THE MITRE

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2007-'08
Bishop’s University
The Mitre

115th edition
2007-'08
Bishop’s University
The Mitre is published by the Students' Representative Council of Bishop's University.

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Thank you to all who made possible the continuation of this literary tradition.

Frontispiece: Untitled (2007), Sabrina Paternostro

Below: Origins 1 and Origins 2, Kathryne Owen

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For Bucket For Lukas
Her Peaches
The Philadelphia Museum
Viewing a Nineteenth Century Portrait

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J. Coplen Rose
For M

Sonja Solomun
Memories

Kayla Webster
Single Frame

Frank Willdig
Night Migration

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Garden Goddess, Ellen Russell
On Chicken Farming

Luella kept the house. Elias took care of the chickens. She did her job with precision, as did he.

Jane also did her job with precision, but did so half-heartedly. Jane was a young reporter, fresh out of Ryerson and thrust into small town Ontario. Nevertheless, she still retained all of the haughtiness of a girl both raised and educated in the big city. Her career counselor had promised her that the move westward to work for The Shemp Post Standaard, albeit in a remote hamlet, would be a great foundation to a career as a journalist. One former reporter now worked for the Ottawa Citizen, another for the Calgary Herald. The Post Standaard, spelled in such a manner because of its founder’s Swedish heritage, was the flagship of the Trillium County papers. It had a circulation of nearly nine thousand and had won a few (three to be exact) national journalism awards over the years. 1979, 1985, 1993. These intermittent wins were still enough to hold cachet at the paper. They were displayed in the waiting area with pride.

Jane was living with an aunt on an organic farm just outside downtown Shemp. (Population 604. Canada Post office, Esso, abandoned former Esso, Joan’s Convenience, Credit Union ATM-no branch.) She was also producing some of the best writing of her life. “Abandoned Esso sold to Local Man, Downtown Interest on the Rise”, “Fight Over Leaf Burning Ordinance Heats Up”, “Drought Conditions Dire”, “A Christmas Gift Like No Other”. (That one was about a puppy given to a dying boy. The boy ended up taking a turn for the better, but that plumb assignment was bestowed on someone else.)

While Jane was content building her portfolio with solid news (the puppy was considered a big scoop), she wanted something she could take a few more creative liberties with. The idea came to her when watching the news one night. She saw a brief report about a Toronto woman running a soup kitchen. The next day it was the talk of the office. (Meaning Jane had mentioned it and the others had nodded in agreement that it was admirable.) Therefore, it only seemed right to suggest a human interest story to Howard, the editor-in-chief of The Post Standaard. Something that would be thought

provoking, sentimental. Something people would remember her for. More importantly, a springboard to help her move up in the world. As she gave him her pitch, he lay reclining in his desk chair, contemplating.

“I don’t know if that would fit in with The Post Standaard my dear,” he said. “I mean, people look to us as a beacon for news, not smoltz.”

“They expect other things from us too though.”

“Sure. Obituaries. Advertisements for local businesses. That advice columnist. Edna, or whatever her name is. Hints from Heloise.”

“But don’t you think a story about someone local might be interesting?”

“Look, I let you write that piece about the puppy. Wasn’t that good enough?”

“Need I refresh your memory that I was forced to stick to the bare bones of that story. It was the most stoic story about a cocker spaniel that anyone has ever read.”

She was right. The paper was positively barren of any emotion. It lacked even letters to the editor. They’d fallen by the wayside in 1984 under the previous editor, an obese woman named Marg. She’d drank herself to death. Her obituary was right to the point as well, as she surely would have liked it to be.

Howard looked at Jane. She was cute enough, a blonde who hid her pristine face behind cat-woman glasses, and whose large bosom was barely contained by an attempt at conservatism, a red long-sleeved top. One of her nipples was erect, the other not. This turned him on for some reason he could not explain.

“You can do it this once,” he said. “And if it goes over well, we’ll see about letting you try this more often. If not, you’ll stick to cocker spaniels and the Esso, okay?”

“Of course. I won’t let you down, I promise.”

He clenched an unlit cigar between his teeth. He didn’t smoke, but enjoyed the look; felt it fit in well with his vocation.

“Any thoughts on whom you might do this piece on?”

“Not a single one.” Jane still didn’t know much about the locals. She spent most of her free time complaining about small town life through e-mails to her friends, always assuring them that she’d only be there a
year. A year and a half tops.
   “Actually, I was hoping that you might give me a bit of direction.”
   He misheard at first. Something about his erection. Upon clarification, he was disappointed.
   “Well,” he said, without missing a beat. “How about Elias Kassam? He’s good people.”
   “If you say so,” She jotted down his name, misspelling it terribly.
   “And where does he live?”
   “Out the Murphy Road. Just beyond the Vonneguts.”
   “Who are the Vonneguts?”
   “Ask Bettie. I don’t really have the time now,” he said.
   Howard had just noticed the giant clock before him.
   “I have to run. Business.”
   With that he threw on his coat and headed out the door. Rona closed in an hour and he desperately needed a new screen door, needed to stop his wife’s bitching.
   Bettie gave Jane the directions with pleasure, and the next afternoon Jane parked her Cavalier by the front entrance to his farm and went off in search of acoop. The farmhouse was very large, yet in seemingly ill repair. The yellow paint had long-weathered from its clapboard shingles and the grass on the front lawn was sporadic. Wisps of hair on a mostly bald head.
   The property by-and-large was in that mid-stage of decay where it no longer looked cute or quaint and instead seemed quite dilapidated, like a setting from a movie where a blonde, bosomy girl such as herself would be murdered. They were good people he had said - this didn’t quell her fears. She walked with a quick step towards the main property, looking behind her the whole way. Her years in Toronto had caused her to fear too much. There was nothing except a corn farm and her car looking back at her.
   She walked past the chicken coop, which came just before the house. She had figured that it was a garage, and that perhaps she’d find Elias Kassam there, fixing a tractor or something to that effect. The coop repulsed her. It gave off a fetid odour, and in fitting with the main house, appeared to be on the verge of collapse. The chickens, surrounded by wire, clucked and jumped and stared at her with beady eyes. Some lunged their heads toward grain. Others poked their heads through the wire. Their dead eyes terrified her. They appeared to have no soul.

   Hearing footsteps, Jane turned around, startled. (The locale and present company, she figured, were not conducive to relaxing.) An older man in good physical shape was walking towards her. He still had all his hair and was covered with the grime of an honest day’s work.
   “May I help you?” he asked.
   Jane was scared. She wanted to ask to be held. To feel the warmth of a human body and soul. To forget the creatures that had been staring at her moments ago. To forget the ever-present thoughts of being hacked to death.
   Embarrassed, she looked again at the chickens. Oh, how could they live with themselves, she thought! She composed herself.
   “My name is Jane. I’m a…”
   She was cut off quickly by Elias. “You’re that young one who’s always writing for the Post aren’t you?”
   “The Post Standaard, yes.”
   “Well, good on you. My wife and I really enjoy your stories.”
   Jane blushed despite herself.
   “Now, Ms. Jane, what brings you to the farm? There isn’t much newsworthy around here.”
   It occurred to Jane that only in a place such as Shemp would a stranger be treated so kindly on a property. In her Toronto apartment complex she knocked on a neighbour’s door to borrow some laundry detergent once, to be met by the neighbour opening the door abruptly, holding a knife. Once she had her favourite pairs of panties stolen from the communal dryer. A man once grabbed her ass on the subway. She was surprisingly more flattered than upset.
   Only in a place such as Shemp would a scene like this occur: the happy farmer indulging a strange journalist who is creeping around his farm (and blocking his mailbox with her Z24) in conversation and not pull a gun or at least a pitchfork on her.
   “Well, Mr. Kassam, we at The Post Standaard would
like to do a profile on you for the paper. A true human interest story.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said, visibly flattered.

“There’s not much of interest in my life. Graduated from the vocational school, worked in Edmonton trucking for a year and then came back and started this here farm with my father. Been livin’ the dream ever since.”

“But the editor specifically told me to come see you, Mr. Kassam.”

Surely, she thought, he must know something I don’t.

“Oh, it’s for Howard? Well, why didn’t you say so! Anything for that old dog. I think of him as a brother. Come on in. I’ll have Luella put on a pot of tea.”

And so she followed him, now feeling safe.

Howard hadn’t sent Jane to just anyone’s house, but to his “brother’s.” And now she was going to write a brilliant article about him. “Nepotism.”

The house’s interior was much more enticing than the exterior. It was modest, yet held all the comforts of a grandparent’s house. All the while without looking too dated. (Save for the giant spoon rack over the fridge or the tacky glazed wood plaques with pictures of assorted dead family members.) The floors were laminate in a hardwood style. It was evident the Kassams didn’t give a damn about resale value.

The pair sat down at the wooden kitchen table.

Very conventional. Very Sears Catalogue. Luella put out some Peek Freans and a pair of mismatched mugs for the two. Then she went to boil water and busy herself in the living room with her soaps.

“So,” Jane began, with her notebook and memory waiting for some golden quotes. “Why chickens?”

He laughed. “Why journalism?”

“I don’t know, exactly. I suppose because I’m good at writing.”

If Jane needed to answer a few questions to get the story, she didn’t plan on making a fuss. Hopefully he wouldn’t try to grab anything. Although Luella was probably a sweetheart, in comparison, Jane felt herself to be quite a prize. Today she wore a turtleneck and a good bra. After the previous day’s outfit she felt a want for

extra support.

Elias looked at her confused. “You suppose?”

“Well, I am a good writer. That’s why.”

“Well, I’m good at walking and talking. Why aren’t I a spokesmodel?”

“A valid point I guess.”

“There’s more to life than doing what you’re good at. You’ve got to have a passion.”

“True enough,” she said dismissively.

Jane, while a devout fan of the creative, was not a great fan of optimism. If so, she’d be corresponding for the Good News Network instead of The Shemp Post Standard (if such a thing as the good news network existed of course). She’d be writing about sugar and spice instead of fires and accidents, which were published alongside national news stories about war, terrorism, and problems on Sussex Drive. While warm-hearted, Jane was cynical. She felt that it assisted her greatly in her small town posting. And that’s why she was able to take the advice that Elias Kassam gave her graciously, instead of chastising him for his utopian views.

“One must follow their heart in life,” he stressed. That was too frilly even for this story. She was beginning to see the point of the paper’s philosophy, slowly but surely.

The questions didn’t go any better after that. Elias, a verbose man, talked about his chickens as if they were gold medals. Ninety-eight gold medals with soulless eyes and ill temperaments. He talked about having an Easter egg hunt for the local children each year and how he loved giving back to the community. He asked Jane if she liked giving back.

“Well, I used to volunteer at the children’s hospital,” she remembered.

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“How come you stopped?”

“No time for it, I guess. Too much work with the school paper.”

“Because it was your passion, right?”

“Well, it got me on the right track at least. And that’s saying something, is it not?”

Elias sipped his tea and putting his mug down
opened his mouth to answer her question. “I’m going to grab some more tea, do you care for any?”

“Yes, please,” was all she could say.

Forty minutes in (she had expected to be in-and-out in fifteen), Jane found herself exasperated. Her career at The Post Standard began looking more and more glib with each syllable that passed through Elias Kassam’s lips. Why hadn’t she packed up and moved in with her friends after graduation? Taken a grunt job at Chatelaine, or started climbing the ladder at The Globe and Mail. It might not have been as much of a step forward as a writer position for a solid local newspaper, but damnit, she would have been doing something more important. Running in circles for a hook with Farmer Joe certainly wasn’t giving her any sense of accomplishment. Now, helping set up a photo-shoot or giving coffee to an editor to keep them perky and fit to do their job, that was something tangible. Something of worth. Something with results.

She heaved a heavy sigh, nearly defeated. Surely by now she had enough to churn out the story of Elias Kassam. And then, she would submit it and never ask to do such a piece again.

“I have one final question for you.”

“Just one more?” cried Luella from the living room.

She had the TV volume down low, as it was a commercial and during those she tuned into the conversation.

“Yes. Just one more. My deadline is midnight, so I’ve got to make sure I have time to put it all together.”

“Midnight? But it’s not even four o’clock now,”

Luella observed.

She was now in the doorway, with a blanket and a look of confusion draped over her.

“Yeah, I need some time to write the story. And edit. And shape it.”

“Eight hours?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you said you were a good writer?”

“Just ignore her,” said Elias.

Jane had already taken that advice.

After watching Luella trudge out of the room, she regained her composure.

“My final question for you is this. If you could see yourself doing anything else in life, what would it be?”

“I don’t think I would be doing anything else.”


“Well,” he began. “If I did anything else in life.”

Jane was on the edge of her seat. She knew that the next statement could make or break her article.

“I’d do what I do now. Except maybe pigs. Maybe in another life.”

In another life he would raise pigs. It was the saddest thing that Jane had ever heard.

That, and the headline on the next day’s human interest page.

- Robert Csernyik
And a Haughty Spirit
Before Fall

An alarm chortled drowsily, for minutes, unheard. Rainy Tuesday morning weighed heavy upon sleeping Isabelle - all around, the air was thick, the bed sheets damp with sweat. She snored noisily, but her wide breast barely heaved.

(There is no time in the suburbs on rainy summer days. Water patters on the windowpanes and plays a symphony of nonsense, taking the place of hours and minutes. The day oozes by, like the clouds: massive, grey and indistinct. Underneath the crowded sky the living shuffle listlessly in their unrest - sleeping and waiting, waking and waiting, working and waiting - all alike in the long wait for the greyness to pass, for the weight to be lifted, and for summer to resume.)

(Summer rain in the suburbs means that life is postponed.)

(Not so in the dreamtime.)

In the dreamtime rain is life descending from the sky and filling every nook, every cranny, every crevice - from the infinitesimally small to the unthinkably huge. Rain is the Sky Father making Love to the whole Earth, and He is certainly not stingy about His Love. In the dreamtime Isabelle was standing on a shore. It was raining violently, but the sun shone brightly through the fog. Her feet lodged ankle-deep into the blond sand, waves rolled up to her and told her that she was beautiful and resplendent. She was their queen, queen of the waters. Alabaster arms wrapped in golden bracelets, a translucent smock beating in the wind, Isabelle Harris was Rān.

Rān was something Isabelle had read in a book, but the book hadn't been specific about the land, or about the beach. There was an eldritch reef that grew as the waters ebbed. The sea receded so far that an entire port of sunken ships - sallow sails decayed and fallen masts - appeared in a hollowed cataract. The North Sea was now a black impression on the horizon, miles away. Still the inkling of a tide coursed through the valley to
caress Rán-Isabelle.

The forest of drowned men arose from the bare ocean floor and offered worship. Outstretched arms laden with gifts, the dead prayed for mercy. Denied a proper burial, their souls were condemned to wallow in the black abyss; only Rán-Isabelle held the key to their salvation, as whomever she smiled to would enter her kingdom, to serve eternally the goddess that she was.

She smiled first to the drakkars - their dragons she released from service. They went into the black sea to learn monster nature; to become ship-sinkers rather than ship-guards. Then Rán-Isabelle gazed across the valley for the most devout of the drowned - not those with gifts, but those who pleaded the loudest, and the most decayed.

But something in the picture was wrong. In the middle of the valley stood an elderly man – hardly wet – whose hair and beard the wind did not tussle, whose long black robe the rain did not stain. Rán’s eyes refused to see him, but Isabelle’s would not turn away. Human nature fought with goddess nature and before either could win, the man, who had climbed up to the shore – climbed up or flown up - knocked both the goddess and her human host senseless.

(Sleeping and waking are the processes of falling into and out of the dreamtime. The most perceptive men and women, on the verge of falling asleep, sometimes experience such a vivid impression of falling - of physically falling - that they are instantly roused. They stumble to recover their footing, and find themselves, much to their surprise, lying in their own bed. A similar phenomenon takes place in waking but is infrequently noted; the return to waking reality, taxing for the mind, disrupts the memory of the event.)

When Isabelle awoke, late on that Tuesday afternoon in July, it seemed to her that she had fallen from very high indeed. She did not feel like herself, and could not recall why her face ached. The grey half-light and a low, diffuse patter on the window pane betrayed a faint drizzle. The inside of her mouth tasted salty.

She rolled to one side, sticky eyelids merely ajar - and immediately sat up, aghast. The blue, unfeeling numerals on the clock-face read 15:33.

Isabelle rushed to the bathroom, to brush hair and teeth simultaneously while she showered - with cold water to piece herself together. As the shower sprayed cruelly into her face, she spat out her toothbrush and let out a timid yelp of pain: her eyes stung sharply, though no shampoo was to blame. She directed the stream towards another part of her frail physique, and noticed that much of it was covered with a thin layer of brown sand.

Stunned rather than intrigued, Isabelle finished her shower as quickly as she could and traced her steps back to her bedroom. She had indeed left a trail of brown sand - of very fine, wet grains which smelled briny and clung to the skin. The bed sheets were full of it. No time, she thought, to solve that mystery, as she put her clothes on. Isabelle had missed work. Today this meant lunch with an influential academic publisher whom, like most self-important incarnations of academia, would undoubtedly be very angry at having been made to wait unnecessarily. She would need to make some extremely apologetic phone calls to particularly irate people, first of all to her boss, the editor of an important scholarly periodical.

Dress pants, beige shirt and burgundy blouse, Isabelle ran to the kitchen. There were four calls on her machine. Four. How did the phone not wake her up? The first message was the publisher, notifying her that she was late; the second, the editor asking how come the publisher had called in to complain that she was late; the third, the publisher announcing that he was leaving (but that the Social Science Review had better pay for lunch regardless, and that a bill was in the mail).

The fourth message was - of course - Isabelle’s boss, whom in a jumbled mélange of interrogations and expletives managed to communicate anger and concern. “Where the hell are you? Why don’t you answer your cell?” Both valid questions. Isabelle’s home and cell phones were not on the same line; if the Review had tried both numbers this meant that she had had twice as many opportunities to wake up to the lovely sound of duty calling. It took her only an instant to locate her cell - on the charger on top of the fridge. It was on “ring” mode.
She had *eight* messages.

With the press of a button she deleted them all, and then banned the device to the least conspicuous of her blouse pockets. On the brink of mental breakdown, Isabelle always liked to eat - and presently she felt an overwhelming urge to gulp down some sushi. She picked up her home phone.

One minute before closing the office, Dr. John Specter’s secretary, Harriet Joan, received a very strange message from Isabelle Harris. Mrs. Harris said that she was feeling quite beside herself, and to tell Dr. Specter that she would be taking the day off. Though Mrs. Harris did sound terrible, the call made little sense, and Mrs. Joan got the distinct feeling that Mrs. Harris realized this very well. Clearly this was a manoeuvre of some sort. Mrs. Joan filled a form for Mrs. Harris, noting the date – and the *time*. No way was this going to pass for an error on her part.

Second call of the day: her voice still hoarse and grave from sleep, Isabelle asked for a taxi for 42 Maple Street; she felt in no shape to drive though she needed to get out. Isabelle resolved to put her apartment in order while she waited for the cab to arrive. Nonchalantly, she put her bed sheets in the laundry basket. Then she vacuumed the sand on the bedroom carpet and on the bathroom tiles.

She peered out the kitchen window onto the street: *still no cab...*

Isabelle Harris fed the fish - something she only remembered to do when nothing else could be done. Shrimp flakes floated in thick lumps on the surface of the aquarium. She absent-mindedly scattered the pink specks with a twirling motion of her index. Frantic koi and catfish swam up expectantly, and then, unexplainably, keeled to the side, and died.

For many minutes, Isabelle watched in horror as all of the inhabitants of her aquarium died, one by one. A car horn-startled her; she washed her hands hurriedly, and descended the slippery cast-iron stairs, putting on her grey trench-coat on the way.

It was only on the last step that she noticed the flock of seagulls.

*Flock* communicates the wrong impression. A flock is a naturally occurring phenomenon: birds travelling together for all the right ornithological motives, such as facilitating the search for food and securing the advantage of larger numbers. This was not a “flock,” but more of a horde - a legion, a *host* - of seagulls. Isabelle knew that such a substantial population of seagulls, so far inland, was inexplicable - even if all the town’s fast-food joints were to spontaneously relocate on the roof of her building. The birds crowded every inch of the fence and sidewalk, and covered the tall poplars up to their topmost branches. Their feathers glistened in the rain as they stood immobile in absolute, reverent silence.

Slowly... quietly... *carefully*... Isabelle lurched towards the arrested vehicle, feeling the gaze of a thousand unblinking, beady eyes. It seemed to Isabelle that there was something ancient and unearthly inside those eyes - something uncouth which simultaneously terrified and fascinated her. The seagulls backed away as she advanced, though never gave any more ground than was necessary for a single step. She feared for her life but she also felt *respected*. She was, in fact, utterly confused.

After forty-five seconds that seemed like an eternity, she timidly opened the cab’s front door and slipped inside. The Lebanese driver asked where she was headed in perfect English; she muttered almost unintelligibly the coordinates of her favourite sushi place, and the car was on its way.

And above the traffic a procession of seagulls screamed “Ran! Ran ran! Râdâni!”

*FINIS*

- Etienne Domingue
Part One
Fear and Loathing
in Fort McMurray Alberta

I entered the facilities of the Wal-Mart suspiciously. I had been told stories of what twisted things; incomprehensible sadistic acts could lay or be transpiring behind any given men’s room- (specifically this one) door from apparent second hand experience. Foolishly, I disregarded their warnings as there were no other options available for human discharge as well as shaving and valuable drinking water anywhere close or accessible for that matter. As I entered I pushed the door slowly. I made sure to remember to keep a keen lookout for thugs and hooligans ready to sink a plastic fork in my eyeball and rob me at the drop of hat; possibly lurking behind this very door exercising the pounce movement to subdue me before I had the chance to utter a chicken-shit screechy-like yelp to the otherwise, unflinching, extremely sedated Wal-Mart employees. “I wonder if the 500 pound one in the wheelchair would save me if I hit trouble?” the thought ravished my occipital lobe. I couldn’t help it - the employees looked like they were on loan from some government research farm. What an asshole. Wouldn’t you agree? I managed to maintain a façade of maturity on the outside – but my core (and entire spiritual centre including a perfectly aligned Chi) still laughed at a well executed, what some would consider, immature or poo-poo humor. What can I say? I was bored and very broke yet still able to make use of a brain.

But all the dirty and politically incorrect jokes in the cosmos couldn’t prepare me for the stench-barrier of liquid evil that viciously attacked my nose upon stepping into the washroom. I gasped for air and choked at the unavailability of clean oxygen. What I saw next would make any 3 to 9 year old drop the ice cream cone and start bawling to their mother. “This is horrendous!” It was expected - but not to this degree. This is... uncalled for. This is... not the typical course of things.... This was; Fort McMurray, Alberta - and this is the story... part one.

How about a dose of contemporary reality? We stepped off the bus directly in front of the imposing, ironically placed, jagged sheet metal sign that read in a somehow foreboding font: “FORT MCMURRAY UNEMPLOYMENT BUREAU”. A greasy haired, jaundiced and toothless man sucked away at a rolled cigarette and watched us as we retrieved our baggage from the belly of the Coach Canada 42-piston steel beast. The sidewalk was covered in those large blackening gum-like patches which were always a mystery to me – from this later point in time they were clearly symbolic of a deeper, more integrated filth. The man took a drag off his smoke and held it in, and was clearly sizing us up and most definitely querying himself about our story. “Oh Jesus, where is THIS lot from?” I could almost read his thoughts if it were not for the plethora of urine-soaked whisky stench-fumes emanating from his breath, the street, or quite possibly - a combination a both? It was anyone’s guess. We were, on the other hand, clearly filthy, distraught (at the position our former employer had put us in) and obviously wide-eyed, unknowledgeable strangers about this so-called “jewel” of North-Eastern Alberta - the town that never sleeps – Fort McMurray. Through this we had a gleam in our eye; a determinately unflattering shine. This was a place where the oil flowed like lies from Bill O’Reilly’s mouth and crack is more abundant than snowflakes in winter. It was truly a Boomtown – as the Casino kitty-corner from us was affectionately named. The jaw of the man still staring at us suspiciously dropped immediately when we began to move towards him with our load of luggage.

“We know who I am?” he said with some deflated authority. “No,” we responded in unison.

“Should we?” I added.

“That’s not important right now - in time – you guys are fucked, ya know?” he said, looking at our bags.

“What do you mean by that?” Doisty inquired.

“First time here?” he inquired, implying our inexperience with being homeless.

“Yes, it is.”

“Comin’ for the work?”

“Yep.”
“Yer fucked guys,” he said again, glancing at our bags once more.

It struck us right when we got off that bus after 15 hours on it. We soon realized that we were indeed ‘fucked’. He told us that, as a veteran and unofficial civil servant of this most decadent of oil-towns, that if we planned on living on the street we had better get ready for some crazy shit because the locals around here apparently “don’t fuck around.”

We asked his advice on a wise first move for newcomers after finding the only motel in town was $90 a head per night and was on top of the violent crack supermarket strip-bar known as the Oil-Can Tavern – located conveniently across the street from the monolithic and sealed looking seat of municipal power which was coupled with the ineffectual police station and our future hang out – the air-conditioned public library. It looked as if it were a lost little puppy dog in a sea of lawlessness. “Has the West still not been won?” I mused while gazing at the irony within the scene that lay before me.

“Well, don’t go up in dem dar hills. You’ll get robbed, beat, attacked by snakes and most likely analy tortured by the people who hang around there.”

“You mean like... mountain men? You’re joking,” said Sha-Foo.

“Camp there and by sun-up if your colon hasn’t been ruptured – I tip my cap to you sire,” said our impromptu tour guide.

“Well...” we all looked at each other with that classic ‘what now?’ look on our mugs.

“I’m goin’ down by the river,” he said as he grabbed his light luggage, on wheels I might add, and began trotting down the street, adding one more “yer fucked” regarding our luggage situation, and then moved on.

“Wow, he’s so knowledgeable. I hope to be like him someday,” remarked Sha-Foo, who I should mention now - not having fully understood it then - was a little slow and most likely mentally retarded in some aspects of his development which can probably be attributed to his parents bludgeoning him with blunt objects throughout his youth, or in the womb for that matter as I suspected. His face was covered in hideous yellow boils and warts which oozed and pus’d all over the place. And he had this ear crust which smelled like molten asphalt and was even worse on a hot day when it began to ferment inside his diseased ear canal. He certainly made vagrancy even more of a chore than it was with his meaningless commentary and nonsensical remarks at every situation. I almost got out of being homeless with the hideous Asian bastard but it was not to be.

“You’ll make a fine soldier in the Salvation Army, I’m sure,” I reassured him, when I knew in my own heart and mind that they would sooner institutionalize the monstrosity that he was than allow him to sell nickel ribbons.

We found two shopping carts behind the bureau and loaded them with our bags and tents. We looked at our tree planting bags which we had brought with us foolishly and decided to leave them beside the bureau – someone would most likely redeem them for valuable crack, poker chips or 40oz’s – it was anybody’s guess. The three of us regarded it as an invaluable public service by Ft. Mac’s newest additions to their already ballooning homeless population. Immediately, upon my first push of the shopping cart with our lives in it, the stereotype hit me: I was dirty, unshaven, and practically penniless and had obscenely long and matted hair – Jesus Christ – I’m down and out.

“We’re down and out,” I proclaimed to the others, like an epiphany.

“Yuh think?” responded Doisty with some annoyance. “All the people in these big fancy trucks with suspension kits and NASCAR decals commemorating some forgettable deceased driver, are giving us the glare and thinking ‘Oh no, not more of those transients giving our clean town a bad name.”’ The irony was apparent, to me at least – these people in the trucks were the real dirt – the real slime that made up this soon-to-be-discovered wretched town. Ruled by dollar bills, cocaine and an annoying front line mentality cross-bred with a homophobiahobic cowboy persona, these people were the products of pure and unadulterated capitalism. They would prove to be our downfall, suckling the last vestiges of hope from our big-dreams. They were arrogant, badly dressed and clearly in it for the money. But who was
I to judge - I was just a sucker fish in the greasy game - however, this allowed me a place to observe the natives and note their patterns of speech and so forth.

"Shit - well, it’s getting dark and we should find somewhere to camp fast," Sha-Foo added and we agreed to follow the advice of our fellow vagrant and camp somewhere down by the river, wherever that may be.

We walked about 12 minutes until we came upon an elementary school with a thickly wooded area behind it and a vacant lot across the street. As we turned into the woods to scope our spot out, an elderly man passed by with a Doberman and gave us a look of inquiry, not of disgust or of unapproval, just a curious glance. He was most likely keen to know our story, our exploits... little did he know they would truly begin in his hometown.

Some sketchy looking individuals darted between the thicket where we were headed towards. I got an uneasy feeling in my chest - was this the last frontier? Please fellas, let’s not die in a pool of crack-rocks, wood alcohol and hooker spit. I was never so happy in appreciating the fact I had actually been enrolled in secondary education. This is temporary survival, I thought, I hoped....

The next day a by-law enforcement officer pulled up onto our grassy knoll via the access path towards it, sneaking up silently in a gesture of uncertain lawful goodwill. The window rolled down:

"Hello?" said a voice.
"Hi there," I responded.
"Why don’t you come on out, son."
"...Yeah... ok." I hesitated, and exited the tent - unsure of what to tell the officer.

As I got out of the tent, I greeted him as cordially as possible. He seemed equally legitimate as well, uncorrupted from my standpoint, but then again, I do not have the infallacy of the Pontiff? "What are you doin’ back here kid?" he mumbled.

"I’m with two friends," I explained, "we’re former tree-planters from Hudson Bay, Saskatchewan who were screwed over by our boss."

"Oh you don’t say..." The conversation proceeded unhindered as he sat in his polished SUV, obviously running on pure Alberta oil. It was such a beautiful and abundant resource in this area I wouldn’t have been surprised if you could find it two feet under our camp spot. He told me explicitly after I had told him the story up to this point: "Now listen kid, you shouldn’t be camping back here. There’s some dangerous people that can roam around back here, believe me, you’re not exactly in the Hamptons." I nodded in acknowledgement and told him our bleak financial situation and he suggested the oil rigs, but seemed set-on setting us up with his friend for another tree planting gig. I thought, ‘there is not a fucking chance I traveled 17 hours on a bus to plant more trees for a bisexual, schizophrenic planting Nazi,’ but accepted the information cordially and he once again advised me to call the number and vacate the area a.s.a.p. – reiterating the dangerousness of the “weirdos around here.” I shuddered at the thought of waking up to a morbidly obese, transsexual, bi-gendered sexually unsatisfiable convict and seeing a pile of Colt 45s in the corner. Time to invest in a chastity belt....

The others had gone out job hunting, leaving me alone in our grassy enclave behind the elementary school which we named affectionately Crack City due to the abundance of rock in the vicinity. The vicinity of obscenities. The planting shovels gave me a sense of primal security in the blunt yet stellar aura of the crudely painted steel blades. I had seen a few choice rough individuals walking around the area which had many trails and hidden areas that I had explored with relative caution and distance from the home-base tent. To my disgust, but not surprise, the area was littered with soiled linens with questionable stains and other hypodermic-like paraphernalia. Inside the tent, I was enjoying a repulsively slimy and crudely constructed ‘turkey and thanksgiving dressing’ microwavable delicacy from the gas-bar up the road, picking out tendons and bones wherever they cropped up, which was often. I gave thanks that I had managed to survive thus far. In mid-chew, a commotion of two arguing voices began through the thicket, one male and one female, and drew closer as I devoured my gory lunch with an eagerness coupled with an imposing sense of doom. I could foresee the headlines: “18 yr Old Transient Murdered for 40 cents of Crack Money and Anal Pleasures by Fellow Squatters.”
The editorial would appear dismally at the bottom of the extensive Fort McMurray crime section; forgettable, to say the least. I began to panic somewhat. Sweat collected on my grease-burns and my brow line. I suddenly regretted the slew of earlier decisions that brought me to my present situation – hostility, resistance, proximity and disenfranchisement. All of this was coupled with a seemingly divine purpose to prevent me from having a problem free existence.

The tent began shaking.

“Hey buddy, let me in your tent! This crazy guy is after me. Can you hide my vodka bottle?” said a frantic female voice. I didn’t move.

“No way, get the fuck away from my tent,” I said, clutching the shovel and caressing the sharp blade with my fingers.

The adrenaline began to surge.

“Let me in!” she fired back.

“Fuck off!” I returned with annoyance, feeling a little guilty but adamant in my resolve. I digress to a more sheltered suburbanized reader, if you were in the same situation, self-preservation would have been in your best-interest; as it is instinctual. Instinct is nothing to be frowned upon with all due apologies to the intelligent design theorists – to each his own.

She said something else indiscernible and I watched the walls of the tent move as she went around the back, out of view, and crouched behind the back door. I could see the outline of her 40oz through the cheap tent material. As soon as this happened I peeked out to see if anyone was coming. At first I saw nothing but a slight movement of thicket roughly 30 feet down the trail towards the road. Almost instantaneously, a muscular bound 6'4 - 6'5 rugged looking native man emerged from the overgrowth staring straight ahead. He robotically pivoted his massive neck in my direction and made direct eye contact, then turned and lumbered towards the tent with a look of schizophrenic angst in his determined eyes.

“Fuck me in the Goat Ass!” the thought whizzed through my head. “I’m going to get fucking murdered, man!”

The behemoth’s shadow came over the zip up door and I thumbed the spade’s edge.

“WHO’S IN THERE?” the voice thunder-bellowed with a kind of heroin-induced, manatee-like twang.

“George. George is in here.” I responded as calmly-sounding as possible.

“GET OUT HERE SO I CAN SEE YOU!” it demanded. I could see the outline of the woman hiding behind the tent still there as the tension began to mount. You could cut the atmosphere with a butter knife. I didn’t respond.

Once again it insisted that I “GET OUT NOW OR I’M COMING IN!” I chirped back that there would “be a faceful of lead to any vermin who try to do that” and readied myself with the spade strategically to ensure I could get a good shot at his cranium.

The massive figure grunted in response and I saw its hand reach for the zipper of the tent. This is when I believe I shat my pants just a little.

I cocked my arms back and just as the zipper was about to go up, the hiding native girl’s weight shifted and I heard her run into the woods behind and her pursuer undoubtedly saw this and took after her, leaving me in my manmade lagoon of sweat stained fear.

“I’LL BE BACK,” the voice called back to me.

“That fucking cop wasn’t kidding,” I thought, as my grip on the shovel eased.

Still, who knows what could have happened. By all extent of the imagination I felt lucky that I still had all my limbs and organs in working order.

The others returned soon afterwards to find me pacing around our camp site like I was the mayor of Crack City.

“What’s wrong?” one of them asked.

“Oh, nothing...” I tried to conceal it, to no avail. “We’re just going to be moving out of Crack City tomorrow - I almost got sodomized by a local native kiddie didler.”

“No shit?”

“Yes shit... I think it’s in our best interest to head towards the bright lights of the commercial strip to find somewhere more suitable and out in the open to squat. These woods freak the shit out of me.”

“Ok ok, we’ll go real estate shopping tomorrow,” said Doisty.
“Har har - you’re a comedian. I think we’re moving up in the world... I can see it now boys, access to facilities, close to the liquor store and the bus stop; a nickel-laden and utopian dwelling in the land of the Black Gold. A paradise fit for the kings of squalor.”

“Tomorrow we hunt,” said Doisty as he balled up some Red Man chew and placed it securely into the back of his jaw.

We arrived at the Wal-Mart, the ultimate symbol of Western gluttony, trying to find a needle-free location to set up camp. The bastard Hindi cab driver (we broke down and took a cab with our limited funds as we were exhausted from walking all over the Fort and thought it would only be fitting to arrive at our new transient dwelling in style). As it happens, he added an extra $5 dollars, claiming it was a charge he had informed us of before entering the vehicle, which was total horseshit.

“Five dollah! Five dollah! You pay!” he screamed in a high-pitched nervous voice.

“You’ve got to be kidding. You’re being a giant asshole about this, you know,” I returned.

“Van! Five dollah extra! You pay!” he countered. “You’re BREAKING OUR COLLECTIVE BALLS!”

This guy looked like he was so worried about getting screwed out of this apparent five dollars that he was going to unsheathe one of those ceremonial blades - the ones which cannot be returned to their scabbard unless they have spilt blood - and actually use it. Even though we could have beat the tar out of him together and lived like homeless royalty, I wasn’t about to let myself be brought down to the level of this parasitic, rabid breed of newly assimilated North-Eastern Albertan. In essence, the fecal matter of society.

“You really are an asshole, man,” and gave him the ‘five dollar van charge’ with not a dime tip. We emptied our bags from the back. The financial burn persisted.

“Fuck you!” we bellowed in unison as he muttered something derogatory in Hindi and drove off.

“Fucking asshole,” said Doisty. “Everyone in this town is trying to screw you.”

“It figures, this place is the refuge of the damned, even the Mormons would run crying back to desolate Utah at the site of this catastrophe of civilization,” I replied. “This really is the Albertan dream. Almost like a perverted cowboy version of the one we all know.”

“We’re willfully ignorant of having red, white and blue dicks jammed up our ass everyday,” said a curious onlooker. We looked at him quizzically, and he just kind of turned around and walked away. I would realize much later that this is a quote from George Carlin’s comedic tome on the true owners of the United States leading one to examine the illusion of democracy projects. I found it darkly ironic to be in this “tiny-Texas” tit-town at the time I was as this black bounty was shipped to our southerly neighbors to feed their thirsty SUVs and other self-esteem boosting vehicles.

Our new home itself was an empty lot behind the mega-store with crude looking sun-scarred weeds and grasses growing uninhibited from the roar of its feared adversary; the weed whacker man. There was a very dilapidated trailer park beside us in the lot and mangy looking, man-gnawing pit-bulls tied up outside on long chains of questionable quality; barking ferociously for food or death and at us. It didn’t seem to matter. A very wide, mud colored river ran behind the Wal-Mart that looked like the Ganges. I was expecting to see a funeral pyre floating down the rapids at any second and became more aware of my growing delusion with this place.

We found a well-hidden-from-the-road flat spot to set up behind a sparse and dying patch of Alder trees and removed a few broken crack pipes from the area so we wouldn’t contract anything and then we went into Wal-Mart to observe more obese Albertans attempt to purchase therapeutic babbling brooks and useless trinkets while scarfing away at the bag of McDonalds they had purchased there so conveniently.

- Owen McGuire
The Little Mermaid, Part II
(with apologies to Hans Christian Anderson)

It was after the honeymoon, when life began to return to normal in the castle, that the empty cushion outside the prince's chamber was remarked upon and people started to wonder where the mute girl with the long hair and beautiful eyes had gone. The prince first remarked on the absence of his pet two weeks after the wedding. He had sated himself on the body of his new bride and was now becoming bored with her ceaseless chatter, her obsessive religious devotion, and the giggles whenever she closeted herself with her maids - always feeling as though he were somehow the object of their speculation - and his mind wandered to the foundling.

She had always been there when he wanted her, always calmly placid, although he sensed great turbid depths, as if outwardly she was as smooth and glassy as the sea in still weather, but with an undertow and strength that belied her delicate appearance. He had been able to open his heart to her and she had never argued or contradicted. He contrasted her silence to the incessant conversation in which he was now obliged to take part, and wondered for the first time if he had made a mistake.

But then he had only considered her a pet, a lap dog, an affectionate kitten to be fed tidbits at table, to accompany him on his walks or when he sailed. She was a foundling after all, a waif, a mute. How could he even have viewed her in any other way but as an adorable child? And yet, now, two weeks after marrying the maiden he thought he loved more than life itself, he remembered the girl and how she had appeared when he had first come upon her, naked, half-drowned on the sand, seaweed entwined in her long hair, how he had wrapped her in his cloak, hiding those long legs and small breasts, and carried her home in his arms, never once tempted to caress her velvety soft skin, kiss those smiling rosebud lips, or embrace her young body.

Three months after the wedding, when the princess was no longer throwing up her breakfast and was instead eating everything in sight, the prince began making inquiries as to the whereabouts of the girl. Gone, were the replies, disappeared. She never got off the ship when it docked; no one remembered seeing her after she performed that amazing dance at the nuptial dinner. She had simply vanished.

That was impossible, said the prince. People didn't just vanish. He closely questioned the members of the crew on board ship that night and heard a strange tale. The helmsman was coming off his watch just before dawn, headed for his hammock, when he heard mermaids singing off the starboard bow. Hiding behind a stack of coiled rope, he saw them rise out of the water, five beautiful women with shaven heads, their song tugging at his heart as though it might break.

The prince's foundling was leaning over the railing, looking as though she had lost her best friend. One of the mermaids tossed a stone knife onto the deck with which the girl disappeared into the purple and gold tent where the bridal couple had spent their wedding night. The helmsman would have followed, but the mermaid song had him rooted to his hiding place. When the girl returned, she threw the knife far out to sea; the water turned red where it fell, scarlet drops leapt into the lightening air. Just as the sun's rim peeked over the horizon, she launched herself over the railing into space.

The helmsman watched her dive into the waves. But when she touched the water, her body ceased to exist: there was just foam to show where she had landed. The shaven-headed women cried out one last time and dove beneath the surface. He rushed to the railing in time to see their flukes disappear and thought he saw a shining sphere, like a child's soap bubble, rise into the air and linger for a moment above the surf before he had to look away, blinded by the brilliance of the risen sun.

No one else had witnessed this. Everyone else was either sleeping, hung over, or at a different side of the ship. But the helmsman swore on his dead mother's grave that this is what he had seen, tired perhaps, but stone-cold sober.

The prince had trouble believing this tale. Mermaids? But the helmsman would not be shaken, so...
strongly did he stand by the story he told. The prince questioned the other sailors about the possible veracity of the helmsman’s account. Oh yes, many had heard mermaid singing, no one doubted that part. A few had even occasionally caught glimpses of the alien creatures, both male and female, cavorting in the waves when the seas were high, defiant in the face of storms, rain lashing their beautiful faces, the wind whipping about their long, seaweed-trailing hair.

By now the prince was so besotted with the memory of his erstwhile companion that he could concentrate on little else. He no longer took pleasure in his previous activities, no longer enjoyed the delights of his shining yellow palace with the ornate statuary, the golden cupolas, the costly tapestries and magnificent paintings. His wife’s contours changed as she became great with the child she carried and her strange appetites and wild mood swings confused him. They started sleeping in separate chambers.

The prince pursued his own investigation into the disappearance of the girl. He frequented the taverns along the wharves in disguise, asking for tales of mermaids and other denizens of the deep. Seamen were superstitious and reticent when it came to talking to a stranger, but their tongues were soon loosened and their throats wetted when he bribed them with rounds of ale and rum.

As the prince listened to yarns spun by mariners over their beer, he heard things that he could hardly credit as real except for the corroboration they received from the other sailors. Everywhere he went he heard about mermaid singing. During the onset of storms at sea, when a ship was in danger of not making it back to port, they would surface, arm-in-arm, their long hair flying in the wind, and sing to the men on board. Most heard them only as the howling of the storm, but others actually saw them and were moved by their song, even though they couldn’t understand the words. It evoked images of a world under the sea of calm beauty, of serenity and joy. The few lucky sailors he spoke to said they did not fear dying by drowning after that.

One old tar told a tale of sailing in winter when your breath froze on your beard the moment you stepped above deck and the water was dotted with icebergs, those beautiful but treacherous traps, capable of ripping the hull of a ship to shreds if it ventured too close. One time he had seen a mermaid seated on one, combing her long hair, singing to the passing ships, oblivious to the cold, naked as she was. His own vessel, sails reefed, had given the iceberg upon which she sat a wide berth, avoiding the danger of the unseen portion below the surface.

Other stories were told, fantastic tales of the king of the sea and his castle of coral with amber-paned gothic windows where the sands of the garden were as blue as the flames of burning sulfur, tales of the sea witch and her garden of crushing whirlpools and serpent-like polypi, ready to snatch an unwary diver and immobilize him until he died by drowning.

The prince again questioned his own sailors onboard the royal ship and they spoke to him of the night many years before when the court had celebrated his sixteenth birthday at sea. He recalled the festivities, especially the fireworks and the music. A sudden storm had sprung up, they said, catching them unawares. The ship was old and could not withstand the pressure of the conflicting currents and was torn apart. The guests were able to make it to the boats and the crew was saved by lashing themselves to the mast and other stout pieces of timber, but the prince had been washed overboard and was feared drowned. The man who had been the cabin boy said he remembered catching a glimpse of the prince floating on the waves, not moving, but not sinking either, as though something were buoying him up, something that trailed long, hair-like seaweed.

All the prince could recall of that occasion was waking on the beach near the convent where his bride-to-be was cloistered. He had believed that it was she who had saved him, finding him cast up on the sand, calling for help. It was her he had longed for all those years, resigned to the fact that she belonged to the holy temple, unattainable by him. Had he not said to his pet, “If I were forced to choose a bride, I would rather choose you, my dumb fowling, with those expressive eyes”? What joy he had experienced when he found that his appointed bride was none other than she who had wakened him with her tentative touch and concerned expression.

Now he began to experience doubt, wondering if
perhaps it had been a mermaid who had saved him from certain death after he lost consciousness. There had been a contusion on his brow which the doctors said was caused when he slammed his head into part of the ship as it came apart in the waves. He would surely have died before reaching land if that was the case.

Now the prince questioned the maids who had attended the foundling. One of them said that there were often blood stains in the child's slippers, and on the day they had returned from hiking up his favourite mountain trail her socks had been soaked with it. She had never uttered a cry of pain, but instead had always laughed and smiled. At evening, though, she would sit by herself at the bottom of the stairway that led into the sea and bathe her feet in the cool, salt water that lapped at the base of the steps. The housekeeper, a devout woman who had been with the household since before the prince was born, revealed that she too had heard mermaid singing on those nights when the girl sat by the water, her bloody feet trailing in the surf.

Who had she been, this mystery girl? Was she a mermaid who had somehow exchanged her fish's tail for legs so she could sojourn in the world of men? Could she have been the very same one who had saved him from certain death on his sixteenth birthday? She had danced more gracefully than any other, even on his wedding night she had spun and dipped and arabesqued, yet her feet bled. She had been so thoroughly devoted to him, but then she had disappeared. Why would she do that? Had she died of a broken heart? Had he inadvertently killed her?

Plagued with these morbid thoughts, the prince shunned the company of his courtiers. Instead one could find him at the bottom of the long flight of marble stairs that led down to the water, staring off into the distance, as though the sea itself could answer his questions, assuage his grief. It was there that the housekeeper found him when the princess came to term, her labour cries echoing through the castle halls.

"Come quickly, my lord," she cried, pulling at his arm, "the princess, she's having her baby!"

The prince woke from his reverie and suddenly came to life. He heard his wife's screams and started running up the sea steps, the housekeeper panting as she kept up with him. At the top of the stairs he hesitated momentarily, then, spurred on by a new cry of pain, turned towards the princess' chambers. The servants quickly got out of his way as they saw the expression of anguish on his face.

He burst into her bedroom at the very moment the midwife said, "I see the head, now push!" and his wife bore down, her face contorted with pain and effort, tears streaking her smooth cheeks, and he became frightened. In all the months that he had neglected her, that he had been pursuing the memory of his erstwhile companion, he had forgotten how much he really did love her. The thought of losing her scared him. He pushed past the servants and took the princess' small hand in his own, forcing her to look into his eyes. She focused on him and smiled, then suddenly was racked by another spasm of pain and cried out.

The midwife, between the princess' legs, answered the cry with a delighted laugh and called to the prince, "It's a girl! You have a daughter, my lord!" The prince gave his wife's hand a reassuring squeeze, then moved to get a better look at this new life he had helped produce, a tiny, blood-covered baby, red of skin, the umbilical cord still attached to her navel, who opened her mouth wide and started howling. The midwife snipped the cord, deftly wrapped the squalling child in a blanket and handed her to the prince, who held her as though she might break or disappear.

He put the newborn in the princess' arms. She was exhausted, but still had the strength to smile upon her husband and child before suddenly dozing off. The prince stared at this new life, this little person who had not been here yesterday, whose whole development he had ignored. She was quiet now, asleep in the blanket. He stared at her rosebud mouth, at her slightly misshapen head, at the tiny fingers curled into little fists.

Then, as he gazed upon her face in wonder, she opened her eyes, and he knew immediately who she was; for staring back at him out of their liquid depths was none other than the foundling, the girl of the bleeding feet, who had become foam on the crest of a wave and whose gossamer spirit, shining like a child's soap bubble
in the rays of the morning sun, had entered the princess’
womb and fastened itself to the life that he and his bride
had just created.

But even as he looked on those expressive eyes
that he had come to love, they changed and were replaced
by the unfocused gaze of a newborn, a hungry newborn,
who started to cry once more. Even so, it was enough. The
prince needed look no further for his mermaid. She had
never really left him. A great joy filled his breast, a love
that encompassed his wife and daughter. He felt, for the
first time in his life, truly complete.

- Eleanor Gang

Kristina Vidug

Portraits of Grief

1.

The house was the same. Everything looked the
same. The windows and drapes seemed to be at the right
places from the outside. The cars were in the driveway and
the front door was unlocked and waiting to be opened like
it always was. It had always been a welcoming place, just
waiting for visitors. Everything was the same, except that
she was not there.

Walking into the house, it smelled the same, but
looking up, her face was missing. Upstairs, the carpet was
in the usual place at the top of the railing, the bed was in
its place in the room and her clothes were still in her closet.
But the sound of her fixing her hair was missing from
the bathroom. In the kitchen, the radio was playing some
old song, like every other day, but there were no knitting
needles clicking and her off-key humming was missing
from the once familiar song.

He was sitting there, not knowing whether to cry
or heave a relieved sigh. What an empty house this would
be, what a lonely place. What would he do with all his
memories? The thought of sharing his space with
thoughts and memories of her every day was a painful
one.

It was funny how he had never noticed before the
things about her he was missing now. These things had
become part of the daily picture they had shared for more
than forty years. He should have known what he would
miss. These little things were what made her the person
she was. He had loved her, he still did. How would he live
without her?

“I will continue, I will find a way,” he thought. No
matter how much he knew he would manage it somehow,
though he missed her. He would always miss her.

2.

She was left alone with the dying woman. At fifteen,
she had seen so much; she felt prepared to keep watch
over the barely living body of what had once been her
grandmother. Everyone knew the end was coming; she had
not spoken for days and her cancer-ravaged body would
not hold out much longer.
The girl was sitting, watching, thinking. Suddenly, she found herself looking into open eyes, clear and focused. “It hurts,” the woman said. Those would be the last words she spoke. Alone, and feeling more like a child each passing moment, the girl felt helpless. Quickly kissing the wrinkled cheek, she ran for help. When she returned to the room, the woman was silent, sleeping again. She felt guilt for leaving her and those two words would haunt her for years.

That night, she prayed. For the first time, she understood that the time had come to let go. She asked for relief. Though she would lose the woman, through it, she would become one herself.

3.

The wound was no longer fresh, but from time to time, it still bled. Life had gone on without her. Still, nothing ever seemed quite as it should have been. Her absence still left a hole, a gap that could never be filled.

She had been the glue that held a family together and without her it had promptly fallen apart. Holiday gatherings no longer seemed as important without her cheer and her smile. As time passed, they even stopped going through the motions of trying to come together.

Her memory was painful, beautiful, funny, distressing and both welcome and unwelcome. Could they ever really heal? Was it even possible to accept life without her?

She lived on in the children. One shared her smile, another her compassion and her love of life. Her eyes might startle an old friend from the face of her granddaughter. They all remembered something, no matter how little. But what would happen when someone came that had never met her smiling eyes, never felt her comfort? That bridge would also be crossed.

They could never forget her. Her presence was still felt in their hearts. That much was certain; they knew, because it had not yet ceased causing them pain.

-Jennifer Schulz

The Stranger on a Train

She turned her head slightly so that the outside sliver of her left eye came into contact with what was left of the morning sun. The sun was barely visible through the hazy beginnings of a Montreal snowfall, but there was enough light to illuminate the dainty freckle in her green eye, which darted across the blurry sky desperately seeking a speck of shine. All she saw was big mismatched snowflakes sticking to the windowpane. Once again she was reminded that the sun only peeks out when it wants to. She amused herself with this thought as she traced her fingertips along the snowflakes, imagining the words that they would spell. She tried to read again, and as she opened her book for the third time since she’d boarded the train, her eyes fell back on the same sentence. “I’m sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody. I’m sick of myself and everybody else that wants to make some kind of a splash.” Her mind left the page and gazed back at the crystal slices of clouds that were falling out of the sky. How was she ever supposed to explain that she was turning down graduate school to her parents? She wasn’t even sure how to explain it to herself. She looked down at the plastic ridge framing the window and focused on a keyed in inscription: “Bethany was here 1999.” Poor Bethany, she thought. She was about to scratch out the inscription when a smoky voice interrupted, inquiring if “this seat was taken.” As she unpeeled herself from the window to reply that the seat was in fact free, she suddenly became aware of how cold her forehead felt.

“The way you were leaning on that glass, I though you were going to topple the whole train over with just that one shoulder!”

She smiled at the prospect and watched the grey-haired intruder squeeze himself onto the burgundy seat cushion, which protested with a slow hissing noise. They proceeded to exchange introductory pleasantries and tossed around profound observations like “it’s cold out today.” She quickly learned that he was retiring this year. A philosophy professor. He was en route to Toronto to see his family. When asked about his wife’s choice of permanent residence he candidly replied that she had
“packed up the kids hours after our divorce.”

“I don’t care for her much,” he said. “She’s a terribly selfish woman. My kids though, now they’re something else. Phoebe is around your age. They’re wonderful kids.”

“Well, I guess they must take after you then,” she mocked.

His laughter acquiesced her sarcasm, and he modestly replied, “I guess they have an ounce or two of their mother in them.”

They sat in comfortable silence while the train rolled away from the city lights and into the hazy hills of in-between. She took this opportunity to inspect her company. Mr. Lautrec was in his mid-forties with a full head of grey hair. His eyes were wide and curious but sunken back, the ultimate observers. She would later find out that he wore glasses to read an old book, perhaps an old friend, where the pages had not yet been cut. His eyes were not quite blue and not quite green, an intelligible grey colour against his peachy complexion. Mr. Lautrec could have been an attractive man, but the thought never crossed her mind. In fact, she was more attracted to his loose navy blue sweater, which looked soft enough to dream in. She has a bit of an obsession with wearing men’s sweaters. Just as she was imagining herself wearing Mr. Lautrec’s navy blue sweater at home, and eating chocolate covered raisins while reading the newest Rudard Baill edition, a booming voice overhead announced the train was delayed in Cornwall. Indefinitely. Delayed indefinitely. This thought made her smile, but her sly smirk didn’t go unnoticed.

“You don’t seem to be in a rush,” Mr. Lautrec deduced.

“I’m in no hurry,” she replied, not necessarily to his comment, and not necessarily to him. She could hear passengers behind her letting out exasperated sighs and speed-dialing their relatives to notify them of the change in schedule; the change in time, when really, no change in time had actually occurred.

She decided to pass the time by getting to know Mr. Lautrec better. She liked him. His navy sweater reminded her of the one her last boyfriend used to wear exclusively after soccer practice. She had never witnessed the sweater make any other appearance in his wardrobe. But after every practice, no matter what the weather, he wore his blue knit sweater. This suddenly made her miss him, a pang in her stomach telling her so, but she almost liked the pang in her stomach more than she liked her ex. Missing him felt better than loving him, and so he was exiled to her memory, to live forever as a thought – an ache in the cavity of her mind.

In an attempt to soothe the frustrated passengers, the refreshment cart made its second appearance in twenty minutes. Mr. Lautrec, noticing the cheap snacks and stale coffee being served, expressed his annoyance at consumerism, muttering that there was “too much want in the world, everyone is always wanting more, and everyone is always asking of everyone for more.” The cart inevitably stopped at their end, and a short, blond-haired woman with too large of a smile asked if they were in the mood for refreshments.

“No thank you, I’m not thirsty really,” Mr. Lautrec dismissed. “However, what I’d really want is a glass of Pinot, do you think that could be arranged?”

After settling for some ubiquitous vintage instead of Pinot, Mr. Lautrec was served a glass of white wine in a plastic miniature make-shift wine glass. He was given two extra large white napkins, in case his ounce and a half of wine should spill and flood the train.

“Do you travel often?” The girl asked her train companion.

“I used to travel a lot, I don’t anymore, but I see more now than I did when I traveled. Sometimes you don’t need to go anywhere to travel.”

She liked where this conversation was heading. It made her think of an idea. How brilliantly simple. For a quick second she thought about abandoning the proposal, but decided that Mr. Lautrec was the right person for the game.

“What do you say we play twenty questions to pass the time?” She asked without hesitation.

He laughed. A genuine laugh.

“Don’t you think you’re a little too old for twenty questions?”

“One is never too old to question,” she replied, diplomatically.
“Alright, any question, no matter where it comes from, rhetorical or metaphorical, fiction or fact, original or copy,” he proposed.

“Deal,” she said. “No answers required. In fact, let’s abolish answers, they belong with concepts and rules, answers to Truth. You start,” she said, turning in her seat to face him, his glasses reflecting the excited glimmer in her eyes.

“If a tree falls and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?” The sing-song of this question made it belong more to a schoolyard than a train. Nevertheless, she continued the game.

“We know the sound of two hands clapping, but what is the sound of one hand clapping?” She volleyed back.

“Something tells me you’ve played this game before,” he guessed as he shifted his weight from his left leg to his right, his left leg now crossing into her invisible space.

“I might have. Never with another person though,” she defended.

He smiled and looked behind her, or rather, through her, at the “Press In Case of Emergency” sign above the window of the train.

“How do I deal with the fact that my kids don’t call to tell me about their day, about their friends, about school, about their lives?”

“Do you deal with indifference by being even more indifferent?” she asked.

“Do any of these questions have an answer?” Mr. Lautrec wondered out loud.

“I don’t know. Maybe. That’s not the point. Just ask a question, any question, any ridiculous question.”

He paused for a good two minutes or so, looking still at the stupid yellow sign above the corner window.

“Why do we feel we have to be significant? To our kids? To our colleagues? To the world?”

This last one made her think about her life. About the choice she’d made. About school. About writing.

“Why am I scared of nothing, of being nobody and of coming to nothing in the end?”

As soon as she said it she wished she hadn’t, and as soon as she wished she hadn’t she was glad she did. It brought about an emptiness in her stomach, left a void in her mind, and made her tongue push against the bitter taste of nothingness on the roof of her mouth.

“Why can’t people see the beauty of life, and be content to witness it when it comes to them?” he replied.

He’s right, she thought. Life is beautiful, though intolerable. How can it be both? How can I live with both, she wondered. Then she remembered it was her turn to ask a question. Without thinking, she spilled, “Will I ever smile the way that I did like that day?”

This one made her feel lonely, without really knowing why. She looked at Mr. Lautrec who was calmly smiling and looking down at his hands, one folded on top of another.

A long pause separated them in time but not in space, and to them it seemed that mere seconds went by until the next question was born.

He sighed. The kind that sounds like someone is drawing air in, not out.

“What is the illusion of life hiding?” He asked this one slowly, pronouncing every syllable, but not to incite a reaction, or to ignite a reaction, but simply to do justice to the words.

They both knew that this question was to be the last question asked, and without saying another word, they sat, each drowning in a river of their own thoughts.

She must have fallen asleep because when she opened her eyes the window revealed not the scene outside, but the one inside, reflected in the light of the dark surface of night. She felt a warm hand on her forearm, and she knew it signaled the end of the journey for her and her companion. He was leaving, he had arrived home. And as she turned her head back toward the window after bidding him goodbye, a peculiar blur of darkness caught her eye. She looked down at her arm, and right above the ridge where her watch had dug her skin while she slept, was a dark navy smudge. She tried to rub it out with her right thumb but stopped abruptly when she remembered. Of course. It would not come off for quite some time. It was a navy blue stain, left by Mr. Lautrec’s navy blue sweater.

— Sona Solomun
Epiphany

Returning home after another monotonous day at Accounts Payable, I was struck by a thought... I was dismayed by the fact that nothing had actually changed since my departure last summer. Maybe a few things here and there, though there was nothing substantially different. The next day was completely static. I had learned more during my coffee break of 15 minutes than I had in an eight hour work day. To be honest, it irked me a great deal to think that we’ve abandoned the workplace as a venue in which to learn as well. And I thought to myself, ‘No, not just the workplace...’ The fact is some people have abandoned even the university as a place to learn. Consequently, I took this realization to be a challenge to prove that it doesn’t necessarily have to be in those places, although they are well suited to the task. Therefore, I thought it only appropriate to write about where we learn and why.

Vincent and Colin were both walking to a class at about 4:30 in the afternoon on Wednesday, a class they had no real interest in at the outset of this short but fruitful walk. Upon taking the shortcut through a local storage yard by the railway tracks and out of earshot of passers by, Vincent broke the silence and decided to tell his friend Colin about a most unusual occurrence only the week before. “You see, Colin, my memory of the following events is not as clear to me now as it was then. The reason for that is not as such attributable to a want of sobriety or clarity of mind, but rather just the passage of time, and perhaps my unwillingness to jog through the memories on a regular basis. Whatever the case may be, I most certainly have forgotten a few things about that day, and the conversation I had with that strange man.”

“Do tell, for I should like to hear everything you remember. For perhaps we could remind ourselves of why it is you are so confused by your conversation with this man.” Colin seemed interested to hear what had happened.

“Well to contextualize, this wasn’t the kind of conversation you could ever expect to have at random. Have you ever had that happen to you when you start talking with a stranger, and it seems to tumble deeper and deeper, though you’d wish you could have simply walked away?” As Colin nodded in agreement, Vincent recounted his tale, if you can really call it that. “In any case, an old man I’d not seen before in the borough walks up to me while I’m in the grocery store just the other day. I’d gone to pick up some wine, bread, and the usual. I was just carrying on about my daily routine. We were simply making some small talk, and suddenly, out of nowhere this unsuspecting young chap” as he referred to himself in third person and planted a finger squarely on his chest, “is beset by a question that has dogged me day and night and left me ragged and weary from contemplation, wallowing in a state of complete mental disorientation.”

At this Colin seemed torn between hearing out the story and telling Vincent it was all in his head, that it was nothing to work oneself up over. But before Colin could choose the path to walk down, Vincent had jumped headlong into the story. “What can Socrates say to me here and now about the nature of education?” So needless to say I was quite flabbergasted. I almost felt... angry at being asked that question. I didn’t feel it was fair to just lay it out there like that. All the while thinking, who in the hell does this guy think he is pulling this kind of stuff on me? Obviously, had we been talking about different teaching methods, or Socratic philosophy, or any subject of real depth other than last week’s sports scores and our preferred brand of beer and the like, I could have given a much better and convincing argument.”

“Still I imagine you learned something from it. It couldn’t have gone that badly.” Colin was seemingly impatient, wanting to know the end before having read the beginning. He pressed him to continue on.

“I can’t say I learned much at all. Certainly I felt frustrated,” Vincent said as he paused to collect his thoughts on the conversation, “because it seemed that any argument or idea I offered only made matters worse for me. It was like debating against a chimera of a reftutation. You just couldn’t win.”

Upon hearing this, Colin shrugged his shoulders in a way that seemed to say ‘Well I suppose so, but I’m not entirely convinced.’ “So what happened?”

“Well first I offered, albeit half-assedly, that the aim of education is the means by which we become
good.” Colin rolled his eyes, almost as if he were prescient of the old man’s refutation. “So naturally he countered, ‘But what of the man who learns to steal, or to kill? For surely many things can be learned, even those things which are harmful to yourself. Education then surely cannot make one good, can it?’ So,” as Vincent let out a sigh of frustration, “I admitted then that education was rather a process, at the end of which was what you desired whether good or bad. I could tell he wasn’t satisfied with that definition.”

“Neither am I,” chimed Colin. “Honestly though, give me a break,” Vince admitted. “So he asked me, ‘How then can you explain, that through the process of learning and research, scientists have often found themselves to be in the wrong and even more confused than before?’ I had no answer for him, so he suggested we examine what education itself is, before we can discuss its purpose. He proposed I define education and knowledge instead. So I offered that education, or knowledge, is something which is obtained from and manifests itself as the effect of our experiences.”

“A decent effort,” said Colin. Vincent agreed and continued.

“He told me I was wrong, citing that ‘such an account holds no room for such basic things as mathematics or abstract concepts such as the forms, for how could a man possess such an understanding of justice? If you’ll recall, friend, in the Phaedo where Socrates addresses the theory of recollection, he speaks of the idea of our understanding of the form of equality. While I cannot as such proclaim to give an authentic account, it is akin to this explanation: You are presented with two sticks, both being of equal length. In order to recognize them as equal, one must have at least some basic understanding of Equality from the moment one is born. Therefore, we must be afforded some knowledge that is pre-existent of our experiences. Tell me boy,’ he said, ‘do you find anything peculiar or similar between Socrates’ account which you have read, and mine?’ I told him no. He reformulated the question and posed it once more, though in an odd fashion.”

“How so?” Colin asked.

“He said, ‘So you couldn’t swear on every word of it that there was something odd, could you?’ I replied that I couldn’t, as my knowledge of the text and the sentence previous was not perfect, to which he replied ‘Ah, now we’re getting somewhere.’” Colin let out a small chuckle. “I told him I didn’t understand at all and he says to me ‘Yes! Even better still,’ and starts laughing aloud. So you’d imagine at this point I’m getting quite frustrated with the man.” Colin stopped to light a cigarette and offered one to Vincent. He in turn lit his and drew a long drag off his cigarette, watching it burn ever shorter as he drew harder, much as he had watched his patience do the same that day. He exhaled a great billow of smoke and said, “Finally I got fed up of his mindless questioning, which obviously wasn’t going anywhere. I asked him, ‘Are you going to keep playing devil’s advocate with my definitions till there’s nothing left?’ And he says to me, ‘Until you see the error of your ways, I will do the opposite and argue the opposite.’

“So I threw my hands up and walked away, I couldn’t take any more of this old man frustrating me with new questions, leading me down paths that didn’t end or start and running me around in circles. His questions only served to disorient me, and left me wanting for something to anchor my opinions to.”

Colin paused and asked, “Vince, can I be honest with you?” He paused to take a drag. “You’re just not getting it. If only I could show you what he was trying to get at... Do you mind letting me ask you a few questions?”

“My intuition tells me there’s something ironic in the works.”

“Shh! You’ll ruin the fun,” he cautioned. “Now to begin; Where are you right at this moment?”

Confused by the question, Vincent answered, “Lennoxville.” He did so somewhat apprehensively, almost answering back in the form of a question.

“Why then, good sir, are you in Lennoxville?”

“To get a degree,” Vincent declared, as if to state the obvious.

Colin seemed slightly on edge at Vincent’s answer, still he continued with the questions. “Is that so? Are you sure?”

“Yes! What other reasons could there be, Colin?”

“Well for starters, you could be here to learn. Had
you thought of it that way?”

“Surely.”

“So then let us assume you are here to learn. You seek the gifts of knowledge. To what end does your learning take you?”

Vince replied rather casually, “Presumably, I should think that that end is a cushy job, a nice house, a decent car. The good life.”

At this point, Colin’s blood pressure had climbed to the point of visible frustration. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Colin disappointedly, “that’s not the raison d’être of the university at all. University is about finding new possibilities, not choosing one. It’s not a means to an end; it is the end! Knowledge isn’t a product, Vince. It just doesn’t work that way! Education can’t be bought, no matter how hard you try to. Unless of course you think that by ‘education’ you take it to mean your name on a piece of paper that reads Bachelor of Arts, then of course. However, you won’t be any smarter for it.”

“I’m still not sure how this relates to the nature of education, I mean of course I’ve been led to believe, through various social forces, that commodification is a good thing. But so long as I come out with the skills I need, who’s to say that my education isn’t worth much?”

“AHHH! Fool!” Colin spat. He paused and took a deep breath, visibly frustrated and clenching his fists. Vincent looked on apprehensively, not quite sure whether he was about to be lectured or punched. He bit his lower lip and waited to see if fortune would favour his ears or his face. Colin began to speak: “Have you ever read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance?” Colin said, as Vincent let out a sigh of relief. “It’s a novel by Robert Pirsig. There’s a passage in it, though I can’t remember where - he’s talking about some run-down church and the concept of the university.” Vince looked extremely puzzled, though slightly grateful at the outcome of the present situation. “The gist of it is that a man had wanted to turn an old church into a bar. When that happened, the townsfolk cried foul. So the author got to thinking and looked a little deeper into the situation. What he found was that the people really had no reason to cry foul, unless of course, they only had a superficial idea of faith. You see, it boils down to a few questions, and that’s all you’ll need.” Colin saw a brief flicker of understanding in Vincent’s eyes, though that quickly dissipated and turned into an empty stare. He continued, “Is the church really something that needs to be inside four walls, in front of a crucifix? Is faith dependent on a steeple and stained glass windows? Church only requires people together bonded by a common purpose and the will to work at it. Now think about university. Does learning really take place only inside these hallowed halls? Is it only between 4:30 and 6:00 pm that our professor stands ready at the gates of the ivory tower to impart his wisdom to us? The possibility to learn is always already staring us right in the face; you just have to be aware enough to see it. You have to want to see it. Learning is something you have to want to do. It’s not something you get, and then stow away in a box until you need it again. You never truly possess knowledge of a thing.” Colin was suddenly struck by a new idea, and immediately began to pursue it.

“Tell me Vince, you play piano yes?”

Somewhat taken aback, Vincent answered, “Of course, but what does this have to do with…”

Colin interjected before he could finish, “Have you ever forgotten how to play something, be it a small melody or an entire piece?” Vince looked to Colin and saw the gears inside the man’s head turning ever faster. Not wanting to slow the pace, Vincent simply nodded and Colin continued without so much as a moment’s hesitation, digging ever deeper to the heart of the matter. “So you would say it requires constant practice?” Another nod and another question fired in quick succession. “And with more practice, is it not easier to grow as a musician, opening up new possibilities?” Yet another nod, and even deeper still. “And with these new possibilities, do we also find a greater understanding of what lies at the very core of what music is?” One last nod, Vincent could feel that this was to be the last question asked of him. “How then, Vincent, could this differ at all from knowledge?”

Vincent suddenly stopped on the bridge and the sun shone bright on the water. He turned his attention to the Massawippi River, ever moving towards the ocean, the vastest expanse. It suddenly struck him that he too should be moving in the same way.

“I finally get it” He yelled. His voice fell to a
hush, full of sincerity he spoke, “You know how Sir Robert Browning said... ‘Strive ever to reach for what is beyond your grasp, otherwise what is heaven for?’ Well, I think by the same token, we should always say ‘Strive ever to understand what is beyond your grasp, otherwise, what is living for?’ They both smiled at one another, and turned once more toward the river, each thinking to himself, “So long as I don’t ever believe I completely understand a thing, there will always be time to learn and room to grow.”

Both Vince and Colin stopped and stood there, staring out over the Massawippi from the bridge, dumbfounded at their discovery. As for Vincent, in his thinking and outlook on learning, he had turned around. Out of his dark corner of certitude he came to see the limitless possibilities that lie in humility and the willingness to learn. Not soon after however, they both came to and realized that they were late for that class they had just moments ago, proclaimed they cared little for... Only now, they ran to class to practice the art of learning with a newfound enthusiasm and fervour. I think that gesture could speak for itself.

And so to prove to himself he really had turned around in his thinking, Vincent decided not to write his paper in Lennoxville. He travelled home early after his exams, and wrote it in Calgary, choosing to divorce the physical context of the university from its now ever more meaningful context, its mental one.

Education, so he thought he had learned from Socrates, had no bounds, physical, conceptual, or otherwise. So what could Socrates tell him here and now about education? Education is here, right now. The nature of education is that it is capable of existing anywhere, anytime, and revealing itself to anyone who wishes to stumble upon its gifts. One therefore, only needs to ask the right questions.

- Vincent Light

Top left, As the Crow Flies: Men pulling in their fishing nets on the shores of Kovalam, Southern India (January 2007).

Bottom left, Coaticook is Gorgeous: The world's longest suspension foot bridge, Parc de la Gorge de Coaticook (October 2007).

At right, Security and Prosperity Indeed: Police barricading a cemetery in Montebello, Quebec, protecting the North American Leaders SPP Summit (August 21, 2007).

Jenn Kang
115 WORDS

For this 115th edition of The Mitre, our beloved journal played host to a flash fiction contest in which entrants were required to send in a piece of prose fiction of 115 words or fewer. While the genre’s entrance and acceptance into the literary mainstream is a nascent one, it is, nevertheless, achieving some notoriety and esteem in the world of letters.

There were only two rules for this contest. The first was that the entry had to be a piece of prose fiction, and the second was that it was imperative for entrants to flex their creative muscles.

Dr. Linda Morra of the Bishop’s University English department acted as judge for the contest and did a “blind-reading” of all the entries. She ultimately awarded the title of “winner” to Kayla Webster for her entry.

It was so intriguing to see what each person had done with their 115 words that we present to you all five contest entries. At the risk of sounding cliche, all of our entrants were “winners”, for each entry is able to encapsulate more than a single moment, but a character and a story, despite the limited word count.

One might gather though from the count of entrants, that the genre is even more nascent than we think.

Enjoy,

Rob Csernyik

Kayla Webster

we linked poplar leaves together in a daisy chain around our necks set up a lemonade stand on your farm no customers we lowered the price from a quarter to fifteen cents hung upside down from the monkey bars our shirts falling over our heads one of us already jaded one wouldn’t grow up for years maybe still hasn’t first night away from my parents was with you your father laughed at my tears you were already asleep I held your rough delicate hands in the morning you brushed my tangled curls scented me with love’s baby soft but you were beautiful even then I knew I would lose you I didn’t know how soon

Gordon Lambie...

'The Four'

The four stood on the ledge and gazed out into the clear blue sky of the January afternoon. It was windy on the forty second floor, and all were chilled to the bone by the strong gusts that threatened to toss them all into oblivion.

"Is everyone ready?" One called out hoarsely.

The others did not respond aloud but instead took hands and, in unison, stepped off the ledge with their polished shoes.

Below, the assembled crowd drew in a collective shocked breath as, together, they watched the four tumble toward the ground.

For an instant there was stillness, silent and divine, and then the world forgot and moved along.
Katherine Campbell...

'A Room with a View'

They say the woman in 14B was found face-down on her bedroom floor wearing goggles and a leopard-print bathing suit. I live in 3C.

All of the units in our building had a view. It's the only reason I moved there - for the view. That is until they started construction across the street. A six-tier layer cake of cars.

I bumped into Agnes from 14B at the pool - her body looked like marbles held together with leopard-patterned tissue-paper. She told me that the lot hadn't obstructed her view, being on the fourteenth floor as she was. I asked if I could come over and see. She was right.

Sonja Solomun

She used to collect words.
She used to whisper too loud.
She used to ask a million questions.
She used to forget.
She used to wash oranges.
She used to say my name.
She used to miss me.
She used to lie in the dark,
And tell me.
She used to love me.

Vincent Light

A quiet man was he, who rose before dawn to saunter and recount a few words of fonder memories. He recalled his childhood and times with his friends, neither of which could truly rouse his passion for prose.

So he said, “I know it, I’ll try to be a poet!” but only so a couplet, and abandoned the endeavour. He then returned home, beaten and broken, and attempted anew. He needed some friends, he thought, he needed his friends.

Alone at last, he sat at his desk, with paper and pen; two very good friends.
who could ever
sleep through this rain?
falling over
mattresses,
split down the middle
like a canyon,
wholly indiscernible
to anyone else
but me.
Us
loses itself
in this space,
the distance within
rain.
I cried before,
as much as after
as if I knew
that I would
lose it anyway.
I always lose it.
if we had stayed safe,
would I have
been safe?
I can’t be sure
I miss you
if I don’t reach out
and breach this break.
I could—
even though I know
I won’t mend
us.
my tears have quit,
nothing left inside
but sinking.
in whispers that
only you could hear,
I ask us both—
am I supposed to let go
of the memories?
No.

why was the one answer
I needed most
the only one you could ever
give me?

benched

park benches were built for waiting.
doesn’t matter what for—
a bus, an earthquake or your severance package.
it’s like waiting in line at a grocery store
with a buggy full of items
that you paid too much money for
and can’t digest.
things pass by while you remain still,
arguments and snow angels and melted popsicles—
there is violation in such missing.

when are you supposed to decide
the moment to leave
after you sit down?
what if you don’t know where to go?
you are forced to stay waiting
so as not to wander,
until your bones start to hurt
or the sun goes down and
you miss another day.

what makes innocent people
so afraid of dark streets?
as if criminals have night vision.
they see as little as you do
they are about as brave as you are
they hide just as well as you could.

in the cold
your breath,
an exhaust on black air,
becomes a transparent spirit

like a beckoning,
as if you have the light of a sun inside you
that comes out with every single breath.
what happens to that light when it leaves you?

when love leaves a heart,
where does the love go?
do you hear the last breath you take,
no matter when you die?
do you watch the light leave,
the moment your soul leaves your body?
what are you waiting for?
always waiting
sitting, or running with all our passions.

such must come from our
death instincts
we are compelled to destroy ourselves
by rushing time,
waiting for beginnings
and endings.

I wish I could stop wondering what comes next
what about my life now?
why are we so afraid of confronting
what is so clearly in front of us
and so obsessed with wondering
what may
or may not
exist when we’re gone?

perhaps we are waiting for a world
that we won’t have to wait in
when we get there.
time will melt
and there won’t be any backwards
or forwards.
but then—
where would we go?

your bus is here.
table for one

you may leave of your own volition
I might not try to stop you.

assurances won’t be assuring
but what do I have to lose?

what to do
with what I know
is not enough.

fun, easy, casual—meaningless

I was deeper than that once

if you’re not good now,
how could you be later?

I’ve gotten used to a seat alone,
rarely with thought
that you might want a chair.

with but a look away from his,
the waiter clears
the extra bread plate
and closely bound silver

I’ve taken a window
in a corner
where I see my second self
and your vacancy.

I don’t love you

because I won’t

if only I could tell myself
that you’re not coming.

I wish that made me hopeful

- Olivia Anastasia Arnaud

Explaining Brown to the Blind

It is a waltz on a creaking hardwood floor

the smell of first rain
after a long dry spell.

It is waking up late
on a Saturday morning

and the eggs are frying
and your wife comes into the bedroom
with a hot cup of coffee

and the sun streaming in through
the partly opened drapes
feels warm on your face.

Brown tastes
like roast beef and gravy.

It is the feel of damp soil
and the smell of tomato plants,
its song
the snap of a bare branch
or, depending on the shade,
his voice singing opera.

A wood stove crackling
in the family room
on a snowy afternoon and

the dog still damp
from her walk
curled up near the heat –

if you have sat next to her
and warmed your feet
in the soft spot
beneath her leg,

then you know brown.

The Enemy

If you must think of him
at all
imagine he is a madman
or a fiend
a womanizer
thief.

You are doing the world
a favour
by killing him.

Call him names –
Raghead Kraut Kike Gook.

Remember, the whites
of his eyes
will not show soul.

As you align the delicate
rifle cross-hairs

on the soft skin at his neck
or upon his furrowed
intelligent brow

do not imagine he has
a wife
children
ailing father at home.

His life is not a cluttered closet
of love –
it is empty.

When you bomb his house
(never think of it as a home)
know this:
there are no books on the shelves,
no dog curled in the same corner
every evening,
and that scent of roasted garlic –
it is not his dinner.

You do not hear music.

The Centre of My Universe

You asked what it feels like
to be so self-centred.

Let me tell you.

It's like a fly
caught in a jar
buzzing in frenzied circles

certain it is making contact
with the world
every time it bumps its head
against glass.

- Michelle Barker
Chalk Dust

High winds erase the sky
with the powdery wrist
of my history teacher
from grade ten
whose cuff was always
speckled with the dates of wars
white snow falling
on a Russian General
and his starving troops,
ashes from Hitler’s bones
or the aftermath of Hiroshima.
All that’s left, she told us, is a clean slate.

Commodities

Go deep.
Feel your way
under your own skin
between muscle
to the bone, the marrow
to blood, pushing its current
through you.

A red river
thick with treasure
your body has pirated
from the meal you’ve just eaten.
Think of the minuscule minerals
it has mined, chunky proteins
crystals of sugar and salt
the cell-barges, poling
the Mississippi mud
of your upper body,
gathering oxygen.

And like a train car it pulls out
of the station of your heart,
pushes on, into dark
underground tunnels, across

the trellis-bridge of lungs
to the long hauls
the limbs’ straight highways,
the journey we take for granted,
washed down with a glass of red wine.

Recycling

Imagine if we could recycle the energy
we put into defensive arguments,
discard bad habits and late deadlines
the way the religious relinquish sin.

If we could use a blue box for the ego
a garbage can for destructive thoughts
which clutter the shelves of our psyche
rattle around in our blood-stained hearts.

A twist-tie sufficient to encompass
every stupid thing we’ve done, a wastebasket
to toss in dependencies, regrets, and a green bag
for leaves fallen from the tree of knowledge.

A mighty brute on wheels, with a jaw like a lion
to devour our vanity and laziness, our apathy,
labels removed, empty bottles rinsed
and all the plastic reconstituted

into clear vessels, (which deteriorate but retain
the ephemeral), into window glass, light bulbs
life-saving devices, such as, I love you
or Sorry, and of course...wings.

- Marjorie Bruhmuller
Landslide

When did the landslide start?
When did our feet lose their grip
and sink into the tumbling earth?
Who fell first?

When did you stop posing for our picture?
When did you sit out,
and leave me grinning for the camera
alone?

When did I start tending your garden?
How did you know that if you gave me seeds,
I'd help you grow your wants and needs?
When did these weeds overthrow my own?

Why would you release my helium hopes
so they'd fly free in the sky?
How, when you watched them burst in the sun,
did you not shield your eyes?

Ahead of Me

Your feet on the pavement
brisk and sure
the smell of September in the morning
and your click click
ahead of me
I think I've always felt you
ahead of me

Do you know that
when I look into the cold flat lie
hung above my sink
your eyes look back at me
(I think I've always felt you ahead of me)
like two halves of a pear
how they toss me
like a stone
even still

- Katherine Campbell

Macroeconomics

I'm bored, I'm bored, I'm bored,
The pen scribbles across the page,
In a flurry of black on white backdrop,
With a long blue line as a stage.

Yet this stage is not alone,
It is the first of thirty-one,
And now the corruption spreads downward,
Down to line thirty - just for fun.

And this pen does the same thing,
It leaves its mark again,
I'm bored, I'm bored, I'm bored
The sole message of this pen.

And in its wake, line after line
The pearly white pages, caressed by blue,
Are tainted a consuming black
Which only this pen can spew

This tower of corruption continues
Down row by row by row
Until none but the margin remains
With its resilient untouched glow

This tower is invincible,
Perfect and strong and bold.
The words scrawled on every line
Never cease to take their hold.

Then when all seems still,
When all seems said and done,
The paper is crumpled up into a ball
And thrown into the trash - just for fun.

Another white sheet revealed,
The pen uses the last of its evil stored
Defiling this perfect page as it did the last:
I'm bored, I'm bored, I'm bored.

- Michael Cestnik
To Die a Happy Man

The seeds of Anger sprout their leaves as only unholy things can & grow as weltering Promise grieves (but withers all the same) over the arches toppled, bleak of widowed tombs for forlorn saints where erstwhile pious ones would meet to warble in G-D’s Name.

Now parsons purged from their pulpits show off their virtue without shame as though there was no place for it, mindless of whence it came. These are curious birds indeed whose ersatz faith they shove around, whose judgement they think G-D decreed though HE’s not to be found.

& here are good men by the throngs, their hands around each other’s throats too busy defending belief in others’ need to choke to seize the Devil by the horns & cease their warring ere it casts their future into the same hell wherein was thrown their past.

So Hope’s to Love & Love alone as Reason’s tangled in her paths & Faith for long has been dethroned by our weather forecasts. But Love is blind, & deaf, & lame, & Life wasted on the living. Drink, therefore, if you’ve been meaning to die a happy man.

The Art of Disaster

A bereaved world beseeches You with screams of slander & of rage a broken world, its foul language streaming down straight like cataracts disgorging crude, blasphemous blame declaiming science, hurling facts.

Yet we are orphans in this age, a viper brood of self-made men whom no discipline can assuage children in fact, although we can number the stars & burn the land in ever-consuming fire. A bereaved world beseeches You with all the art of disaster. A bereaved world beseeches You with murder, theft & war with every little thing that kills that wasn’t there before.

- Etienne Domingue
Persephone's Visit

Some say that hell is made of fire and ash.
But I have been,
and you will find no fire there,
only ice and bitter winds and poison creeks.
It is a world
of perpetual autumn,
of constant, dying beauty all surrounding.
And at the hub of this labyrinthine dwelling,
so vast and full of misery,
is a man, who I know well.
His lonely, frozen voice sings me lullabies,
and in a sea of blue corpses,
he is the only one alive.
I wish that I could love him;
he who sits at tables decked for splendid, bubbling halls,
but only runs his thumb
around the contours of an apple
and looks lustily my way.

The Little Jade Tree

Death stalks keenly
Too far, too near to ever leave me
“Have you stopped grieving?”

Primitive worms dissolve each trace
The house, the smell, the lines on the face
The picture window that expands across the wall a vast
view of a bushy garden in a narrow,
tended
yard.

The little jade tree
Fond memories come to me

“There’s lots of space in here with all the furniture gone.”
...The rattle!
It’s only the door, but still, still, so still, no more.

Abject Poverty

Death rummages freely
Too long, too quick to deceive me
“Will you walk this evening?”

minds will eventually omit
The room, the touch, the lines in the obit
The easy conversation over iced tea in the screened porch
with the dinosaur sticker on the white
wall.

The little jade tree
Sweet memories stay with me

“There’s lots of time to make it feel as if it belongs.”
...The silence!
It’s only the war but still, still, so still...
It’s not ours anymore.

- Elyse Gagne

this is a modest ode to
our windowless garret
our merciless mattress,
rationed soap and razorblades,
three-day’s shadow obfuscating
gaunt jaundiced cheeks
the brown sac of rice in the kitchen
the jug of unholy wine like arsenic
the thermostat set at zero
the faint plumes of breath
slipping from your lips as you sleep
the suggestion of last night’s curry
in this morning’s eggs
drowsy lingering lips on my neck
as I’m frying

- James Hatch
Poem to be Read at Poetry Readings to the Background of Traffic Across the Bay Bridge

1.
I'm tired of eating word sandwiches
with those sloppy sentence constructions
tasting like pickle relish
that gets stuck in my teeth.

All those put together meals
oozing mayonnaise on Wonder Bread
words padding empty images
for hungers that only death could satisfy
or a good kick in the symbolic butt;

poems tasting like watered down - no -
I'm not going to use a four letter word
leaving all the coffee grounds intact as they came out of
the ghettos that wrote them

Wait! - I was just getting into that image,
let it spin out of its fine threads
sheaves of seasonal colours, it's energy
coming out of the head
of a perfect flower

don't slice its body into lean
chateaubriand strips
and sell it for all those ridiculous
endings or padded middles

Let it breathe!
Create some space around it
you're squashing the whole poem
into a ball - all the colors
turn black

I can't see the acid red or blues.

2.
I'm tired of being castrated by men's poetry and liberating by the women's

All the scenes of discovering oneself
in Iowa,
the farm,
the mill,
the city at 17,
haven't we suffered enough?

And the Primal Scene
has ferried all necks loose
from their moorings: if people
have really escaped from marriages,
children, kitchens, why are they still
at the proverbial ironing board
through more things
that masquerade as poetry,
though really it's a flesh trade
that grasps the audience -
the wonderfully red pieces
thrown to the audience
who become cannibals
at an ordinary poetry reading

everything becomes eaten and assimilated
the disembodied genitals
coming in all sizes and colours
to be worshipped or sacrificed
at the improvised alters
of Reality, Karma etcetera.

3.
I'm tired
for all these words
and for the others that are going to come
and not hear
the sounds of being spoken,
for the words
that once held all the gold
in people’s minds
that now have become alloy
in a metal age:
   silver – bronze – lead

for the words
that are ritual
not removed from grace
from grace not removed from dignity
from dignity
not removed from silence.

Old Poets and Writers
(for Elizabeth Parker)

This is the season for old poets
and their ilk
with their high cheekbones
and distant smiles.

With names like Atwood and Oates
their small miniscule structures
poking out of muskrat smelling jackets
their tiny birdlike hands writing into the night
so that we may SOAR in the morning
breaking the fresh folios with an ivory knife.

they write politely almost virtuously
of murder, mayhem, massacres,
and other crafted obscenities
cautious not to get blood on their faces;

taking the seeds of dragons’ teeth
one before teatime
to see who kills who by the time it is
for cocktail hour.

LAYTON once called Atwood
“a piss on a plate voice.”

How could he or anyone be SO wrong?

How many writers deal with pure destruction
as shimmering as she
as gallant as Oates

reminding us that the
compassionless failing heart
really does get you in the end.

- Noni Howard

January 28, 2008

Grandfather,
You Patriarch, you Monarch of Antiquity,
You terrify me;
For I am a child of today.

Grandfather,
You Master of Dogs, You Lord of the Manor,
You make the ground quake,
And I hide myself in the dark.

Grandfather,
You soaring monolith, you captain of kings
You command your life,
And I watch it fall into line

Grandfather,
You ivory tower, you sage of working worlds,
You scared me so much
That it's hard for me to believe.

Dear Grandpa,
You Gardener, You true Friend and teller of Epic Tales,
I lost you yesterday,
And only now can see how dumb it was to fear.

- Gordon Lambie
Selected Poems

You keep looking around,
looking ahead, by passing the passersby,
by passing me.
There is not enough time to catch up
with the seventy years ahead of you.

What good can you do?
You overbudgeted the years
it would take you to achieve status.
You mortgaged yourself,
there is no going back.

And yet, once you looked back
and sighed, nostalgic,
for the past and the hippies,
for the possibilities vanished in the breath of desires.

Nor then did you see me,
I was standing right there
hoping for an ally in the fight.

I should have shouted a riot
then, my friend, to tell you
there is no such thing as the sixties,
no moment to stop and throw it all away
but every minute you venture to go your way.

But you kept walking and so did I
A man stopped me and I declined.
Am I a fool? Can I read his mind?
I didn’t even know what words would come out of his
mouth.

Maybe he meant to add that we need to
lose sight to see better,
because there is no such thing as the sixties,
no moment to stop and throw it all away
but here and now on any day.

* * *

I wish I could find a spot
Where my legs might run
as free as thoughts within me.
Because here, on this Kharkiv park bench,
there is no room to shelter a bohemian
from a corner of people’s sight
from a passport stamp,
from the working hours.
Nowhere to raid with mind bombs,
robbing idiocies from sentences
Nowhere to make comfort uneasy, really.

Anywhere I go, I am trapped by humankind
Where customs raise boundaries
Where skins are barbed wire
Where skulls build walls

Humankind is such a disease.
It even follows every step within me.

– Ann-Marie Morin-Labbé
I am Not Here
November 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2006

\begin{verse}
\textit{I am not here}
but people see me
\textit{I am not here}
but people hear me
\textit{I am not here}
people don't look
\textit{I am not here}
people don't listen
\textit{I am not here}
Where do I go?
\textit{I am not here}
What do I do?
\textit{I am not here}
I am not here
What must I do?
\end{verse}

\begin{verse}
For M
\end{verse}

loving you
was like
crushing a fist full of thumbtacks
between my broken ring finger
and my splintered thumb

the inverted shape of a porcupine’s spine
nested in the curled
blistered form
of my softest flesh

the beauty of it all

the white knuckles like snow capped mountains
with tiny red streams

\begin{verse}
For Bucket
\end{verse}

the bush is no place to kick a habit
why did you have to try?

why, when so far from everything,
did you think it would be a good idea
to give up the one thing
that always helped you deal with me?

how did we survive for two weeks on beans and dreams
when your crushed pack of smokes
was at the heart of all your curses?
cigarettes will always be the stone in your boot,
and as a good friend,
i will always be the dirt in your eye.

\begin{verse}
For Lukas
\end{verse}

the day you made your big escape
i was half drunk and hoping you’d make it
too bad a police cruiser can easily outrun
a riding lawnmower with a half a tank of gas

i never thought you’d get the thing started
and you did
i never thought you’d make it to the highway
and you did
i never thought you’d get a d.u.i. for the forty of vodka
and you did

you proved me wrong three times that day
and yet you returned to the farm house an hour later
cuffed and drunk and cursing authority.

\begin{verse}
For Marie Nwiesser
\end{verse}

For Mloving you was like crushing a fist full of thumbtacks between my broken ring finger and my splintered thumb the inverted shape of a porcupine’s spine nested in the curled blistered form of my softest flesh the beauty of it all the white knuckles like snow capped mountains with tiny red streams

\begin{verse}
- Marie Nwiesser
\end{verse}

For Bucket the bush is no place to kick a habit why did you have to try? why, when so far from everything, did you think it would be a good idea to give up the one thing that always helped you deal with me? how did we survive for two weeks on beans and dreams when your crushed pack of smokes was at the heart of all your curses? cigarettes will always be the stone in your boot, and as a good friend, i will always be the dirt in your eye.

\begin{verse}
- J. Coplen Rose
\end{verse}
Memories
Salty strands of hair fly
While undone laces drag.
But scraped knees
Never heal.

Her
See her smile.
Watch it unfold
As it spreads
On her precocious face.
Tilt your head and
Lower your lashes.
Pretend you don’t
But see her smile.

Hear her weep.
Listen to the tears
As they splash
On her black and white tiles.
Take a sip and
Close your eyes
Pretend you can’t
But hear her weep.

Peaches
A child sits on the porch,
The fruit in hand.
Peach juice stains
Her cotton shirt

The orange-yellow innocence
Tans its way into her

Small shape.
The aroma sticks
To the summer air.

A pure smile.

Dancing trees sway
As the days grow.
But the child
Sits still.

Single Frame
I knocked on your painted blue door
to tell you what I would say
if I should return here
again someday.

I stood and I waited
you were not to be found
I flicked away ash
and turned around.

I should think you are sorry
but the moment has fled
and now your door
is painted red.

The Philadelphia Museum
I wish my mind could be illuminated
every evening above sixth
like the Philadelphia Museum.

we stand outside on Chestnut Street
move into the upper part of the Arcade
post theatre-goers jostling at our shoulders.
the museum is open throughout the day but we've arrived after dark with 25 cents to rummage through mammoth bones.

I want to slip my fingers through yours walking through the Mineral kingdom of nature but you are busy stroking fool's gold and quartz.

implements and ornaments of aboriginal tribes you caress with your eyes while soft pearls nestle gently into your neck.

exhibits beautifully arranged the tongue behind your teeth when you smile that I can study with the greatest advantage.

“All parts of the world that we desire to secure Obtained by an act of Incorporation To insure the stability of the Institution.

Nothing can be removed without penalty Investments can be made with certainty Only on behalf of the public good.”

according to Founder C.W. Peale you roll your eyes and tug on my sleeve impatient to roam the Animal kingdom.

we pay our respects to the Cabinet of Antiquities and Artificial Curiosities before parting with distinguished sighs under the canopy.

your behaviour is fascinating and extensive worthy of my attention ordinary attractions in an immense collection.

- Kayla Webster

Night Migration

Descending Sirius follows his master, the great hunter into the bottomlands of winter; and welcomes me to a midnight filled with primordial stirrings, susurrations, scamperings, and the music of snowmelt softly trickling in the crystalline chill.

Overhead, moonlight scuds between the broken clouds, as the invisible revenant myriads announce themselves to the world - alive, speaking alien, avian tongues, stippling the April night with chirps and flutterings, with wingbeats full of night.

They fly the wide corridors along the peripheries of wood and field, like waves of an aerial sea, and northward they fade - the unnumbered and the unnamed, leaving me earthbound, humbled, resolved of all ambiguities and full of a deep and living joy.

Viewing a Nineteenth Century Portrait

On this wall, a portrait hangs by a fountain where patrons wait, full of culture - what must they see,
gazing at it helpless before eternity?

His frozen face is a tomb in suspension, and viewed with the present’s smug condescension,

or to some, it’s a totem, a treasure believing they’re blessed in the presence of this relic from Eden.

Through the halls they quickly come and go, and critique what they do or don’t know,

and positions established in each crucial debate are quickly abandoned under time’s endless weight

but through it all, there’s my timeless complaint, that in the end, it is only paint.

– Frank Willdig
NOT TO BE TAKEN AWAY
CONSULTATION SUR PLACE