her own home.

Her cell is, of course, back at Franklin's with her bag. And so she jogs across the street to a row of pay phones. Ahead of each is a lineup ten people deep. As she waits, beads of sweat rolling down her stomach from under her breasts, Nicole overhears scraps of conversation that confirm what's started to dawn on her: ". . . says the whole city's out . . ."; ". . . people are still down there in the goddamn dark . . ."; ". . . afraid they'll be looted, so they're staying put."

When she finally gets her turn at the tepid receiver, she can't seem to get through to Franklin's cell. She hefts the dangling phone book container to look for his home number, only to find the pages she needs have been stolen. She dials 411 but something is wrong with the line. She dials the operator and has the same problem. "No," she says, slamming down the receiver. "No. No. No." The people who've lined up behind her blink at her frustration. They look ready to pounce if she doesn't step away.

She considers walking back to Franklin's but cannot imagine ringing his doorbell, finding him clean-shaven, changed into appropriate clothes, greeting her with—what? She can only imagine the kind of self-hate and indignance he

STRANGER HERE

This review in the *Gazette* startles me.
"THE LONELY PLANET," about a book called *Rare Earth,*
by two profs from Washington state.

It's positing the earth encountered such spectacular coincidences
(this to grow life advanced enough to create *Star Trek*)
we could well be unique. Alone. In the galaxy:

Just us. Another true meaning for justice. Another justification
for haute couture and bizarre behaviour. . . . To send the book's ideas
into combat the authors deploy Science & Sheer Speculation.

It takes me back to less person per inch—the folks out late
and the babysitter getting down to something heavy
with her boyfriend in the basement.

I hear my voice echoing through the empty nest.
Imagine us not being studied by some more advanced form of life!
Break it down to haiku:

Three caterpillars.
One leaf-filled Bick's pickle jar.
Seven holes poked out.

Surprised to report my next thoughts on the solo system
include the possibility of never having a child—no energetic proxy
to set loose on the lonely planet (or the babysitter).

(I'm conditioned from an uptown upbringing
and greying sideburns to thinking of progeny
when presented with compelling ideas of life advancing.)

Perhaps it has to do with making a little planet—
someone to read to us when we grow old, when it is proven
beyond any shadow, alone in our galaxy.

Alone with our only sun, when the clouds don't hide it,
with our one measly moon,
when the clouds allow for that.

I look up (my head is lifted anyway) but quickly and safely return.
Here comes the Sun King—
trying to squeeze his Sun Queen.

Looking for his glasses. Trying to read to her
(if she is not alienated by bizarre behaviour). It has snowed
all afternoon—tonight the world cowers alone.

—CHRIS CHAMBERS

might take out on her. He is, after all, the one with the wife, the one with seniority at work. He only likes to toy with the idea of being the vulnerable one. Screw it, she thinks. She'll start walking. She can pick up more water on the way. The concierge at her building will let her into her condo, and she can still get a good night's sleep. It will be fine.

She goes back to the corner and merges against the now very heavy northbound flow of foot traffic, an eerie army of people who look just like she and Franklin, returning from offices probably much like her own. How grim, she thinks. But a few minutes in, as she finds a rhythm, she begins, oddly, to enjoy herself. It's absurd. The whole city really *does* seem to be without power. People are giving off an energy Nicole remembers from her childhood. Growing up in a small northern town, her grandmother would sit with her whenever the power went out and they would sing songs and she would feel that anything was possible, that she could be anyone she wanted.

People are standing in the shadowy doorways of their flower shops, hair salons, and computer stores with nothing better to do, as if the pedestrians were part of a civic parade. Nicole overhears scraps of jokes and finds herself smiling at the punchlines. One man says all this unplanned exercise is very bad news for gyms, good news for cobblers. Another woman tells everyone within earshot that she's been walking for three hours already and can't imagine what trouble her children are up to. There is only the slightest note of fear in her voice, and Nicole wishes she hadn't caught it.

The comments continue, block to block, and she feels sorry for them—these people whose need for drama has been met by a false, temporary emergency. By nightfall, the power will have been restored and their lives will be as boring as when they'd plugged in their blow-dryers this morning. This is playacting, just as it was when she was a child. Even then, deep down, and despite what her grandmother told her, Nicole knew she couldn't be anyone but herself. Which is still true, she thinks now. In spite of the games she plays with Franklin, or maybe because of them, she does not believe in escape. Soon this will be over. She will take the subway the rest of the way home. She will bathe and sleep and return to work and drink coffee beside Franklin. No harm done. Still, every so often, she reaches into her suit pocket and palms the ten-dollar bill.

But when, more than an hour later, her feet have started to hurt, and a smell comes up, regularly, from inside her shirt, and it is pitch black, and the city has been sucked into an impenetrable abyss, and she is not quantifiably closer to home—when all her brief good humour and tolerance have been walked off, Nicole begins to resent the cheery, nearly festive mood of the crowd, the cars stuffed with young men who pass, hooting their horns in knuckleheaded fraternity, the friendly neighbours who hand them water bottles at street corners. People are actually *celebrating* this, she thinks with enough disgust to spit, though she never would.

Eventually, she decides she can stand it no longer. She gets off Yonge Street and heads for the nearest residential street that parallels it to the west. There, she reasons, she can at least go about her trudging in peace. Two steps from the corner though, darkness swallows her like a great mouth. She sees just the flickers of the occasional candle in a front window, like holes poked in black cloth. Twice, without notice, she is startled by people who come upon her from the opposite direction. She imagines, again, those stupid, ghoulish urns that must still be sitting on the steps of all the houses she's passing, just steps away. And in the void, she feels her usual certainties being worn down. Doubts about her choices. Her preferences. The darkness feels like it is seeping through her skin. She quickens her pace and tries to focus on the regular click-click of her heels.

Suddenly, a woman appears out of the dark.

"Hello," the woman says, passing.

"Hi," says Nicole.

The woman suddenly stops: "*Nicole?*"

Then women both turn, coming very close, like dogs, to confirm one another's features, which appear very pale and grainy.

"Holy geez! I can't believe this!" says the woman, who turns out to be the rather too young and angular receptionist for

THE NIGHT I TOOK BENICIO DEL TORO TO BED

This morning the bed is a giant wrinkle of white sheets,
and you're still sleeping beside me, your black hair
is just as messed now as it was when we met,
and my mind is filled with jump-cuts of
you holding my arms, holding me against
the back of the hotel door with your foot firmly
planted between mine, and of me leaning
against the bar ordering a Scotch, neat, and of you
taking a long look at my cleavage and giving me a
perfect Sinatra smirk and, naturally, I give you my best
Ava Gardner arched brow, and on the street you
held my face in your hands and kissed me, and
the curve of your side just under the flat of your shoulder blade,
where my palm smoothed your skin, flashes through
my mind, and somewhere along the way, perhaps in the cab,
we discover we're both born under the sign of Pisces,
and this seems to explain everything.

—KERRI HUFFMAN

the group of offices where Nicole works. "What are *you* doing here? Don't you live downtown?"

"Oh, yes. Um . . ."

"Isn't this *nuts?*" the woman jumps in. "Apparently, it's going to be out for *days.* I think I found the last Thai take-out in the city for me and my husband!" she says, hoisting a greasy paper bag of food.

Nicole's throat has tightened. "I was on a site survey," she blurts out. "A site survey just north of here. I couldn't get home." She reaches up and touches her hair nervously. Then her soiled shirt collar.

The receptionist adopts a queer look. "Oh," she says. "You were on a survey all this time?" And Nicole can see, even through the ink-blot darkness, something clarifying itself in the receptionist's clever, mouse-like eyes: she was the one who put through both Nicole's and Franklin's calls this afternoon.

"Well, I'll let you get back on your way then," says the receptionist, evenly, and Nicole has an urge to hit this girl in the smug mouth and run. "Yes, I'd better keep going," she says. They take three steps from one another and, when Nicole turns to get a last look, the receptionist has already disappeared, carrying her fragrant Thai and her secret irretrievably into the hot night.

At the next intersection, Nicole, stunned, and despite the intense pain in her feet, jogs back to the relative comfort of Yonge Street, where cars and people have now formed a throng, a mob, a human mass she wants to disappear into. She continues her walk but calculates, with every step, how long it will take for the leak she's caused to spread. Another forty minutes and she's convinced she will be drowned, sunk by this crowd, or by what is known of her. She passes a young man with a wide grin and a loose sandwich board that reads, "TWO WORDS: CHEAP AND COLD. ONE-DOLLAR PINTS TODAY ONLY!" Before she knows what she's done, Nicole has answered the call and steps past him into the bar.

It smells like a lifetime of cigarettes and stale beer and she would normally run the other way, but instead she takes a seat at the bar and orders the pint, which she sips by candlelight. All around her, groups of people, probably at the half point on their own long walks home, seem to be content to share the situation with strangers. The mood is giddy. Nicole sits with her

back to their chatter, resentful or maybe even jealous.

Now an extremely elderly woman approaches the bar. With great effort, she props her curved, bird frame up on the stool next to Nicole and orders a whisky sour. In the flickering light, Nicole makes out the upper-class profile of a dry matron, like a figure from a Rembrandt. The woman turns to Nicole and considers her for a long moment with her pale, shrunken face. Just once. Thoroughly. Then a jolt of knowledge—or bemusement, Nicole can't be sure—turns some idea on like a light in the woman's ancient skull, and pulls up one corner of her mouth into an amused grimace. As though she is reading every aspect of Nicole's condition. As if she can see directly into her insides.

"My dear," says the woman, in a voice like paper being crumpled, "you are lovely."

Nicole just blinks at her. The old woman reaches into the dated but expensive handbag on her lap and brings out a silver case from which she plucks two long cigarettes, lighting both in a gesture Nicole has never seen, except in black and white movies, then hands one over. Nicole takes it and breathes in deeply. The woman digs out an alligator-skin change purse and pinches from it a one-dollar coin, putting it down on the bar beside Nicole's pint. "Your ale is on me," she says, lifting her milky eyes so that two identical reflections of the candle's flame leap into them. Beside her, the ember of her cigarette gives off a precise trail of grey smoke.

Nicole drags on her cigarette and considers the word: lovely. She crosses her legs and lets herself feel it. Be it. Then she turns her gaze to the candle itself, which occupies a spot just beyond the raptor-woman's manicured hand. There, in the flame's yellow heart, Nicole recognizes a malicious, hot glare. She quickly, forcefully, attempts to blow it out. She blows and blows, but the flame only wavers before returning, stubbornly, to life.

Marguerite Pigeon lives in Vancouver. Her work has appeared in Grain, Room of One's Own, and Dandelion. She holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of British Columbia, and is currently writing her first novel. She has contributed to the magazine since 2001.

THE BOOKS

Taddle Creek Recommends.

GreenTOpia: Towards a Sustainable Toronto, edited by Alana Wilcox, Christina Palassio, and Jonny Dovercourt (Coach House, 2007; $24.95). If only the planet could keep itself from dying the way Coach House's *uTOpia* series has. This third volume in as many years focuses on that latest of crazes: the environment. Remember back in the early nineties when the environment was all the rage? Whatever happened to that? *Taddle Creek* sincerely hopes things are taken more seriously this time around. Keeping Taddle Creek World Headquarters air-conditioned in the summer isn't cheap.

• *Long Story Short,* by Elyse Friedman (Anansi, 2007; $29.95). Even though Elyse was kind enough to send *Taddle Creek* an advance reading copy of her latest collection of stories, the hugeness of this tenth anniversary issue prevented the magazine from getting very far into it before press time. But based on the stories it contains that originally appeared in these pages, and based on all the other fabulous books Elyse has written, *Taddle Creek* has no hesitation in recommending *Long Story Short* to its readers. And, more importantly, by talking about not having read the book, *Taddle Creek* has filled a paragraph's worth of space.

• *I, Tania,* by Brian Joseph Davis (ECW, 2007; $19.95). *I, Tania* is a slim volume. With a few pages removed, it could easily be a lengthy short story. In any case, it's a humourous, pop-culture aficionado's dream, and equally as enjoyable as B.J.D.'s debut, *Portable Altamont.* Nice poster campaign too.

Pulpy and Midge, by Jessica Westhead (Coach House, 2007; $19.95). It seems Jessica Westhead has become one of those instantly famous authors. With, *Taddle Creek* believes, only a handful of zines to her name, she not only managed to pack the Gladstone Hotel ballroom for *Pulpy and Midge's* September launch, but also to send her publishers scurrying back to the office for more books to sell before she even took to the stage. You go, girl.

• *Therefore Repent!,* by Jim Munroe and Salgood Sam (No Media Kings, 2007; $16). Good ol' Jim has gone and written the comic-book equivalent of one of his novels. Jim has a knack for depicting somewhat depressing sci-fi futures, but the future presented in *Therefore Repent!* is quite possibly his most depressing to date, especially when mixed with the bleak, blue-grey tones of the artist Salgood Sam.

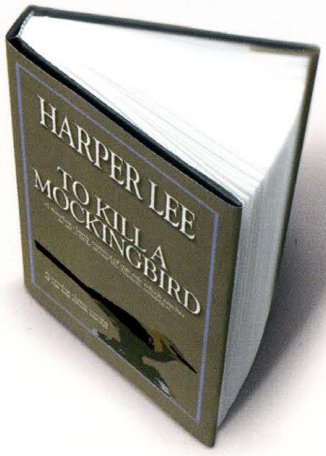
The Outlander, by Gil Adamson (Anansi, 2007; $29.95). *Taddle Creek* is usually a self-admitted non-fan of the period piece, especially those set in turn-of-the-century (last century) Canadian wilderness. At the same time, *Taddle Creek's* previous exposure to Gil's fiction was no more than the delightfully witty short story presented in these pages some issues ago. So the magazine didn't know what to expect when it cracked open *The Outlander. Taddle Creek* may sometimes be glib with cliché praise, but it literally couldn't put this book down. It is enjoyable from start to finish (thankfully, it actually has a laudable finish, something so many novels lack). Do pick up this book and see why the literary press was hinting it will be this year's winner of everything before it even hit bookstores. Why are you still reading? The magazine's over. Go buy this book. (Actually, read *People Around Here* first. It's a good one.)

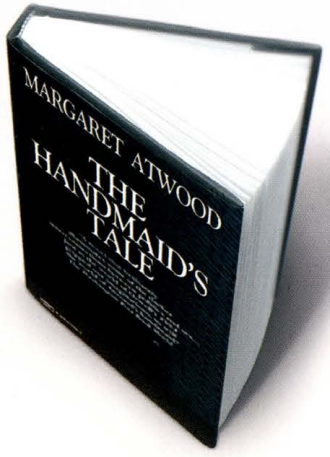
AN APOLOGY

Last issue in this space *Taddle Creek* made reference to a certain "cheapskate" and his buying habits, completely forgetting that said cheapskate is a loyal subscriber (although at a discounted price), regular launch attender, and all-around helper-outer—a true friend of the magazine if ever there was one. So apologies, Mr. Art Director. You're tops in *Taddle Creek's* (non-discounted) book. You may renew your subscription now.

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


PEOPLE AROUND HERE
DAVE LAPP
TADDLE CREEK BARBEQUE
DON'T YOU FIND IT ODD THAT A CATHOLIC FAMILY LIKE THEIRS WOULD HAVE FOUR GROWN, MARRIED KIDS, BUT THEY HAVE ONLY ONE GRANDCHILD?
YAH, AND I'M NOT SURE HOW HAPPY THEY ARE ABOUT THAT SITUATION.
PATRICK'S MOM SAID SHE DOESN'T WANT TO BE AN ENABLER.
WELL SHE'S ENABLED HIM TO DUMP HIS BABY AT THEIR HOUSE... THREE HUNDRED KILOMETRES AWAY!!
I CAN'T BELIEVE HIS WIFE JUST LEFT THE BABY BEHIND. WHEN IS SHE SUPPOSED TO BE COMING BACK?
NO ONE'S REALLY SURE SHE BOUGHT AN OPEN ENDED TICKET... BUT AT LEAST ANOTHER MONTH.
SO WHAT IF SHE DOESN'T COME BACK? PATRICK SAID HE MIGHT GIVE THE BABY TO THE CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY.
OH, HE IS SUCH A JERK! THAT'S UNBELIEVABLE! WHAT IS HIS PROBLEM?! HE'S A TENURED PROFESSOR, HE'S GOT MONEY!...
I KNEW SOMETHING WAS OFF WHEN I VISITED THEIR APARTMENT JUST AFTER MARY WAS BORN. THE PLACE LOOKED LIKE A CRACK HOUSE... NO FURNITURE, GARBAGE AND PAPERS EVERYWHERE AND HIS WIFE LYING ON THE FLOOR.
WHY DIDN'T THEY HAVE ANY FURNITURE? HE SAID IT WASN'T WORTH IT BECAUSE THEY WERE GOING TO MOVE IN A FEW MONTHS...
THAT'S INSANE! WHY DIDN'T FONG TELL HIM OFF?
PATRICK IS TO BLAME FOR SOME OF IT, BUT WHEN THEY CAME TO VISIT US FONG WAS ACTING STRANGELY. SHE JUST SAT THERE STARING BLANKLY, NOT SPEAKING. I REMEMBER HER SAYING ONE THING...
I HATE MY LIFE
OH JEEZ, SOUNDS LIKE MAYBE SHE'S SUFFERING FROM POST PARTUM DEPRESSION.
YAH...
Y'KNOW I HATE TO ADMIT THIS, BUT PART OF ME ENVIES HIM... SIGH... I WISH I HAD A LITTLE DAUGHTER, BUT IF YOU HAVEN'T HAD ONE BY FORTY, YOU PROBABLY SHOULDN'T...
TOO SET IN YOUR WAYS?
SIGH, YAH.
IT'S ONE THING TO DREAM OF THE IDEAL OF HAVING A CHILD LIKE WHEN I SEE A LITTLE ASIAN GIRL HOLDING A TOY, IT MAKES MY HEART ACHE...
...BUT IT PASSES AND I ACCEPT MY CHOICE, BUT PATRICK HAS THE REAL THING AND HE'S TRYING TO DUMP HER LIKE AN UNWANTED PET!... GOD HE'S SUCH AN IDIOT!!
THIS VARIABLE DOES NOT FIT INTO MY EQUATION.
$\alpha + \beta \neq \Omega$
GLAH
SO NO ONE KNOWS WHEN FONG IS SUPPOSED TO COME BACK FROM CHINA? NO... BUT THE IDEA IS THAT SHE WILL COME BACK... EVENTUALLY.
MAN, SHE SHOULD COME RIGHT BACK, GET THE BABY, DIVORCE PATRICK AND GO BACK TO CHINA! WITH CANADIAN DOLLARS, SHE'D PROBABLY DO PRETTY WELL OVER THERE!
YAH, BUT WOULD YOU RATHER RAISE YOUR CHILD IN CHINA OR IN CANADA?
HM...
HEY! REMEMBER WHEN HE WAS A TEENAGER HE HAD THOSE TWO RUBBER BABIES?
HEH, OH YAH, THE 'SHRAINS', 'SHY OF BRAINS.'
HE WAS SO PROTECTIVE OF THOSE THINGS! I ONCE PUT ONE OF THE SHRAINS ON THE OVEN JUST TO TEASE HIM...
YOU IDIOT!! YOU BURNED HIS HAIR!
SORRY SORRY
PAF
...AND HE WENT BERSERK!
HEH, MAYBE PATRICK THINKS HE'S JUST GOT ANOTHER SHRAIN.
NAW, HE'D PROBABLY TAKE BETTER CARE OF IT!





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