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AMY JONES

THE VERY FIRST GIRL IN THE WHOLE WORLD TO WIN THE DAKAR

One day I come home to Cherry Tree Hill to find my sister Rachel trying to steal a car. This car is a 1999 Mazda MX5 Miata with many features, such as a 1.8-liter, 140 horsepower, four-cylinder, 16-valve engine with dual overhead cams, 15-inch aluminum alloy wheels, 5-Speed Manual Transmission, AM/FM/CD Audio System, Bucket Seats, Center Console, and Dual Front Airbags. Also, you should know that this car belongs to Mama.

Mama won this car a long time ago on a game show called *Place Your Bets*. Ever since Daddy had the Accident at Work, Mama has been on lots and lots of game shows, the most recent one being a few months ago when she was on the game show called *The Million Dollar Question* that maybe you have heard of. It has a host whose name is Gene Sugarman and who always says this one thing so that the audience will say it with him. The thing that Gene Sugarman says is, "Are you ready for the big one?" which means the big question that will make you win or lose all your money. Even though Mama has been on lots of game shows, she has not won anything except when she was on *Place Your Bets*, and I know that this is why Mama loves this car so much and does not ever let anyone else drive it, and this is how I know that Rachel is stealing it.

Rachel does not know that I see her because I am standing on the other side of the street and she is halfway in the side door of the passenger with her head under the seat. "Damnit," she says, along with many other words that I am not going to repeat to you because they are rude. I wonder at first what Rachel is doing and then I remember that this is where Mama keeps the extra key to the Miata in case she loses the other one or someone steals it and so on and so forth. This does not seem very logical to me but it makes sense to Mama and Mama is the smartest person I know.

Rachel finally finds the key. She holds it in one hand and shuts the passenger door with the other. "Sweet," she says. Then she turns and sees me on the other side of the street and waves the key in the air. "Come for a ride, Taylor?" she asks and my heart starts thumping very loudly in my chest because unlike my other sister Lauren, who talks to me all the time, even sometimes when I am in the bathtub or when I am in my bed while I am asleep, Rachel never even talks to me at all under normal circumstances and most of the time I am not even sure she knows that I am a real

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alive person. But I do not answer her, and the reason I do not answer her is because, if you do not already know this, I am eleven years old and do not know how to speak, which is also to say that I do not know how to make words with my voice, and if you ask me why, I am not going to tell you right now because I do not feel like it. So now I am going to tell you about something else.

The something else that is what I am going to tell you about is Puerto Vallarta, which is the place I was before I was standing on the street across from Rachel. If you do not already know, this is of course not really the real Puerto Vallarta, of Mexico, where Mama and Daddy met many years ago when Mama was young and even more beautiful and Daddy was an almost famous hockey player and very handsome even though he was missing three of his teeth, but only a place in the No Trespass Zone down the street from my house where there are four trees which are spruce trees and two rocks made of granite that come together to make one big rock made of granite, and where I can see the ocean and the islands in the ocean and the boats going by the islands. I call this place Puerto Vallarta because Mama told me that this means "the place that makes you feel like you are wrapped in a blanket" in Spanish.

To get from Puerto Vallarta to Cherry Tree Hill, you have to do this: first you crawl out along the mossy ground under the four trees and around to the side of the left rock of the two rocks that come together to make the big rock, then you pull yourself up to the top. I'm sure you will find it easy to do because I can still do it even though I am very small for my age. Once you walk along the third rock, which is flat and covered with lichen and seagull turds, which are often blue during berry season, after a while you will see a path through the lichen and you can follow that path straight off the rock and through the alders, past the little campfire pit and dirty mattress where homeless people sleep.

You can follow the trail a little farther, through some old trees with beards, and then you will come to a clearing. You have to be careful here because there is always broken glass on the ground, as well as disgusting cigarette butts and sometimes bags from fast food restaurants and so on and so forth, but it is still a nice place because you can look down through the trees and rocks and see Purple Lake on one side and Red Lake on the other, which are not the real names of the lakes but the names given to them by me. But whatever you do, do not look in the space between Purple Lake and Red Lake, because then you will see a burnt-up car that someone didn't like anymore and it will probably make you sad. So it is best to just look up, which is good when it is sunny or if there are clouds in interesting shapes but boring if it is just one big cloud covering the whole sky.

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Then after a minute you will come to a chain link fence with barbed wire running across the top, but do not be afraid because you do not have to go over the top. There is a hole in the fence where you can go under right at the spot with the rock that is shaped like a planet with rings around it. Once you go under the fence you will be on a street that is called Walnut Grove, but you shouldn't be confused because there are no walnuts on Walnut Grove. The one thing there is on Walnut Grove is a small brick building with a big fence around it and that is a very scary place called the Power Station. Mama says you should always stay away from the Power Station, even if your dog jumps in there or your ball goes over the fence, because it is a very dangerous place and maybe it could make you electrocuted, and I believe her because Mama is the smartest person I know. On the other side of the Power Station is the street called Cherry Tree Hill, and if you turn left you will see three houses that are all white and tall and have black driveways in the front, the one in the middle being number 21, where we all live together, Mama and Daddy and Lauren and Rachel and me.

Rachel walks to the side door of the driver and gets in. Then she backs out of the driveway and over to where I am still just standing there on the other side of the street. She looks right at me and I can see that her eyes are very dark. I do not mean that the skin around her eyes is dark, like sometimes Mama's skin gets when she has not had time to have a proper night's sleep, but the actual eye part of her eye is dark, like as if someone was drawing in her eyes with a pen and then the pen exploded and all the ink just pooled around in there. They are all dark and shiny like that and I am not afraid to tell you that they scare me. They scare me so much that the only thing I ever wanted in the whole wide world, which of course is for Rachel to turn around and look at me, suddenly becomes the last thing I want in the whole wide world.

"Are you coming, Taylor?" she asks.

I do not know where Rachel is planning to go. The only thing I know is that Rachel never ever wants me to come with her anywhere, and so this is a very special day. So before she can change her mind I run over to the passenger side of the car and open the door and climb into the seat and I think about fastening my seatbelt underneath my arm just like Mama once showed me so that the strap won't choke me in case we get into an accident, but I don't because that is something that little girls do and I am not a little girl anymore. Then I fold my hands in my lap and look straight ahead and in my head I am saying, *don't change your mind, don't change your mind* and I am not moving at all or doing anything that might make her kick me out of the car. Then I realize she is staring at me, and when I look back at her she leans over and hugs me really hard. This is the most

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surprising thing that has possibly ever happened to me and the worst part about it is that now my arms are pinned underneath the seatbelt because I did not fasten it the way that Mama told me I should, and now I cannot hug Rachel back. This makes me feel really upset and I know that my muscles are tightening up, and I do not want Rachel to feel this happening because then she might think that I do not want her to hug me anymore. So instead I concentrate on making myself very soft and cuddly like Chris Bosh, who is not of course the real Chris Bosh, formerly of the Toronto Raptors, but my teddy bear who I call Chris Bosh. I let my arms and legs go limp and lean forward into Rachel's body and rest my head against her shoulder.

These are the things I can feel: her fingers pressing into my side right underneath my ribs, one of her breasts all mashed up against my arm, her nose bumping up against my neck. I can even feel her shoulder digging into my ear and even though it hurts, it feels good. Her hair is on my face and tickles my nose. I breathe in but it does not smell like anything except cigarettes. I can hear her breath going in through her nose and coming out through her mouth and I think that this is maybe the best moment ever and if Rachel was not hugging me and holding me together that maybe I would explode.

Okay. I am ready to tell you the reason now.

The reason that I am eleven years old and only learning to talk now is because of Gabe. If you do not know Gabe, he was my twin brother who died when we were both still inside of Mama. Gabe died because the cord that attached him to Mama, which is called the Umbilical Cord, was wrapped around his neck when it was time to come out. The Umbilical Cord made Gabe not be able to breathe, and then he became scared and started thrashing around with his little tiny legs and arms, and when his foot kicked me in the throat it made my voice box crumple up like a juice box you squish in your hands. The doctors told Mama I would never ever be able to talk but Mama says I am still a very lucky girl because Gabe did not make me dead, too. But I do not hate Gabe. I love him very much because Mama told me he died so that I could be alive, and when someone does that kind of thing for you, you have to love them whether you want to or not.

But here is the big secret. I've been teaching myself to talk.

I do this in Puerto Vallarta. Puerto Vallarta is one of the Sneaky Words like ocean and island that sound different in my mouth than in my head, so even though in my head the place I go sounds like PUR-TO VALL-AR-TA, in my mouth it sounds like PWER-TO VAI-ER-TA. So I started with this word, PWER-TO VAI-ER-TA. I could say the "P," because the P is just putting your lips

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together like you're going to kiss someone and then making a kind of popping sound. Then I tried to say the "WER," but somehow the E got lost and it sounded just like "WRRR," which is the sound of a car engine in first or maybe second gear.

"WRRRRRRRR," I said, and I put my hands in front of me and closed my fists, and I could almost feel them vibrate as if I was really holding the wheel of a car like a rally car racing around Sanremo, "WRRRRRRRR," just like Sébastien Loeb or Marcus Grönholm, until after a while I remembered that I was supposed to be practicing talking and not practicing driving, which is the other thing I like to do when I am in Puerto Vallarta. So then I tried to say the P and the WER together, but this made me spit all over my pile of overdue library books that were hiding in the Dark Space, which is what I call the place where the one rock meets the other rock to make one big rock, and this made me distracted and I start thinking about how when I took them home I opened them all up and looked in the back at the list of people who had taken them out, there was not one single name of one single person on the whole list. And I thought about the books sitting on the shelf in the library all by themselves and it made me too sad.

Then after I looked at the library books I had to look at all the other interesting things I keep in the Dark Space, and then I forgot all about trying to talk. The Dark Space is the safest place in the world, and the only bad thing that could happen would be maybe the one rock would slip off the other rock and then it would be stuck there because I imagine the rock is so heavy that not even Daddy could lift it, and Daddy is the strongest person I know. I keep all of my most important possessions in the Dark Space, such as the picture of Sébastien Loeb's blue Citroën C4, which is the car that I want to drive when I become a world champion rally racer, and the scarf that is Mama's scarf and that she was going to throw out because Rachel told her that the colour of it reminded her of puke and that I rescued from the garbage can, and so on and so forth. And of course my most important possession of all, which is a brochure for a very beautiful place you can go stay with your family called La Maison Baie Bleu which is in Quebec and is owned by the one and only Luc Belliveau.

If you don't know about Luc Belliveau, well, let me tell you. He is just about the greatest rally racer the world has ever seen, and he is from Canada! Actually, he is the only Canadian to ever win the World Rally Championship *and* the Dakar Rally, which you might not know is not really an official rally race but what they call an endurance race which means that you have to go very far for a very long time across the worst places on the planet and you don't have anyone to help you except

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for your team and lots of people die in it. Rally racing is the greatest sport in the world because number one, it takes brains *and* stamina, and number two, you do not have to be able to talk to do it.

It is better than any other kind of car racing because you are driving real cars that anyone can buy and you are driving on real roads that anyone can drive on, and you have to really work hard as a part of a team with your navigator. Luc Belliveau's navigator was a man called Per Hogarthe, of France, and Luc Belliveau and Per Hogarthe raced together for many years in their Toyota Celica GT-4 but then suddenly they stopped because when they raced the Dakar together they had a very big fight about nobody knows what and now Per Hogarthe navigates for a Finnish driver called Jari Harju who drives a Mitsubishi Gallant VR-4 and who has been credited with inventing the Scandinavian Flick which is a very sophisticated driving technique. As you can tell, I know almost everything there is to know about rally racing, which is very important if I am going to be the very first girl in the whole world to win the Dakar.

Ever since he won the Dakar no one has heard much about Luc Belliveau. Some people say that he married an African woman who he met during the race and now he lives somewhere in the desert, and other people say that he bought a big floating raft and has given up living on land altogether and just floats around on this raft that he has made into its own country. But I know that none of this is true because this brochure that I found one day when me and Mama were at the ferry terminal is telling me that Luc Belliveau is alive and well and living in Quebec with his wife Judy and their two small children, Alex and Sophie, who have their picture on the back of the brochure.

I am not telling you all this about rally racing because I want to show off for you or to make you think that I am smart. Many people think that because when I make sounds with my mouth they come out like someone is placing the heel of their foot on my neck that I am stupid. But I am really not stupid. I know everything that any other eleven-year-old knows, and then I know about many more things than that, such as the constellations, William Shakespeare, the Pythagorean Theorem, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, and so on and so forth. I am actually the smartest kid in my class if you ask any of my teachers. But you know what? I do not care if you think I am stupid. Mama and Daddy and even Rachel might care that people think I am stupid, but I do not. And neither would Luc Belliveau, I am sure of it.

So. This is what happens next:

Rachel presses her foot very firmly on the pedal underneath the steering wheel called the clutch and presses the button which turns on the radio and some man who I know is called Pink

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Floyd is singing "We Don't Need No Education," but I think he really means that he does need education, because when you have the word "don't" in the same sentence as "no" this is called a double negative and it means the same thing as a positive. Rachel turns it up louder and nods her head along with the beat. She starts driving the wrong way down the road called Cherry Tree Hill, away from Purcell's Cove Road and towards the No Trespass Zone. She drives past Walnut Grove and then comes to the end of the road called Cherry Tree Hill, which is a round piece of road that is called a cul-de-sac and then she turns around fast and stops the car by the side of the road.

In case you do not know about Cherry Tree Hill, let me tell you. First thing is this: there is not one single cherry tree in Cherry Tree Hill. There are many other kinds of trees, such as birches, maples, chestnuts, fir and spruce trees, and other kinds of trees that you probably have never even heard of. But there are no cherry trees. The second thing is this: you should not come to this end of the road that is called Cherry Tree Hill, ever, because this is where the teenagers come to do bad things that their mothers will not let them do at home, such as drinking, taking drugs, smoking and having sex with each other. I know this because there are some kids in my class who talk about how they come to the top of Cherry Tree Hill to do these things, except they do not call it Cherry Tree Hill, they call it Cherry Popping Hill, which I do not understand but know it has something to do with taking drugs and having sex with each other.

When Rachel pulls the car over, she leans her arms on the car door and looks out over the No Trespass Zone, so I look out too and I realize that from here you can see way more even than in Puerto Vallarta. You can see the ocean and the islands in the ocean and the boats going by the islands in the ocean, but you can also see inside the mouth of the harbour and the container pier and the oil refinery and the park and the tops of every building in Halifax, probably, and then on the other side of Halifax if you turn your head all the way around, you can see the very tippy top of one of the bridges. Rachel's head is turned away from me but I can tell that she is not looking at any of these things, she is not looking at the houses or the oil refinery or the container pier. She is not even looking at the tippy top of the bridge. I think maybe she is looking at a place that she is the only person who can see it. Rachel is always doing that and it seems like she is thinking of something very sad and important but Mama says it is just because of her being a teenager and she should get over it already.

"Where should we go, Taylor?" she asks me.

I can tell that this is a very serious question. I do not know why Rachel is crying or why she wants to go somewhere that she does not even know where it is, not because I am stupid but

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because nobody ever tells me anything. But I can understand what it is like to want to be somewhere other than where you are. I look back out over the city and try to remember the last thing I was looking at before Rachel asked me where to go. I see the tippy top of the bridge poking up on the other side of the city. I point to it.

Rachel turns her head. "Is that the bridge?" she asks.

I nod.

"Yeah. Okay. Let's go to the bridge," she says.

The question that Gene Sugarman asked Mama on *The Million Dollar Question* was this:

Meteorology is the study of a) weather b) the ocean floor c) meteors or d) stars.

Mama had been practicing really hard to be on *The Million Dollar Question* and I really thought she was going to win because like I told you before she is the smartest person I know. She sat in the dining room every night with her laptop computer with a program that made up random questions that were multiple choice, and sometimes she even watched old episodes of *The Hundred Thousand Dollar Question,* from back when people thought that a hundred thousand dollars was a lot of money. Sometimes if I was really quiet, she let me sit under the table, and I would play with the laces on her shoes and listen to Mama answer the questions, which I can tell you she got right almost 97% of the time and which Mama said was because I was her Good Luck Charm.

Like I told you before, Mama has been on lots and lots of game shows. The first one she was on was *Place Your Bets*, when she won the Miata and a new refrigerator and all kinds of other stuff, too. She won everything there was to win on that show, and after that was when we bought the house in Cherry Tree Hill. Mama was very lucky, everyone said. The newspaper did a story about her, and she got to be interviewed on *Live at Five* with Bruce Frisko and also was the special guest at the Atlantic Winter Fair at Exhibition Park where she got to judge the Super Dogs and so on and so forth. But after *Place Your Bets*, Mama was not so lucky. She went on all kinds of other game shows and did not win any other prizes at all, except for the play-at-home version of *Jeopardy* that they gave her when she went down into the negatives and she was not allowed to stay and play Final Jeopardy because she had no money to wager.

But after *The Million Dollar Question*, Mama became very famous again. Lauren was at dance practice so I watched the show on television at home with just Daddy and Rachel, even though I wanted to go to New York to see Mama because as you remember she told me she was her Good Luck Charm! Daddy said it would be too expensive and that would defeat the purpose of winning all

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that money, but really I know that it is just because Daddy does not ever like to leave the house since the Accident at Work that made him be in a wheelchair. So we were watching it at home in the living room just like it was any other boring show we would watch on TV.

"This show is for stupid people," Rachel said. I knew even before she said that that she was in an angry mood. Rachel has all kinds of moods, such as angry, sad, happy, contemplative, excited, morose, and sometimes drunk. I know all about Rachel's moods because she has them all the time.

"Oh Rachel," Daddy said. "That's not a nice word." He looked at me when he said it, but I pretended that I did not see, because I knew he had the Sorry for Taylor face on and the Sorry for Taylor face is the face I hate most in the whole wide world.

"What? It's not like I was swearing," said Rachel. "I didn't say 'this show is for stupid *fucking* people.'" Rachel is very good at being mean to Daddy. I think if there was a Being Mean to Daddy Olympics, she probably would win the gold medal.

Daddy drank some of his drink and looked at Rachel really sadly, as if he was trying to figure out some big mystery just by looking at her. I thought maybe he was going to cry, but then he just said, "Watch your mother on TV."

Then there was some really tense music. I was in my pajamas and Rachel was wearing a black dress because she was going out that night with some friends to a club and Daddy was wearing his sweatpants and his number 93 Dougie Gilmour Maple Leafs jersey which he sometimes let me wear too but just around the house. Mama was wearing a red suit with a skirt instead of pants and I thought she looked very beautiful even though Rachel said she had on too much makeup. Then it was time for the very first question, which is supposed to be the super easy question that gets you started and sometimes makes everybody laugh. Gene Sugarman leaned forward and he said, "Are you ready for the big one?" and the audience said it along with him and the Gene Sugarman said the thing about meteorology and Mama took a deep breath and Daddy took a drink of his drink and Rachel played with a hole in her stocking and I sat very, very still.

'C. Meteors," Mama said.

Then the music made a sad noise. Gene Sugarman stopped smiling. Rachel stopped picking the hole in her stocking. Daddy stopped drinking his drink. None of us said anything, we just stared at the TV for a few seconds and then Rachel said, "What a fucking moron," and got up and turned off the TV and Daddy turned his chair around and wheeled out of the room and I said in my head, *it's okay Mama, it's okay, meteorologists should study meteors, it only makes sense.*

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When Mama came home she was very angry and wouldn't talk to any of the reporters who came to the house, and when David Letterman made a joke about her on his TV show she did not even find it funny at all. In fact it made her cry a little bit, which I can understand because it is not nice to make fun of people you do not know because you do not know if they are going think it is funny. After that I wrote a letter to David Letterman and told him how sad he made Mama, and he sent me back a letter with a picture of himself with his name written on it, and in the letter he said thank you for your letter but did not say anything about Mama, not anything at all.

Now I am going to tell you about what Rachel and I do next.

Rachel and I drive all the way to the bottom of the road called Cherry Tree Hill and then take a left turn onto Purcell's Cove Road. As soon as we make the turn, Rachel starts driving faster, which makes the wind blow my hair around. The sun is shining brightly, and this makes me wish I had sunglasses. With sunglasses and my hair blowing around I could imagine that I was a movie star, and Rachel too, and we are driving our movie star car to a big premiere where there are going to be all kinds of people taking our picture and asking us for autographs and we will link arms and walk up the red carpet and into a big lush air conditioned theatre where we will get to eat all the popcorn we want, and even get extra butter because we are the stars of the movie. Rachel already looks like a movie star, even though her hair is dirty and she is wearing no makeup and her clothes have holes in them and she has a great big zit in the space between her eyebrows. Rachel usually wears at least some lipstick, and if she is going out at night she puts on a lot of black stuff on her eyes. I think that maybe after this adventure we have together, that she will show me how to put on makeup the way that she does. Then I will wear it to school and all the other kids in my class will be jealous because they will know that I am best friends with my sister Rachel and they are not.

At the end of Purcell's Cove Road there is something called a rotary where cars drive around and around in a circle until they see the see the street that they want and then they get out of the circle. To get in the rotary, you are supposed to take turns, first one person goes, and then the next person goes, one, two, one, two, and so on and so forth. I do not drive a car yet (even though I practice all the time in Puerto Vallerta) but even I know how to make the rotary work. But when we get there, Rachel just stops. One car drives by and then the next car stops to let Rachel go because it is Rachel's turn. But Rachel still just sits there. When I look at her I see that she is staring at her hands on the steering wheel. She just keeps staring and then the car that is waiting for her gets mad and drives away really fast.

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"Look at my hands," she says, so I look at them. She has her palms pressed against the steering wheel and her fingers are spread out. They look like very normal hands, her fingers are long and slender and very pretty, and her nails are very short. I know that they are short because she has made them that way by biting them.

"Look at this … skin," she says. She takes one hand and pinches the skin on the other hand. "It's so …" she pauses, letting go and letting the skin settle back into place "… fucking *thin*." She pokes the same spot with her finger and sort of moves it around.

Then the car behind us gives a little honk.

"Shut up!" Rachel screams. I jump in my seat because I was not expecting Rachel to scream at that moment. She wraps her fingers back around the steering wheel very tightly. Then she slams on the gas before she even looks at whether or not there is a car coming, which I can tell you, THERE IS! Luckily the car, which is a taxicab, slams on the brakes very hard and does not hit us. The driver honks the horn and yells something out the window but Rachel is not paying any attention at all, she is driving away very fast through the rotary and then up Chebucto Road and under the train bridge and then straight through the intersection by the mall even though the light is yellow-turning-red.

I will tell you, all of this makes me a little bit nervous to be in the car with Rachel.

Before Rachel became a teenager, and when I was just a very little kid, we used to have our own zoo. Maybe if you asked her today, she would not tell you about the zoo but I will bet a million dollars she remembers. The zoo consisted only of animals that we could find in the backyard, mostly just all kinds of insects, such as butterflies, bees, hornets and wasps, beetles, crickets, grasshoppers, centipedes and millipedes, caterpillars, dragonflies, damsel flies, horse flies, deer flies, fireflies, ladybugs, ants, and spiders, which are actually not insects but actually arachnids. We kept them in jars that used to have jam in them and Rachel would pound through the tops with nails to make holes that would make them be able to breathe. We would give them sticks and leaves and moss, which if you do not already know are the things that insects eat, but no matter how hard we tried to look after them, they always became dead. And then, you know what? A thing that was weird happened. The thing that was weird was, we started to get used to bugs that were dead, and we would do all kinds of things to them such as poke at them with sticks, scratch at them with our fingernails, pull off their antennae or their wings or their legs, peel apart their bodies, and prod at

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their insides and so on and so forth and you do not have to tell me that this thing that we did was a very mean thing to do but I was only a very little girl and did not know any better.

After a while, there was one day when we had already gone through all the bugs that were dead and we had all these other bugs in jars that we knew were going to be dead soon anyway, and what was the big deal if we just did it for them a few hours in advance? At least that was what Rachel said. She said, "What is the big deal, Taylor? They're only stupid ugly bugs anyway, right?" So we got a bunch of rocks and put them over the holes which were for the bugs to breathe and soon all the bugs were acting very strangely and doing things such as stumbling around in their jars, burying themselves under the moss and leaves, and climbing slowly up the glass walls trying to get out and stop from being suffocated. But it was okay, Rachel said, because way worse things would happen to them if we let them out of their jars, they would probably get stepped on or run over with a lawnmower or smushed on the windshield of a car and so on and so forth. It was better this way, because they just sort of went to sleep and they did not feel any pain at all.

But you know what? Even though Rachel said the bugs didn't have any feelings, I did not believe her because when I shut my eyes really tight I could hear them inside their jars making noises like they were screaming. And I do not mind telling you that the screaming became even louder screaming and it was making my head hurt, like someone stuck a fork in there and started mashing up the part of me that was my brain, so when Rachel went inside the house to get some Kool-Aid to drink I grabbed the first jar I could see and lifted the rock off of the lid and opened it up. Inside the jar were three bees that were all tired and hiding under a leaf that was a leaf from the birch tree next to the picnic table. At first I was a little scared because bees can sting you but then I remembered that they will not do this unless they are Bees under Attack. But these bees, which were our bees in the jar, made very angry bee noises and then the first one flew out and stung at a spot on my hand and another one flew out and stung at a spot on my shoulder and another one flew out and stung at my eyelid. Then they were all very dead bees. So I picked them up and put them back in the jar and put the rock back on top of the jar and sat very, very still and waited for Rachel to come back out with her Kool-Aid. Let me tell you that I very much did not want Rachel to know this thing that I had done, that I had tried to make the bees free and that they had died anyway.

When Rachel came back out with her Kool-Aid, the first thing she saw was that the bees were dead. "See, Taylor," she said. "You just need to have a little more patience." She took the rock off the jar and opened the jar and shook the bees onto the ground while I just sat there watching her

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through one normal eye and one eye that was slowly becoming a very red and puffy eye. "They look so peaceful," she said, studying them as they lay there with their little legs all up in the air.

The next thing that happens is this: Rachel says, "Let's walk up to the bridge."

We are driving down North Street and I can see that the bridge is right in front of us, and I want to tell Rachel that we should drive over the bridge because outside of the window I can see three men standing on the side of the road and I do not want to get out of the car and have them try to talk to me or steal something from me. The men all have shopping carts that are filled up with empty pop bottles and other recyclables, and there are bags tied to their carts that are also full, and they are standing over a garbage can and it looks like maybe they are arguing about who gets to have the bottles that are inside. Except I cannot hear them arguing so it is possible that they are arguing about who will get to pull out the knife when they rob the next little girl who walks by them, and what nasty things they will do to her when they discover that she has no money.

I wonder if the men tried to rob me whether Rachel would try to save me. When I look over at her, I see that she is pulling hairs out of her head and then letting them fly out of the car on the wind. She is doing this with one hand while the other hand still grips the bottom of the steering wheel, but she is not looking at the road—she is looking at the hairs that she is pulling off of her head.

"It all comes apart so easily," she says to me when she sees me looking at her. "I feel like I could just pull my whole body apart." I want to ask Rachel what she means but then she has turned the corner onto Gottingen Street and pulled over to the side of the road and the car behind her honks really loudly because I do not think you are allowed to park your car where she has parked it, but Rachel just lets another hair fly away.

"Come on," she says after a minute. Her eyes are very bright and when she looks at me I get this feeling like she is not really looking at me but at something behind my head. I open the car door even though I am still worried about the men on the side of the street with shopping carts. They have stopped arguing and now one of them is coming toward me, and his cart is so full that it makes a big banging clashing noise as he pushes it over all the cracks in the sidewalk. He is wearing a green coat that makes him look like an army person and his hair is long and more matted and dirty even than Rachel's. He stops in front of the Miata and peers over the door and into the inside of the car.

"Nice wheels," he says. I do not say anything. Rachel does not say anything, either, because she is standing in the middle of the street staring at the bridge and I do not think that she hears him.

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Then he winks at me and walks away, whistling a little tune, and suddenly I feel very bad for thinking that he was going to rob me. And when I look at Rachel standing in the middle of the street and I look at the man walking down the sidewalk whistling a little tune, I have to tell you that even though most of me was happy to be with Rachel, a little tiny part of me would have rather gone with that man.

So what I do instead is, I think about how I am going to be the very first girl in the whole world to win the Dakar. I think about how maybe Luc Belliveau would teach me everything he knows about rally racing, because Alex and Sophie are good kids but they are not at all interested in cars. Alex is in little league and Sophie is going for her bronze medallion, and even though Judy is a good and kind woman who bakes cakes every Sunday and volunteers at the school library, she could never understand the thrill of racing across the desert and feeling all the different shapes of the earth through the steering wheel and into the palms of your hands, and hearing about me and my dream to be the very first girl in the whole world to win the Dakar has reminded him about how much he loves racing and how much he misses it, and he will decide to fly down here and find me at 21 Cherry Tree Hill and come inside and ignore everyone else in the room and come right over to me and say "Taylor, come with me!" and he will take me back to La Maison Baie Bleu, and Judy will hug me and Sophie will hold my hand and whisper secrets into my ear and Alex will pull my ponytail and then one day Luc Belliveau will take me outside, and hiding in a garage somewhere will be his old Toyota Celica GT-Four under an orange tarp with pine needles that have fallen all over it and we will drive through the countryside of Quebec and he will be my navigator and I will show him how I am such a good driver even though I am only eleven and how I know how to do the Scandinavian Flick and even how to do a handbrake turn and he will be so impressed and we will drive VRRRRMMMM through the countryside together VRRRMMMMM over hills and down dirt roads VRRRRMMMM around hairpin turns and up over rocks and down into big puddles VRRRRMMMMM, VRRRRMMMMM, VRRRRRMMMMM until I realize I am no longer sitting in the car anymore—I am on the sidewalk instead, and Rachel is still standing in the street and many cars are passing her and honking their horns.

Then I am not sure what to do because even though I do not get to go out in The City very often I do know that you are not supposed to stand in the middle of the street like Rachel is doing because a car might come along and hit you. So I just stand on the sidewalk for a few seconds and then finally Rachel walks out of the street but she walks to the other side of the street from where I am standing and then she just keeps walking toward the bridge as if she has forgotten all about me.

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I decide that I should follow Rachel but instead of walking out into the middle of the street I walk down the sidewalk to the corner where there is a traffic light and I wait at the corner for the little Walking Man to come up, which is how you know it is your turn to cross the street. I have to tell you I am feeling a little worried at this moment because even though I can see Rachel on the other side of the street, and even though there are two other people standing with me waiting for the little Walking Man, I feel like I am all alone. Most of all I am scared that I will lose sight of Rachel before the little Walking Man comes up. I am scared that she will walk up over the bridge and just disappear while I am just standing here like a stupid person, waiting for the light to change.

I have another secret. I made Mama lose on *The Million Dollar Question*.

I didn't want to make her lose. I wanted to make her win. I sat under the table while she practiced and soon I discovered that she was only getting 37% of the questions right, even the questions that I knew the answers to even though I am only a little girl. And then I started playing with her laces under the table and I was her Good Luck Charm and I would pull once on her laces if the answer was a) and twice on her laces if the answer was b) and so on and so forth, and then she started knowing all the answers to the questions and everything was okay and I knew she was going to win!

But she did not win, as you already know. And it is my fault because I made Mama think she was smart even though she is not. I made Mama think she was smart because there is no way her stupid daughter Taylor Marie Harnish would ever know the answers better than she would.

The light changes. I walk quickly across the street but I do not run because Mama once told me not to run across the street because I might trip and fall and then a car will drive right over me. When I reach the other side of the street, this is when I start to run. I run along the sidewalk that starts to go a bit uphill, and I realize that I am now running onto the bridge. There are cars driving past me on one side and once I make it up over the first little hump toward the middle very big hump I can look down and there is a space between the sidewalk and the road where I can see down to the underneath of the bridge. Let me tell you, this is a really weird feeling, as though you are flying, with that whole world underneath you, cars and people and dogs and birds and sidewalks and plants and dirt and air and so on and so forth. I am having a hard time running and trying to keep my eyes on Rachel because I cannot stop myself from looking down through that little empty strip and seeing that underneath world, and then all of a sudden, *poof*! The underneath world is gone and it is all blue.

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And I look up and then I stop, because I see that ahead of me, Rachel has stopped, right at the very highest point of the bridge between where there are these two towers that hold up all the big cables that are keeping the bridge from falling into the harbour.

Rachel is leaning with her arms across the railing looking out over the water. I start walking towards her again but really slowly because I am scared that she will start running away from me again and I do not want her to do that. I do not want her to run away from me again because then I might start to think that she does not really want me to be with her, and even if this is true, I do not want to know it, at least not yet. Maybe someday in the future she will say, "Hey Taylor, remember that day that we went to the bridge? Well, I really just wanted to be all by myself." But at that point it will be so far in the past that maybe instead of being sad about it, we will laugh about it, because we will probably be best friends by then.

I walk up beside Rachel and put my arms up on the railing the same way that she is doing, except I am much shorter than Rachel so I have to stand up on the first rung on the bottom of the railing in order to reach. Rachel is looking out over the water and so I look out over the water too and it is windy and I can feel the breath being pulled out of my lungs as I look and then there is the whole harbour in front of me, and it is so big that it fills up both of my eyes and I can look from side to side and still see it. I can see George's Island and MacNab's Island and all kinds of little boats, tugboats and sailboats with their big white sails and motorboats making little lines in the water behind them and big container ships and navy boats with their little flags flying and seagulls flying and other birds flying. I can see all the buildings all along the waterfront on both sides and more water and more water and more boats and clouds and sky and sky and sky and it is so beautiful you do not even understand how beautiful it is—it is so beautiful that for a second my eyes hurt just from looking at it and I have to turn away.

When I turn I see that Rachel has put her feet up on the bottom rung as well, but because she is so much taller than me it makes even more of her body rise up over the railing, and she is leaning forward with her arms open and for a second I think she is going to jump and even though at this moment you would think that I would be thinking about Rachel and whether or not she is going to jump, I am not even thinking about Rachel at all. Instead of thinking about Rachel and whether or not she is going to jump, I am wondering what my life would be like if Gabe was alive. I wonder if we would have bunk beds and Gabe would sleep on the top bunk and then I would sleep on the bottom bunk staring at the dent that his body made in the springs, instead of sleeping on the pull-out couch in the basement like I do now.

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I wonder if Gabe would stick up for me at school when the other kids called me a retard, if he would come down off his top bunk at night and climb into the bottom bunk with me when I had that nightmare about the giant bee with the ripped wings that crawls up between my legs. I wonder if Gabe was alive if Mama and Daddy would love me, instead of being mad at me all the time for being the one who is alive, and that maybe everyone would be better, Mama would win on her game shows and Daddy would never have been in the Accident at Work and Rachel would not be so mad at everyone all the time.

But then I think that maybe if Gabe was alive then I would not have those nightmares at all, and I would not get called a retard at school. Maybe if Gabe was alive I would be able to talk like a normal person. And then I get very scared because I don't know who I would be without all of these things that are part of me. I wouldn't even know who Taylor Marie Harnish is at all. Sometimes I think that I am glad Gabe is not alive and then I hate myself very much for thinking that.

So it is good luck for me that Rachel does not jump. Instead, she looks back at me and says "Do you think that they could see us from Cherry Tree Hill?"

I shake my head.

"But we could see the bridge from there, right?" She squints her eyes and looks to the west which is in the direction of Cherry Tree Hill, and I look that way too, but all there is to see are other buildings that are not our house or any of the houses on Cherry Tree Hill. "You'd think we could see it from here."

But it was the tippy top of the bridge we could see, not the bottom where the cars drive, so I raise my hand in the air and point up.

Rachel tilts her head back. "Good idea, Taylor," she says and her voice sounds very soft because most of it is carried away by the wind except for a very little part of it that makes it all the way over to me. She moves down the railing and I move down the railing after her until we are both standing underneath one of the big towers that hold up the cables that keep the bridge from falling into the harbour. Underneath the cables there are supports that come down from the top of the cables to the railing that we are leaning against, and they are shaped just like narrow green ladders with rungs going across them and everything and then all of a sudden I know what Rachel is going to do. By the time I reach her, she has climbed up on the bottom railing again and is looking out over the water, and then she reaches up for the lowest rung and grabs it with her hands, pulling it a little as if she is trying to see if it will break. Then without looking at me, she raises her other hand and she points at the support next to hers and she says this:

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"You take that one, Taylor. I'll race you to the top."

And then she is moving up and up and up, and all I can see are the dirty bottoms of her feet. "Rachel," I say, and the word feels like glue in my throat, and it hurts and makes me want to cough, but I say it, I say it and it sounds like the word I want it to sound like, but Rachel doesn't hear it because the wind takes it away before it reaches her. The wind takes away the word it has taken me eleven years to learn how to say.

Originally from Halifax, **AMY JONES** is a graduate of the MFA Program in Creative Writing at UBC. Her short fiction has appeared in several Canadian publications, and she was the winner of the 2006 CBC Literary Award for Short Story in English. Her first short fiction collection, *What Boys Like* (Biblioasis, 2009) was the winner of the 2009 Metcalf-Rooke Award, and was short-listed for the 2010 ReLit Award. Amy currently lives in Thunder Bay, where she is working on a novel.

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KEVIN HARDCASTLE

BANDITS

The day I turned eighteen we drank a keg of beer between the five of us and let out over the frozen bay in our sleds. Pa on the lead machine with a pump shotgun strapped to the seat, the barrel fitted with a full-choke. His two younger brothers trailing, whooping and swerving wild on the ice over six inches of snow that fell since early evening. My cousin Ronnie coasted wide on his older sled. He had turned twenty-one in the Hillcrest pen. Ronnie was twenty-five now and he was like my brother. Even more so because Pa would thump him silly on the front lawn when he mouthed off or otherwise goaded the big man enough to warrant some violence.

There was a storm coming from the north and you could see the black clouds rolling even against the lesser black of the moonlit sky. Thunder from the heavens and did it ever fucking boom. Next came bolts of white-blue lightning. Smell of electric all over. The snow came down heavy. It looked to me like the end of the world. We passed between two fishing huts and crossed to the other side of the bay, close to the big houses and cottages planted there. Most of them were empty for the season. They were summer homes for people from the city or second houses for the richest in town. Pa throttled down and so did we all. Crept up rumbling aside a fine cedarwood house with great bay windows, boathouse half as big as our actual house.

Pa turned and untethered the shotgun. Loaded it with double-aught buck and racked a round. He let fly like a marauder on horseback and blasted out two of the front windows. Loaded up again and pulled. Spitfire leapt from the barrel and siding from the west corner of the house blew out in a cloud of jagged timber. Pa gunned it and took off, shotgun held high over his head. He had pocketed his gloves to shoot, and from close by I could see the meatclub that he called his right hand, fingers around the scattergun stock, dark blue ridges of scar tissue and maroon gunk at his skin-split knuckles.

At four in the morning we were back at the house, the living room and kitchen in ruin. Pa kept it clean for the most part. It surprised the hell out of people when they came by, expecting a certain measure of filth and disarray. He'd not ever moved any of ma's knick-knacks, pictures, the crosses up on the wall. All were polished and pretty. I didn't have no mother because she died of a brain

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aneurysm in the middle of the public library, checking out books about eastern rattlesnakes for me for school. I was fourteen. You couldn't set a beer bottle on the coffee table without a coaster or Pa would smash you upside the head with those hamhock mitts of his. You couldn't until the weekend, or a night like this one. And then the place went fairly direct to the boundaries of manmade chaos. By the end of that night there were two of Pa's brothers passed out in our living room. Funhouse versions of my Pa. Uncle Dan on a short couch, his long tree-trunk legs hooked over the end. Uncle Dougie in a chair that extended out with a footrest, spider limbs stretched long, littlest finger of his right hand but a stump. Me and Ronnie were still up, pickled as could be. Pa sat heavy on his armchair with a bottle of rye in his lap.

"I didn' know you'ld get lightin'n a snowstore," Ronnie said.

"Well you know it now, eh dipshit? Or you better 'cause you just seen it."

Ronnie made a sour face and his head lolled. Dad leaned out of his seat and got hold of Ronnie by the shirt collar.

"I hear any of this gets back to your mother and I'll beat the living shit out of you."

"I never talk at her 'bout anythin'."

Pa slapped him lightly across the cheek.

"Good," he said. "Lord knows that woman's been through enough. We gotta look after her."

Monday morning the cops came by. Two cruisers rolled up the drive and parked. Constables took their time getting out. I was up eating cold fried chicken at the table and set it down to watch them think about how they were gonna come at the house. One of the cops wasn't Ronnie's age yet and he had his thumb on the clasp of his gun holster. An older cop from the first car turned and saw him. This was a man we knew, tall and thick and beer-bellied, gone grey a long time ago. He stared the young cop down. The young cop didn't seem to know what he was doing.

"You wanna get your fuckin' hand off that pistol," the big cop told him.

So he did.

The big cop pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and middle finger, rubbed his eyes. He walked slow to the front steps. Hitch in his step where he'd taken buckshot to the knee as a younger man. The fresh cop followed. I could see the other two start to prowl around either side of the house.

"Don't go far," the big cop said. "I'm tellin' yous."

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They came back.

The cop all but filled the doorframe, rapped his knuckles hard against the naked wood of our screen door.

"That you, Charlie?" he said.

"Yep," I said.

"Is your dad around?"

"Who's askin'."

The cop took of his cap, scratched at his scalp.

"Just get him for me, will ya?"

I went down the hall and opened the door to the garage. Hollered for my Pa over some sixties metal he was blasting, the even louder whine of an industrial drill. I flicked the lights on and off and the high-pitched drill screech wound lower. The stereo shut off. Pa came out from behind the stripped out frame of an old Mercury coupe and walked over, all six-foot three inches and two hundred and forty pounds of him. He had brick dust in his beard and all over his shirtfront.

"One day you do that shit I'm gonna drill something I ain't meant to drill. And you'll be all the sorer for it."

"Fuckin' cops are here."

He stared at me, took up a rag and wrung his hands. He nodded. Came up the short steps and into the house. We were eye to eye when he put his huge mitts on either of my shoulders and guided me outta the way. I had his height but by God he was the stronger man by far and I couldn't catch up quick enough.

The cop waited at the end of the porch, leaning heavy against the deck rail. He heard us coming and said something to the other cops. Pa opened the screen door and stood there.

"Francis," he said.

"Rick," the cop said. "Long time."

"Not long enough. What's up?"

They stared at each other. I could see the big cop started to smirk a little.

"Somebody shot up the chief's lakehouse. Banged holes in the place with double-aught buck. Probably lit it up from the ice."

"Did they?"

"You know anybody that might do somethin' like that?"

"I know all kinds of people that might."

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Later on we were on the way over to Ronnie's place. His mom, my aunt Colette, was fixing us some dinner. We walked the broken-up tarmac of our road, tall firs on either side, pine needles all over the fringe where we trod. It had gone awful fucking cold all of a sudden and I hadn't worn the coat for it. Pa stepped long over the drainage ditch at the roadside and started down a trail through the woods, snow in there flattened by sled runs.

"We shoulda drove," I said. "It's fuckin' freezin' out here."

"It's two minutes away by the path," he said. "Quit your bitchin'."

He had a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of wine in either hand, paper bags crushed and creased over the glass by his bare fingers. The cold didn't seem to bother him ever.

"The cops gonna be a problem?" I asked him. "Them that came by?"

"Nope."

"I went to school with the one of them, the pretty-boy, flat-top fucker by the cruiser. He was in his last year when I was in my first. Thinks he's fuckin' God's gift."

"Uh huh."

"I was just gonna tell old Francis at the door to fuck off. Thought that's what you might say, too."

My Pa slowed but he didn't stop. Through narrow breaks in the wood I could see the yellow porch light from my aunt's house. A dog started barking. Clatter of its chain as it tried to get clear of the yard. We turned off the main trail and walked a narrow line toward the place.

"Don't be stupid, son," Pa said.

"How's that?"

"I known that man for near forty years. Since you weren't even a notion. He ain't out there to be a cowboy. He's reliable. Reliable in what he won't do when he's got nothin' on you and reliable in what he will do if he does."

"He just looks like some other cop to me."

"That's because you got shit for brains yet."

"Hey."

"They send cops all like your GI Joe high school buddy and somebody might get shot."

"But not your pal, Francis?"

"He's already been shot. Most men don't get to say that."

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He wouldn't talk to me no more after that. We cleared the woods and went through the side yard and that tethered up mutt came flying at us. Pa stopped it with a look and an outstretched hand, one sausage finger pointing at it from around the whiskey bottle. When we got up on the step he knocked and backhanded the other bottle into my guts. Looked over his shoulder at me.

"Guests bring a fuckin' offerin'," he said. "Make yourself useful."

Near daybreak I woke up with a hangover and a wicked case of dry-mouth. Headache stirring behind my ears. My jeans were still on and I was shivering under my one blanket, the others all piled up on the floor. I went to the bathroom to piss, stepping light on the cold bathroom tiles. Then I walked down to the kitchen for some water and aspirin. When I passed my Pa's room the door was open, the bed made. The old bastard wasn't anywhere to be found.

When I woke up the second time morning was almost spent. I could smell fried-up bacon and coffee at brew. Pa was at the kitchen table with the radio on. He had a platter in front of him with toast crumbs and traces of egg yellow on it. They were playing out the end of a shitty country tune. He turned the volume up.

"There any breakfast for me?" I said.

"There is if you make it. Now quiet down."

The local weatherman told the forecast in his bumpkin rasp. We'd hit minus thirty overnight and it was gonna stay cold through the week. Snow to follow heavy starting early Thursday evening. Pa clapped his hands loud.

"Get yourself a good'un, kid, and eat up. We all got work to do."

We left out from the house at midnight Thursday. All five of us on our sleds. The two best of them, my Pa's machine and the one his brother Dan rode, they were fitted up with custom tow trailers. Not much more than rude metal boxes with old sled skis welded to the bottom. There were blankets piled up in each and tarpaulin pinned there by rig winch-straps. Pa went first across the ice, led by a good distance and told us stay back a-ways. His rig was the heaviest, and were he to go through, he didn't want us following him down in the deep.

At a point Pa signaled and his youngest brother, Doug, gunned it and took off. He passed the lead sled and kept on until his reflectors were small and then lost to the black. We were all dressed in heavy snow gear, facemasks under our visored helmets. The wind found its way through by nooks and crannies. Cold enough to shrink your sack and make you turn around. Nobody

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thought on it and if they did they would never have said so. We crossed the ice single file and gapped a good ways between. I couldn't see shit and didn't have a clue where we were at, but Pa did. He knew where the shoreline sat before his headlights showed it. He slowed up and so did we. His sled climbed up a rise and the trailer skittered behind. One by one we left the ice and started down a tree-bound sled trail. They were woods like ours but not all the way, being that we'd driven clear into the next township.

The liquor store sat in a clearing beside the single lane highway. We came at it from the other side, not a house or traveler met on the way. Pa led us slow to the edge of the site backlot and there we let the sleds idle. The store was really three trailers joined longways, rested on top of three-foot tall concrete supports. One rectangular floodlight shone pale from a fixture atop the middle section. It snowed steady now and the highway lanes beyond were rotten with white, but the plough hadn't passed in hours by the looks of it. Pa whistled loud by his thumb and forefinger. Not two seconds later a flashlight sparked from beside the trailer. Twice more. Pa took his sled down the grade into the clearing, pulled up on the forest side of the trailer. Uncle Dougie came out from the shadow and went over to talk to the big man. After a couple of seconds Pa waved us down. He got up from the sled and unlatched part of the tow trailer tarp and reached in. Came out with a portable acetylene torch rig, cylinders fixed inside a metal bracket, the hoses and torch nozzle pinned to the side of it. I walked over and took it. He went back under the tarp.

My uncle Dan had gone out to watch the road, flashlight in hand. Ronnie was working the winch-straps loose and clearing the tarp from Dan's sled tow.

"Get this fucker next," Pa said to him, pointing at his own rig.

"Sure thing."

Pa looked over at me.

"Come with me, son," he said.

We walked around to the front of the place. Short stairwell leading to a metal security door, round knob on the right side with a deadbolt keyhole cylinder not far above it. There were windows in the front of the thing and they were aglow in the blues and reds of neon beer signs. The open sign was dark. Uncle Doug took his coat off and his snowpants, had a fire-proof jumpsuit on under his gear. He put a welding bucket on and gloved up. Pa stood there with a twelve-pound sledge dangling from his bearclaw by the handle. He looked back to the road and whistled again. The flashlight lit up and went dark twice.

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"Get goin'," he said. "Quick to it."

Dougie went up the stairs with the torch rig and opened up the cylinder valves, oxygen first then the acetylene, opened up the acetylene control valve on the torch, lit it with the striker. Fierce yellow flame fired from the nozzle. He turned the oxygen valve on the torch handle and tempered that flame to a straight and even blue line. He started the cut high up around the deadbolt and doorknob. Then went to the hinges on the left of the thing. Sparks flew wild and lit tiny glow-fires in the wooden decking that Uncle Doug worked from. When he turned off the torch and cleared out there were angry red lines in the door.

"What d'ya think?" Pa said. "Will she go?"

Uncle Doug just took off the helmet and smiled at him.

"You and your fuckin' cousin better bring those trailered sleds around front," Pa said to me.

After that he stomped heavy up the stairs and wound up with the sledge, hit the door good and low. The whole thing shifted in from the framing and then started to topple outward.

The way back home was long and cold and seemed like to never end, no matter the adrenaline and the whiskey we'd slung back before setting out, saddled low with case upon case of cargo. We ran in one line again and farther apart yet than we'd come. Snow fell hard around us, lonely world of ice and narrow lamp beams. Ronnie tried to hoot and holler early on in the trip but it was lost on the wind. He was awful quiet by the time we saw the opposite shore. I tried to make out our earlier tracks but they were long gone and there would not be a trace of our night travels for anyone to see come morning. Even the bonfire that we lit later in our yard—fuelled with branded cardboard boxes, Styrofoam peanuts, plastic and packing tape—lay as but a volcano-holed mound when the sun came up to snowblind those poor working souls that rose with it.

By late winter we had gone as far as Parry Sound for new quarry, and we'd come back and hit two of the same liquor stores again. Pa listened to the radio day and night and was often out watching the skies and the stars like they would tell him something secret about when and where to go next. In times of thaw he worked long hours on the sleds and bikes and his old Mercury. So was his claim to a legitimate mechanics business.

We ate a lot of dinners at Aunt Colette's and less and less did Ronnie provoke profanities out of my old man. Pa even took the guy out shooting and they brought home a ten-point buck with one side of its rack blown to pieces by Ronnie, a good deal of the meat ruined and lousy with

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buckshot. Pa cut what he could and sent it down the road to Aunt Colette. He would not let Ronnie keep the half-rack. He left it in my bed as a joke when he was drunk and I found it drunk and pitched it out into the woods while I was taking a piss off our back deck.

In the papers, they called us booze bandits. I had a chuckle at that and Pa never got tired of reading it. He would save me the clippings. After we robbed a trailer out in Port McCall, Pa had gone out for the paper bright and early and woke me up to read it. He'd drunk nearly all of a forty pounder of rye and hadn't slept a wink.

"You see our friend the chief got a statement in the fuckin' paper?"

"I do now," I said.

"Says he's lookin' at leads. All kinds of fuckin' leads he says."

"Yeah?"

"Then he next says that they're lookin' for any information from citizens with any goddamn information."

"Yeah?"

"You know what the means, Charlie, you little shit?"

"Not yet."

"Means they ain't got no fuckin' goddamn leads."

With spring we lost the ice on the lake and the trails in the woods and there went the business for the season. The sleds were stowed and stored and what little of the booze that hadn't been sold or shipped far was wrapped and buried in a grown-over gravel pit way back in the barrens. I took a job drivin' the delivery truck for the FoodTown, our one crap supermarket. Sometimes I took extra shifts stocking shelves. I had tried for a job in the next town over, with the golf courses and marinas, but that didn't pan out. When they saw my name they'd stiffen up and ask who my folks were. So I told them. That was about as far as I got before their eyes glazed over.

I had a busted old pickup that Pa helped me get on the road. Bought from a local fella for three cases of good whiskey and the promise that if ever the origin of that whiskey was told to cops there'd be a house on fire in the foothills with the owner still inside. I drove that truck to work every morning and it looked like hell but ran like a champ. Hotter days settled in by June and I had to drive shirtless with the windows pinned down so as not to sweat through my work clothes before I got to the fucking supermarket.

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By and by I met a girl who worked at the deli counter. Dirty blonde hair and blue eyes and an anklet tattoo. She still went to the high school I'd just come out of. She said I was once her peer tutor in biology, but I didn't remember her as she would've been but fourteen and didn't ever say a word back then. Her name was Claire. We got stuck working Saturday mornings sometimes and she looked prettier still for all her hangovers and ragged ponytails and tired eyes with no make up. One such morning I'd come in late and had to go out behind the back of the place and puke my guts out all over the fresh-laid asphalt in the back lot. I came in for a hose to wash it down and when I was done she watched me curious as I swiped a travel-size bottle of mouthwash and walked back through the store to the bathroom at back.

At my lunch break I lay half-awake in the driver's seat of the truck, windshield blocked out by a cover that reflected the sunlight back out. It was still Goddamned hot. I'd found a warm bottle of beer underneath the seat and had it in my hand with a ball cap over top. I took a drink and then looked out the window to make sure there wasn't anybody out there who'd dime me out. As I was scoping the place I heard the small shuffle of sneakers on the pavement but it didn't register.

"Hey," she said loud.

I near leapt out of my skin and grabbed hold of the wheel with my free hand. When I turned Claire was standing there in the passenger window, slender fingers on the window frame, pale blue eyes staring at me.

"Jesus fuckin' Christ," I said.

"Rough one today, huh?"

I shuffled in the seat and waved the beer around like I might find somewhere to put it.

"Can I have a sip?" she said.

"Warm as piss," I said.

"Lovely. But I'll give it a go."

Claire reached over and took the bottle from me and took a good pull. She didn't look around to check if anyone saw her. She handed the bottle back and I rested it on my leg. She had faint sweat marks on her shirt where her collarbones met, little wisps of hair stuck flat below her ears.

"When you workin' 'til?" she said.

"Three."

"You think you could give me a lift home?"

"Okay."

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"Don't you need to ask where I live?"

"Where d'you live?"

She smiled.

"Just on the south side of town. Near the grain elevators."

"Alright."

"You live out in the harbour, right? You sure it ain't out of your way?"

"I'm not in no hurry to get back out there."

Through that summer I drove Claire home every shift we worked together. Never straight there. We often drove out to the pier-head at the far end of town, where the fishing was bad from the factories and thick tree cover blocked you from the road. She kissed deep, fast-tongued. Sometimes so hard it hurt my top gums. I'd put my hand down her pants and try to work at an angle with the cab armrest in the way. Sometimes she'd let me figure things out myself by the way she moved and the sounds she made and how hard she took hold of my forearm when I got it right. Sometimes she'd tell me what to do and how and she wasn't shy about it. And when she climbed over and sat straggle-legged on me, hair hanging down at my ears, warm breath at my forehead as we tried to get the necessary garments off, I could barely stop my heart from beating a hole through my chest. Whether you called that feeling love or not I could still live off it for a good long time.

Summer stretched long that year. Too hot and dry enough to nearly rout bumper crops on farms at town's edge. Sunbaked soil under row upon row of stunted plant lines between concession roads. There was a fire ban on. Boats had their outboards torn out in shallowed channels around the bay. When fall came at last it stayed but weeks and then cold rain started to fall. Colder and colder and the first snowfall early in October. Snow banks two-feet high aside the town roads while kids trudged brave through the white on Halloween, ghouls and goblins in winter boots. I went to work at the FoodTown still, hammering the heater with my palm when it stalled out. The truck never took more than two turns of the key to fire the engine. When I left in the mornings now, Pa was not in the garage at his cars and he wasn't in his bed sleeping it off. He was either down the road at Aunt Colette's and Ronnie's or he was at the kitchen table in his skivvies, listening to the radio.

Me and Ronnie were sent to the scrappers, deep in the backcountry. I had to put chains on my truck tires. It took the whole day but we made it back around suppertime with a bed full of parts. At the

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house the sun set red through gaps in the wood, lit the frozen roadway in weird colours. Thick wood smoke rose from the chimney cap, hanging like a fog. The garage door was open and Pa sat a deckchair at the head of the drive with a beer in his hand, the shop stereo spitting news and weather. He wore just his boots and coveralls, wool sweater underneath. Watched us come up like we were travelling salesmen.

"How'd we do?" he said.

"Got everythin' you told us to."

"Okay."

"He would've took a case less for it, but Ronnie piped up."

Pa's bottom lip curled so that his beard covered all of his mouth. He turned to where Ronnie stood in the garage, already at the shop-fridge with his hand on a bottle of beer. Ronnie straightened up and his mouth opened a little.

"Good," Pa said to Ronnie. "Good for you, son."

Ronnie nodded and cracked the beer. He couldn't help himself from smiling. I just shook my head. Pa turned to me.

"Why would ya pay a man less than he's owed if he's fair to trade with and a friend to fuckin' boot?"

"I wasn't tryin' to stiff the guy. Just tryin' to get us a better trade."

"Well, next time just follow Ronnie's lead and trade what yous are fuckin' told to trade. All right?"

I was about to say something else but it just gave up halfway and came out as a puff of air over my lips. I went to the fridge and got a beer and Ronnie leaned up against the dropcloth of the Mercury. I thought he would catch a slap for that one but Pa barely bristled. I started for the garage stairs to the house and got as far as the first step.

"We got work to do startin' early tomorrow," Pa called to me over his shoulder.

"I'm at the FoodTown in the mornin'."

"Nope. You are retired."

"I can't just fuckin' not show up ever again."

He sat up and turned.

"You go there tomorrow an' I'll come in bare-assed and knock the teeth out your manager's head in front of all your buddies. And your pretty girl."

"Fuck," I said.

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"Now both of you pull up a chair here with the old man. We got plenty to discuss before the mornin' comes."

We hit the first store toward the end of that month. Three in the morning with a portable halogen lamp shining eerie light from the underside of the trailer. Uncle Doug cut through the wooden baseboards with a jigsaw and pulled the insulation matting clear. Cut through the actual flooring and climbed inside. I went in after. We lowered boxes down through the opening onto long sleighs made from the hood metal of old cars. They were pulled clear and emptied and slid back until the tow trailers were half-sunk to the ground. Before we let out, Dougie got back under the store with a pair of two-by-fours and set the flooring again, bolted it in. He shoveled the insulation back into the gap and wedged the sawed base panel back before shimmying away.

The next four liquor trailers went staggered, two local stores with a few weeks between them. Then two stores at a three-hour ride to the northeast and three-hour ride back, and those robberies done but three days apart. We had to lug fuel so that we wouldn't have to stop. The cold near crippled us and some of the sleds struggled over the length. We did both of those jobs with Doug on the torch and when we got back from the second job he sat bone-chilled by our wood fire with his hands burnt and bruised. He had good whiskey and water in a tall glass and drank through a straw.

"Why in fuck did we do those two like that again?" he said.

Dad got out of his armchair and knelt by the fire. Took up his brother's hands in his own and kneaded the joint muscles, careful by the little stump.

"Two jobs in a row with that kind of gear to haul makes it look local."

"What?"

"Local to there, Dougie."

On the next job me and Ronnie went through the roadside windows of a store in the next county with a sledge and fire-axe. Made a godawful mess of the place. Ronnie cleared the framing with the axe and boosted me in, handed up the sledge. The alarms squealed loud enough to blow your eardrums. I carried the hammer to the front door and swung near the knob. Blew the hasp clear out from the jamb and let the door swing and come back. Ronnie came in and split the alarm siren with the axe and it warbled low and quit. We worked double-quick to load the booze and fire up the sleds. Tore through the bush to our home county but a half-hour away.

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Constable Francis came by the house the next afternoon. He carried his girth around back to where my Pa shoveled a blackened slush heap into a wheelbarrow for me to haul. We could see the big man coming by his gait but he wore only jeans and flannel, a ball cap on his huge head. Pa stared at him for a second and then kept on shoveling.

"I can't remember when I last seen you outta your blues, Francis," Pa said.

"Sometimes I change outta them. For church and the like."

"It ain't Sunday."

"I hear Jesus saves any day of the goddamned week now."

Pa smiled. He planted the shovelhead in the muck.

"What the fuck's he doin'?" I said.

"Shut up," said Pa.

Francis studied me calmly from across the yard.

"Heard you got a job at the FoodTown?" he said to me.

"I did."

"You ain't got work today?"

"I quit."

"Oh?"

"He's helping me round the shop," Pa said.

Francis nodded.

"What is it you want exactly?" Pa said.

"I need to talk to ya, Rick."

"As a cop or as a regular person?"

Francis stood up tall as he could get and eyeballed my dad.

"Don't be a fool," he said.

Pa stared at Francis a long time. Then he handed me the shovel and said he'd be back. They left out together in Francis' car and they were gone for hours.

By nightfall the old man was back and full of whiskey, stink of bar-room sweat in his clothes. He sat heavy at the kitchen table and fumbled with the radio. Those massive digits gently turning the dials. He had not uttered more than a grunt.

"He knows, don't he?" I said.

Pa grumbled, took a drink.

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"The cops got nothin'. 'Bewildered' is how he put it. But they're ready to start casting out in any direction just out of pure fuckin' embarrassment."

"What's that mean?"

"You see any cars parked in the road of a night, you let me know."

I picked Claire up from her house. She had her hair teased out and let down and wore jeans and a girl's golf shirt. Little make-up to colour her pale cheeks, faintest eye-shadow. She hustled out to the truck and tried to put her jacket on as she went. When she got in she kissed me long and tasted like wine and bubblegum.

Aunt Colette had roast chicken and potatoes ready in the oven when we got there. I led Claire in through the side door where the yard-bound mutt licked at her hand. Colette peeked over from the stove when we came in. Red haired and tall with thick, strong arms. Slippered feet on the linoleum.

"Charlie, you are late," she said.

"Sorry Aunt Col."

She studied the both of us. Took a long look at Claire. She smiled and cocked a thumb toward the sitting room.

"Animals are in back," she said, eyes on Claire yet. "Honey. You can stay here with me."

Claire took to all of them like nothing. She talked to Aunt Colette about what it was like in the high schools now and she talked to Ronnie about her older sister, Karen. Ronnie said Karen probably wouldn't remember him but Claire said she did. She talked to her last week. The sister lived out west now. Ronnie nodded solemn but he got a charge out of the whole thing. Pestered Claire throughout the meal. Pa said little until he was done eating. He waited for us all to finish and took all the plates to the kitchen. Came back with a good bottle of whiskey and set it by the wine on the table. Pa poured a glass and slid it down to Ronnie. Then he leaned in toward Claire.

"This here Irish wine is better than the girly stuff sittin' there," he said. "Don't know if you got the taste for it."

"I could have a small one," Claire said.

Pa poured the glass quarter-full without looking at it. Claire took it and Colette squinted her eyes at the girl, looked down at her placemat for a second. Pa sent me a half-glass and poured his glass full to the brim.

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"To Claire," he said, raising the thing thimble-like between him thumb and forefinger. "May her luck with men improve by the day."

Ronnie busted out laughing until I backhanded him at the shoulder. We all drank. Claire downed the stuff in one slow gulp and set the glass down. Not a twitch or shudder. Pa smiled a little.

"What's your dad do for a livin', Claire?" he said.

"He works at the TRW. Runs the floor for the morning shift."

Dad nodded.

"What'd he say when you told him you were comin' out for dinner?"

"Try to be back by midnight."

"Yous aren't from here, originally?" he said.

Claire shifted, ran her hair back behind her ear.

"Moved here when I was ten. Dad is from Rochester and my mom's from Niagara Falls."

My Pa poured himself another whiskey. Tipped another small one into Claire's glass. He winked at her.

"She's a good'un, son," he said.

Claire helped Aunt Colette with the dishes for a few minutes until Col told her to grab me and get along. I got up from the couch and gave Ronnie the finger. He tried to swat it out of the air. Pa sat heavy in an armchair and he saluted lazily at me as I went. Barely did he look up. We left the house and my aunt watched us by the lamplight at the side door. Claire kept looking back and waving. My aunt held a hand up.

The truck rumbled heavy on snowed-over ruts in the forest lane. Pine branches whapped along the edges of the windshield and brushed the length of the truck. Out we came into a clearing, the ground under two feet of snow. Nothing there but the hoof prints of a wayward deer, twinned rabbit tracks. I pulled up crooked on a shield rock plateau that fell five feet to frozen water. To the right stood a set of falls that spilled yet and broke thin-formed slates of ice over and over. There was a six-pack of tallboys by Claire's feet. She pulled one and popped the tab, took a drink. She saw that the armrest at the bench-middle had been taken out, moorings and all. Then she handed the can over to me and pulled her shirt up over her head.

Not too long afterward we lay there on the bench with the windows all afog. There was little room to move and I'd had to shift toward the dash, thighs pressed up against the steering wheel and

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my ass halfway off the seat-cushion. The heater had gone again but nobody noticed until our breath started to hang in the air. I bashed the console once with the underside of my fist and the fans whirred.

Claire shuffled her elbows along my chest until she had propped herself up there, eyes fixed on a fat collarbone scar I'd earned at five years old. I felt the curve of her back with the rough flat of my hand. Asked her what was the matter.

"We gotta be more careful," she said.

"Okay."

"I'm on the pill. But I'd rather be paranoid than barefoot and pregnant at seventeen."

"I hear ya," I said.

"You can never tell what might happen. Just look at your aunt."

My mouth opened to talk and then it shut up. I started to breathe so hard that the girl rose and fell a good four inches atop me. Claire looked into my eyes and took hold of my head firm with both hands.

"My God, Charlie," she said soft. "Didn't you know it?"

Out in the yard I stood with a bottle of whiskey upended and fixed to my lips. I drank deep and near had to take a knee before drinking again. Then I pitched the bottle at the house. It glanced off the siding and emptied on the narrow back porch, spinning oddly. I went up the steps and put a barbeque lighter to the spilt booze but it wouldn't take. I opened the back door and walked in.

Pa had settled into his armchair with a short glass in his hand and a few bottles of beer on the nearby side table. Otherwise, the house was immaculate. He looked up at me for just a second and then went back to watching the TV. I stooped down next to the fireplace, lifted a fifty-pound ceramic plant pot, soil and tree and all. I trod over and dropped it through the living room table. Dirt and shrapnel flew as the wooden tabletop slammed down to the carpet. Pa got to his feet like he was pulled by cables and I stepped over the mess and drove him back against the wall with my shoulder. We careened off the paneling and went over the chair and then we were rolling on the carpet. Scrambling to our feet in front of the TV. He had me by the collar and cuffed me hard with an open hand. The weight of it stung me but I was at him again until he pitched backward and took out an entire length of shelving with our old pictures and postcards and framed letters from wars past, pages yellowed.

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In the centre of the room he stood tall, wheezing, hands half up. He could've killed me and we both knew it. I lunged and caught him on the jaw with an overhand right. Back and back he stepped, arms reaching while the walls came down around him. He did not fall. I saw him duck and bolt and then I was up by the ceiling fan, down on the floorboards with my guts afire and not a breath left in me. I swatted at his great and ugly face until he held my wrists.

"Calm down, son," he said.

We could have been minutes like that, or hours.

Mild weather settled in through late winter. The roads were clear for many weeks and snow lay but sparse on lawns and farm fields. Unlucky fishermen had their huts founder and collapse on the ice, or they came by of a morning to see a jagged, slush-filled hole and no more. Pa spent his days at Aunt Colette's and watched the round of her belly grow. He drank plenty and it never appeared that he'd slept. Ronnie didn't seem to know how to talk to me but the sentiment I got from him was just goddamned overwhelming joy. Like if we weren't brothers before I had no choice now. Dummy. Like we weren't before.

At the tail end of March we got one good cold snap, an Alberta clipper they called it, minus thirties in the day and bone-chillers overnight. Pa and his brothers were in the garage late hours and I started waking to fry-ups in the kitchen. Two platters at our little, barewood table. The old man would watch out of the corner of his eye to see if I'd eat or not. I did.

One morning Pa quit eating and put his elbows on the tabletop, wrapped one busted hand with the other and looked at me.

"We're gonna take another run."

"Ice ain't thick enough," I said.

"This cold'll last another week. After that, season's up. We gotta go."

"When?"

"Early Sunday mornin'."

"The ice ain't thick enough.

He just shrugged and went back to his breakfast. I wolfed what I could in the five minutes I could stand to sit there and then I cleaned the plate and set it by the sink. Got my coat and hat and went out the front door, down to the truck with my boots unlaced. I drove the length of our street with my teeth rattling in my head. I'd done laps of dirt road by the time the heat kicked in. I parked atop a rise just north of us and from there I could see clear to Aunt Colette's house.

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Of course I went with my Pa for that run in the bitter fucking cold. We set out to rob a trailer at county's edge, a triple-jointed sucker again and we went in messy, no need for the torch or the industrial saws. It snowed light and stopped while we scooped out the cargo. I did not like that. Pa had planned for it. Ronnie helped breach the place and then he took off on Dan's loaded-up cargo sled, following the shoreline as close as he could, where the ice was thicker by inches. At a paved launch near to the far shoreline a U-Haul sat with a box big enough to carry the two cargo sleds, a ramp that lowered to the ground. The other sleds would ride long trails and switchbacks and cut across lengths of county road, down dirt paths where the frozen clay pack would take no marks.

By the time we got the second tow trailer loaded Dan was already pegging it across the front lot, screaming bloody murder, but we couldn't make it out. Before he made it over we could hear the sirens. Faint as a whistling breeze but getting louder by the second. Pa mounted his sled and rode up over the trailhead lip, careful until he made it onto the trail proper. All of the gear and booze went with him into the dark. Dan and Doug followed and I brought up the rear and stopped just inside the path, got off my sled and used a length of busted plywood to shovel over the snow at the trail gap. I threw it sidelong into the woods and hopped onto my sled. Gunned it for the bay.

I seen my uncles ahead like two cat's eyes, my own headlamp shining at their back reflectors. They got bigger and bigger. I tried to look back to shore but I was going like a rocket and couldn't bring myself to turn entire. The near naked ice played hell on the sled-skis and my arms were already bone-sore. I held the handlebars as hard as I could. Up ahead, the two lead sleds were bigger and bigger and then one of the shapes took a cut to the side and it was off the goddamn surface, swelling and narrowing in size and casting light like a flashlight thrown and spiraling. Then all I could see was the brake lights of the other sled and a round circle of shadow atop the ice that got bigger awful quick as I closed on it.

My Uncle Doug lay sideways on the ice with his arms pinned between his thighs, like he had to take a piss. His right leg had been turned at an impossible angle and was too long by inches. I got off the sled and slid over on my knees. His helmet had a nasty gouge out of it and the visor was gone. I shook him and could see his eyelids twitch by the headlamp light that spilled over us. Uncle Dan had wheeled around and now he pulled up and got off his sled. For a second he just stood there with his helmet in his hand. Then he dragged me up by my armpit, turned me to where we'd come from. Far out in the black there were lines of blue light shifting every which way.

"Go on, Charlie," he said. "I'll carry him. Tell your Pa what happened."

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Not a half-mile gone, I came upon my Pa, standing on the ice beside his idling sled. He held his hand up for me to stop, about twenty feet out. He had his helmet off and his facemask at his neck. Frost clung to his beard. His one arm hung low at his backside and I could see the shotgun steel behind the leg. When he saw it was only me he set the gun down on the seat of his sled and came over by long strides.

"Where's the boys?" Pa said.

"Doug's sled caught a rut in the ice, threw him."

"Jesus."

"He was out when I left 'em. Uncle Dan told me to go on. Said they'd be along directly."

The big man turned and hustled to his sled. He came back with the shotgun and had me hold it while he fixed his mask and put his bucket on, opened the visor. He stared at me. Took the gun.

"Get up, son," he said.

I cleared off of my machine.

"Head for the shore on my sled. When you get there don't you wait on us. Ronnie'll want to wait but you knock him out if you got to and drive on."

"Dad."

"Do not go home 'til I come for ya."

He settled heavy on my sled and took off, circled wide and started back across the ice. The skies had cleared and a sliver of moon shone meagre above us. Tiny lamplight at either shore where people had cut their homes. Treetop shadows like thousands of bottom-row teeth. Pa but a scrap in the white as he sped away.

We waited as long as we could, but then we did go home. By the pale daybreak. On foot and frozen through to the bone, shuffling side by side through the thick of the wood. Ronnie couldn't keep it up so we found the sled-trail and walked the old, ice-hardened tracks. At the back fringe of my yard we crouched behind trees and watched the sun come up, scouted the place and saw not a sign of life.

The fire would not burn high enough for Ronnie. He kept feeding it until the flames choked and all but died. I ran a near-hot bath and made him get in it. Told him to get used to it before filling it hotter. I gripped his hand like men do, thumb locked to thumb. Then I left him there with a half-

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bottle of whiskey, the base of it underwater and pinned to his middle with both hands. I sat in the living room armchair in my underpants with four layers of blankets over my chapped hide. Whiskey and beer at the side table. I had the house phone and a CB radio within arm's reach.

No call ever came because my dad and his brothers went through the ice that Sunday in March, one brother perhaps dead already but we would never know for sure. They fell under the weight of their sleds and went down to the black and were not retrieved until late the next day, stropping the underside of a thin sheet of ice near the eastern shoreline. They had all bunched and froze together like mussels. Had to be chipped apart with a hammer and chisel in the hospital ambulance bay before they were brought to the morgue, so as not to unsettle the podunk doctors and orderlies. At least that's how it's told in town.

Further told as myth and legend are all the accounts of people who sat at the Anchor Tavern the day before Pa and his brothers were buried. Police Chief Donald Moreau had just come off a news show where he talked all about the outlaws he ran down and who sadly fell victim to their own hubris that cold fucking night. Way he told it was the cops tried to throw lines to the three men when the ice gave out. Could not save them. But the chief didn't know, and nor did I, that Ronnie went to the site where my Pa and uncles fell in the black of night and he crawled to the hole belly-down. Found buckshot in the gnawed up brink, same gauge that might be fired from a standard police scattergun. And Ronnie had those pellets in his jacket pocket when he came into the Anchor, rancid from Pa's wake, and blew a quarter of the police chief's head off with a sawed off .22 rifle.

There are quiet days now. Calm days and I wake up most mornings cold in my bed. In a very clean house that has long been paid for and runs little hydro and commands next to nothing in property tax to the county. I don't see many visitors. The old cop Francis came out once to tell me he wasn't at the lake. That he was sorry about my Pa. I didn't let him past the foot of the drive. I hear he's since retired. I been trying my best to keep a real garage running out of the place and I oft set to work on the old Mercury coupe. Even ran it without plates or insurance through the backroads with a pretty young girl under my arm. Just the once, or twice. I spend as much time as I can at my Aunt Colette's house, trying to help her when she'll let me. Round as she is and fit to burst, she still won't let me stay long. Claire goes there often and sometimes she stays late into the night, talking about possible futures. Colleges that could be. Babies that will be. Lonely homes with just one person in each, how to make them full.

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If Claire comes over of a night from my aunt's, we curl up and play house. I drink a lot and she drinks less and less. She always falls asleep before I do and that is when I miss my mother and father. Talk to them long in the thinnest hours of the night. Drunk and damned and waiting for the answers, a girl's head by my heart that by God scares me more than the quiet.

KEVIN HARDCASTLE is a fiction writer from Simcoe County, Ontario. He has also lived in Birkenhead, Cardiff, and Edmonton. He has studied writing at the University of Toronto and at Cardiff University. Hardcastle's short stories have been published in *Word Riot, subTerrain Magazine*, *Little Fiction*, and *The Malahat Review*. He is represented by Meggie Macdonald at Transatlantic Literary Agency, and his first two novels are on offer with them. An excerpt from his second novel, *Work*, was published in *Noir Nation: International Journal of Crime Fiction*. He currently lives in the west end of Toronto.

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ERIC LLOYD BLIX

PROJECT Ω

Some work-related anxiety, indeed. Systems Analyst Roger Jeffries shuffles the remainder of this session's papers, utterly blank save the vague impressions of squares—pink and grey smears left from frequent erasing—and places them on the bed next to Mary's folded lap. Smoke curls off the nightstand where the incense burns, a slow veil coating the objects in the master bedroom. Frustrated with their lack of progress, the stuttering, hobbling inability to move forward, Mary Thompson-Jeffries plays the most nuclear option at her disposal.

I think, she says, *as though we aren't working on the same level. There's an underlying issue you aren't telling me. This inwardness, Roger, it's not healthy. Not for your Self or your relationships—our conjugal body, specifically. This fissure, sweet pea, emerging in our extra-corporeal oneness. Tell me what's up, or else, I*—her voice dissipates like the incense smoke, or that of the many cigarettes Roger Jeffries once consumed.

The corn wags out below the bedroom window. Roger Jeffries tries, as Mary asks him, to salvage tonight's Diagnostic Postulation from the stammering and silence which has so far limped off his tongue, that spongy plank, focusing internally again on the nature of his position as *cog* in the complex face of the coming Friday's Corporate Town Hall Event. The emptiness in his cheek feels like one-point-five, maybe two full tabs of Nicorette. Mary unfolds her legs and lies on her belly, running a slender finger across Roger Jeffries's coagulated breast.

I understand, she says*, that the consciousness and the body are separate entities. I understand that what's in front of you is merely a setting, and that your mind may be somewhere else, some other place at some other point in time, and that you may think differently of yourself in wherever this place is that you're thinking about than you do here. But please, Roger, you live within the conventional, nuclear US familial model. You have the kids, and you have me. Like the rest of us, you live inside the roaring tempest of globalization. You are not exempt. We are your fundamental responsibilities, us right here. Here, should we try another self-concept map? Rodgey. Let's get back to the basics, here, Smokey Bear. Let's chart something that locates you in this model so that you can understand your place and transcend it. Maybe then you'll tell me what's on your mind? Hm? Come on. No more straw men? Does that sound okay? Huh, Rodgey?*

Roger Jeffries loves his wife deeply, and so does his best to honour her when she pleads that constructing analyzable space for his emotions/self-concept is for his own benefit and will ultimately strengthen their conjugal support system, that providing mere cursory examinations

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and/or dismissive grunts are not only unhelpful but may actually harm the therapeutic arrangement they've thus far hammered out.

Yes, Roger Jeffries says. *Yes, certainly. You're absolutely right. That sounds fine.*

Roger Jeffries leans across the mattress and unzips his canvass briefcase. He plunges his hand into the aperture between the rows of moulded plastic teeth, fumbling through the mess of documents and his company-issued laptop. He pauses on the zippered pocket that lines the briefcase's inner wall, feeling the USB drive sealed within, that cloaked rectangle protruding.

> Systems Analyst Roger Jeffries has spent the last six months perfecting in the small rear office of his plain Midwestern home a strategically coded deficiency to write into his employer's (i.e. the Everett Paper Corporation's [EPC's]) new, supposedly self-sufficient digital performance modelling system, a disruption in the system's language that will cripple it from within: deconstructive word sequencing / retrograde meaning.

Mary leans back to provide her husband with the necessary space for serious inner-reflection. The question seems to occur inaudibly, sovereign of any tongue: *What's real, the body or the body of text?* Roger Jeffries slips his tongue in the space between the nervous tingle in his gums and coppery lower lip, continues his fingertips onward and withdraws his Daily Feelings Log. Mary rises and moves across the room. She opens the north window. A breeze enters through the gap between the sill and frame. Roger Jeffries traces his Self in squares, character and context lined up side-by-side, and hands the self-concept map to Mary:

Good, she says. *This is good.*

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A feathered drone shows up again on Tuesday night, perched inconspicuously on

Work is an ambiguous word—monosyllabic, a monolith.

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the power lines behind the house, its form simulating that of an avian. The footage it gathers is unremarkable. At roughly 0100h, Roger Jeffries is seen through the south window committing his nightly routine of stealing down the stairs and into the kitchen, where he concocts a three-scoop sundae topped with strawberry flavoured high-F corn syrup and a large spoonful of whipped hydrogenated nondairy spread, which he wolfs down in the light of the opened freezer door.

Upstairs, the kids, Edmund and Julie, are asleep in the room they're sharing for the summer, which is usually just Julie's, down the hall from Roger's and Mary's master suite. Occupying the floor space between—that above the kitchen—is the guest bedroom, normally Edmund's, where Cousin Chet is staying. He's in for the summer from Ames: an internship for Monsanto, which concludes on Saturday with a six-hour shift at the company's State Fair exhibit. The whole family will go: EPC, too, has a State Fair booth, theirs showcasing the new EPC *SelfCycle® Application Set*™ and its overarching conceptual framework, "The Everett Paper Corporation Roadmap to Corporate Growth."

Roger Jeffries wolfs comfortably until the upstairs floor creaks and Cousin Chet's sleepy, uneven footsteps cross above his head.

Specifically, Systems Analyst Roger Jeffries draws pay from building the computer systems that the folks in QA Assurance use in appraising the quality of the host of other systems used by the variously skilled EPC employees, a type of occupational hazard that exists because the logical terminus of SA Roger Jeffries's profession is its own unimpressive termination—the entire point of the systems he helps perfect is to make it possible for all of EPC's practices to be analyzed and modified by a self-sufficient internal network. One that will ultimately design and implement itself. Everything encoded, the Human Element removed.

Currently, EPC ranks second in the Midwest/Great Lakes commercial distribution market in providing the insulated coffee cup sleeves and paper drinking straw wrappers to several internationally recognized chains of fast food restaurants, though of course all of the honchos would rather be #1.

The pressure bearing down from up top to streamline, to maximize performance and output, is thus incessant, such that when he hears unidentified footsteps approach his desk from behind, even an unassuming cog like SA Roger Jeffries shrinks and mitigates his naturally skittish response to anxiety by chomping on 1.5 extra pieces of Nicorette. Though the real fear urging all of this along is, of course, stagnation, slipping below number

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He pauses his wolfing and holds the bowl at his waist, standing frozen in a wraith of condensation which lingers from the opened freezer, until a flush of fresh sewage courses through the pipes and Cousin Chet's footsteps stagger back to bed. The wolfing recommences.

When Roger Jeffries is finished, he washes the bowl and spoon under a trickle of water and places them delicately back in the cupboard/cutlery drawer before heading down the shadowy hall and into his home office, where he keeps his briefcase after work. The office bookshelves are lined with pictures of the family and many of Mary's New Age self-help books. Here and there is a gap where she has pulled a pertinent title.

Roger Jeffries opens his briefcase and sifts between papers—the *EPC Performance Modeling System Internal User Guide* and the self-concept maps he's drawn with Mary over the preceding months. He pops a tab of Nicorette in his cheek—a remedial tobacco simulation—and finds and inserts his personal USB drive into the computer. He stares into the screen, reading strains of encoded text, tweaking small bits here and there.

Of course, they have explored the possible causes of Roger Jeffries's discontent: ennui, anger with his parents, the abject lack of existential meaning due to rampant two. Failing to excel above the rest.

Preventative measures have been taken—the guys in the Chicago offices would really like it a whole heck of a lot to expand operations nationally and maybe even go public, which has led to EPC's diversification into polysaccharide polymer food fillers (i.e. Cellulose—edible paper pulp) via the new venture, Everett FoodStuff® in conjunction with Kraft Foods and General Mills, Inc., made accessible to consumers through the newly-devised *SelfCycle® Application Set*™, though still in its early phases of development and implementation. The idea is that the Everett Paper Corporation holds an integral place in consumers' daily lives, as it has a vested and benevolent interest in what they and their families eat, an act of survival and of kinship: market-driven symbiosis. Thus, EPC's Dick Van Dyke lookalike of a CEO has, along with significant help from the Marketing heads, developed some branding ideas designed to "help people re-imagine what a paper company can be, going forward," as he's lately been putting it in the weekly Fireside Chats he makes with the folks in Corporate Communications, which are of top-notch production quality and lend a digital clarity to his movements and appearance that are fluid and eerie and make him look somehow *too* real, and which are distributed en masse every Thursday

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consumerism, etc. But these reasons are clichés, all of them, Mary reasons. Therapeutic impositions, which are objects themselves—self-defining symptoms produced by and for the rapacious demands of the globalized marketplace. These conditions, she continually argues, have been invented for the purpose that they may be cured. Emotional scaffolding built in the interests of emotional scaffolding, a framework itself that masks the fact that it surrounds nothing.

The best rationale they have yet devised is his work, or rather, the erasure of Systems Analyst Roger Jeffries, therein.

Now and then, gazing out the office window, he can make out the top of the adjacent cornfield nodding over the fence like a multitude of nosey yes-men, a legion of cronies. Upturned tips of ties flapping, the bustle of an inverted world.

Roger Jeffries spends until ~ 0215h in a contradictory alternation—redly evaluating the written text in front of him →← gazing out the office window. He can then be observed withdrawing the USB drive from his computer, re-securing it deep within the blackness of his briefcase. He then slides his hand down his grey University of Northern Iowa sweatpants and masturbates himself to pornographic videos recommended to him afternoon to the company's employees in three one-hour blocks via the internal communications network, *EPC OnDemand!*.

Hence, "The EPC Roadmap to Corporate Growth" and EPC's work with the Birdseye Group, the R&D arm of the marketing firm, Mueller & DiBiase, out of the 16th–21st floors of Chicago's tall and robust Aon Centre, just off the placid blue shores of Lake Michigan. Birdseye—denoted by its distinctive logo of a white hawk outline spotted by a single red bull's-eye used to signify the hawk's eye, not only to indicate a predatory/hunting tendency on the part of the company, but also, obviously, a great deal of statistical accuracy in their work—is generally thought of as a collection of heat seeking ballistics in the Business-2-Business marketing world, which is considered flattering. The plan, from what Systems Analyst Roger Jeffries can tell via a number of optimistically-worded company emails and general rumour, is to work it so that EPC's brand melds with the hometown, Family Values images of its major clients, speaking not only to the folksy sensibilities of W_____'s, D_____ Pizza's, and K_____ F_____ C_____'s CEOs and Marketing execs, but also to their respectively more cynical acumens for good business. It's only natural, then, that to get a more reliable feel for the marketable aspects of the agrarian life, the Dick Van Dyke CEO (= Ander Gamble)

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based on his previous browsing history.

Satiated and with nothing left to capture, the feathered drone lifts off the power line and cruises among the tops of swaying corn, back to its command centre for content analysis, cutting swiftly across the blue currents of night.

should have chosen Carroll, Iowa, to visit for an outreach endeavor, a good old Corporate Town Hall Event—Systems Analyst Roger Jeffries's branch and EPC's targeted test market.

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Saturday comes, and Roger Jeffries & Co. load up and hit the tax-free pavement of the Dupont™ Danisco® Trans Iowa Tollway, east toward the Iowa State Fair. Cousin Chet has on a pair of beat up denim overalls and a straw hat, which his bosses at Monsanto have encouraged him to wear—the outfit is some gambit put on to get a rise out of people. Edmund, whose square face is already specked with acne—a veritable Rubik's cube—as well as topped with a coonskin pioneer cap, announces at departure, "We're going on a trip!" so he takes a duffel bag and packs it with a pile of snacks and consumer technologies. He lugs the bag outside, and Roger Jeffries, toting his briefcase along, is filled with glee.

As they depart, Julie plugs a set of headphones into her ears and sinks into her seat so that nobody will attempt to engage her, having expressed several times her distaste for sharing a bedroom with her little brother, even if it's only temporary. Soon corn runs up to the shoulder on each side of the Tollway, divided by an intricate grid of dirt roads and power lines into clean 1 mi. x 1 mi. cells. Cousin Chet quickly brings up the subject, "Cousin Chet's Résumé." *You're the pro, Rodge. What do the men in suits like to know about an aspiring fellow*? Mary, riding shotgun, scoffs, though she quickly apologizes, because it makes her feel guilty that she's demeaning Cousin Chet's very legitimate professional concerns. She smells like herbs and has a propensity for wearing noisy metal anklets and organic silk kimonos the colour red. *I, um. It depends, Chet*, Roger Jeffries says. The edge of Roger Jeffries's briefcase can be seen inverted in the rearview mirror, jouncing over the backseat's headrest. *This internship is what you'd call my first* real job*, you know, Rodge. I'd like to have something lined up after I graduate. It's kinda tough to let my inborn talents sparkle just by saying so, is all I'm pointing out.* Mary, then, tilting her head toward Roger Jeffries: *Chet, it's you. Think of your résumé in these terms: it's your mind and body in blocks of text. The words, they formulate—listen to me, now—the words are a schematic of* you! *How*

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do you want potential employers to perceive you*?* She looks at her husband and grins. Roger Jeffries lifts his fingertips to his cheek and rubs. The round slant of his jawline is studded with whiskers. His gaze leaves the Dupont™ Danisco® Trans Iowa Tollway and the card swipe toll booth growing out of the horizon and lands on the rearview mirror. It fixates on the corners of his briefcase. The USB drive is secured within the reflexive rearview jounce, the plastic tab looming subtly and invisibly amid his laptop and corporate documents like a low-spoken interrogative. The corners of the briefcase twist with each bounce as though to trace an arc through the air, that round protuberance, like a tablet of gum folded deep within a person's cheek. It is a roundness, an englobement, the faint mark of the question lurking, omnipresent, among the papers of Self and work, upon reflection. Never spoken. Perpetually implied. Roger Jeffries in text and context, in body, in space.

Edmund fidgets in the mid-row captain's chair and slithers his hands beneath his buttocks. He reclines the seat and watches the clouds lumber past. The topic, "Cousin Chet's Résumé," soon ends as Mary starts in on, "The Inauthenticity of the X-country Family Road Trip due to its Repeated and Frequently Parodied Use by the Makers of Popularly Televised Commercial Content." Soon Edmund notices a dark avian speck cutting across the sky—underneath the clouds and in pace with the mini-van—which appears curious and particularly aerodynamic and efficient in its drifting motion. More bird than bird. He watches it for a while, imagines that it's there specifically for him as Cousin Chet rejects Mary's premise outright; Julie sits back in her seat like she's in some soundproof container; Roger Jeffries drives. The view from above encompasses them all. The boundaries of the mini-van disappear and the squares of cropland build outwardly, stacks upon stacks, as though to form the curvature of the earth itself.

→ ←

They go for a ways, and all is quiet. Cousin Chet and the kids each stare at the respective electronic devices they've pulled from unseen pockets. Mary's head falls to her shoulder as she dozes off. Roger Jeffries swipes his MasterCard™ once more, drives and thinks. In general, what Systems Analyst Roger Jeffries finds malign is not his work itself. Rather, the result of said work on the level of Self-preservation is: the suction of the metaphysical Roger Jeffries from his slack-shouldered Systems Analyst body into the blue glow of the EPC computer screen as he executes his daily tasks, his inner-Self dispersed among letters, indivisible from the punctuated commands unfurling across the display. A sacrifice necessary to the function of the Office of Systems Analyst, which is initially quite abstract though becomes less

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so when implemented, composed of interchangeable, shell-like bodies positioned as though behind the wheel of a motor vehicle.

Husks!

The corn stalks beyond the mini-van windows are planted in rows and mimic the original corn stalk that millions of years ago sprouted about wildly, before one or a group of industrious indigenous peoples discovered its utility as a healthful and easy-to-maintain crop, much more conducive to proliferating effective survival structures than their previous methods of scavenging for sustenance, jackdaw-like. Said one or more early industry gurus soon harnessed the lumpy green/yellow plant's expedient properties of quick and abundant germination, allowing it to be distributed quickly to the surrounding villages and beyond for many sizable profits. And so it was, reproduced in easily tenable square plots, which grew over time into gigantic fields, particularly after Anglo industrialists took over and refined the numerous processes of what is now commonly referred to as mass production*, like millions of spreadsheet cells grafted onto the earth, aided by specialized, rigorously vetted, and highly efficient industry machinery and standards of practice, or, SOP.*

The mini-van, when Roger Jeffries pictures it from above, closely resembles a cursor navigating the green and brown fields as they, the fields, scroll infinitely down his imagined frame of reference.

Cells of lived data, as the mini-van itself is for the surveillant, feathered drone.

Roger Jeffries mind, then, leaves the partitions of the mini-van and drifts to the previous night's Town Hall Event, where Dick Van Dyke CEO, Ander Gamble, and Birdseye Executive Market Ethnographer, Les Chunk (Wharton '01) sit, spotlighted on the Carroll High School Auditorium stage in matching, EPC-issued wingtip chairs with their legs similarly crossed. Gamble and his people have chosen the dressed-down US president look of rolled up blue sleeves and pressed khakis, while Chunk has dressed himself into a gimmick—hiking boots, wool socks, a matching khaki short/shirt combo (perhaps meant to echo Gamble's wardrobe, Roger Jeffries and others suppose), and, on top of it all, an oversized pith helmet. Chunk is clearly a back room type, unaccustomed to being on camera. He mugs and fidgets while Gamble, the seasoned orator that he is, holds his hands parenthetically above his lap and discourses about the EPC FoodStuff® / SelfCycle® Application Set™ / *"Roadmap to Corporate Growth," the logistics of such and the attendant benefits for each and all in the room. The imminent hyper-efficiency of EPC's streamlined operations.*

The exponentially added value of its self-appraising performance systems.

Van Dyke / Gamble streams his portion of Town Hall Facilitation gracefully into Chunk's, who practically flies out of his seat when his turn to speak comes up. Chunk's role: describing the corporate tandem's new

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marketing strategy, i.e., the numbers-derived profile of EPC FoodStuff®'s / the Birdseye Group's typical conscious consumer, who is at this juncture, Les Chunk discourses, in all likelihood jaded and cynical about the inescapable presence of commercialized experience and thus unwilling to be affected by traditional commercials or even by those attuned to the public's skepticism, which point out the flaws and techniques of traditional ads, therefore allowing the savvy consumer to chuckle and feel like a couth insider too familiar with the obvious methods and mechanics of advertising to be truly affected, and in this way refuse to buy into nearly any spot. The logical response, then, Chunk explains, stammering slightly and leaning forward in his leather chair, washed by the warm white light pouring across the elevated space from the tech crew's equipment, is to let consumers do the work. To map their self-demonstrated habits and tendencies, that is, as it were, each consumer's online "self," which they refine with each click, purchase, Google™ search, etc., and advertise accordingly. And so, Chunk explains, the project becomes a Cyber Social Science, a study of online populations in their virtual environments. Hence the safari getup. Ander Gamble, then, grinning, initiates his official internal introduction of the new, holistic SelfCycle® Application Set™, designed to ascertain the several components of each participant consumer's online "self," viz., the VeggieAble® app, Foodtrition® app, and eponymous SelfCycle® app. Gamble explains how each allows consumers to check-in at affiliated fast food restaurants where they may then quantify the different components of their polysaccharide polymer food filler-ingesting "selves" to calculate the short-/long-term nutritional benefits of Cellulose-based food substitutes compared to traditional red meat, to identify the nutritional facts of what they feel like ordering at a given moment, and to measure their reduced Carbon Footprint due to the decreased demands for the highly pollutant practices of beef production and international shipping, each statistical strain very interesting on its own but made even more so when the apps unite and assign each user a "score" that s/he can track and alter via changes in her/his consumptive behaviours in order to earn fast food discounts and various other prizes if a certain score is achieved. The apps, debuting this weekend at the Iowa State Fair, Mr. A. Gamble gladly declares, seem like a relatively minor move though are part of a mad, widespread rush of in-pocket DIY advertising and market research and will enable EPC FoodStuff® / EPC.FS®'s Corporate Affiliates to track, assess, and target the self-constructed consumer profiles of their intended consumption base with commercial responses of unassailable accuracy. In other words, the needs of the individual and the needs of the market thus coalesce—everything is self-defined and self-sustaining. The commercial is life itself → map precedes terrain. Roger Jeffries consequently finds himself in two mini-van's at once:

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1)

Roger Jeffries leaves the Carroll High School auditorium mid-speech, wheeling quickly out of the parking lot and cruising down the darkened city blocks with a full two tabs of Nicorette plugged in his cheek. A red LED follows, blinking from the treetops. The Jeffries family's house, similar to all those that neighbour it, soon materializes out of the darkness. It stands empty with a foreclosed look about it—the family is out someplace. Roger Jeffries opens the centre console in the mini-van and digs out a box of Nicorette. He pops in another, considers the USB drive secured in his briefcase. A casual lean against the leg of the office desk inside, sequestered by walls / blocked from view. Roger Jeffries lets the van idle. He ventures inside the house, courses through the system of rooms and halls and fetches his things.

Something that Roger Jeffries has never officially charted or even presented to Mary in any of their conjugal support sessions, though which he has madly and profusely obsessed over, is that sometimes he stands in front of the fluorescently lit bathroom mirror in their master bedroom suite and stares at his reflection, painstakingly analyzing the appearance of his face and body. He notes each new wrinkle and coagulation of adipose tissue that

2)

Roger Jeffries & Co. reach the outskirts of Des Moines while Mary speculates: Roger Jeffries's urges to smoke are his way of communicating a deep-seeded impediment to adequately representing and quantifying his inner feelings because he has thus far failed to fully articulate his inner-Self in the context of their conjugal relationship and therapeutic exercises. He has instead opted to engage in a behaviour that slowly and fundamentally repels those who are closest to him and destroys his meta/-physical Self. Cold Turkey, as far as she knows. Mary has expressed on several occasions, too, her eschewal of the standard notion of unhappy marriages which are unhappy because of some type of conjugal failure; she conceives of this excuse (i.e., the failure of love) as a produced condition meant to both homogenize desire and perpetuate the myth of redemptive purchasing, i.e., the widespread delusion that yes, despite clichéd sentiments to the contrary, happiness can indeed be bought. Instead she argues that unhappy, taciturn marriages are so because the nature of love and its corporeal-spiritual varieties are left unexamined, which is why, Roger Jeffries supposes, she reaches across the shiny vinyl of the mini-van's centre console and graces his elbow as they turn into the dirt parking lot outside the State Fair Grounds, trolling until he can locate a parking space.

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contribute to his slowly aggregating bodily girth, comparing the existing flaws to how they previously were as they deepen and emphasize themselves. Quietly he recognizes what their intensifying appearances signify: that Roger Jeffries is aging, and his chance to differentiate himself is rapidly deteriorating. He stands this way until eventually he *physically watches* his reflection age and take on the grey and bitter characteristics of his future cosmetic self, the hereditary extension of his current middle-agedness looking back at him for a few awful moments, a fugitive snapshot, until the image dissolves into the surroundings and becomes a mere intimation of his own corporeal self inside a small, reflexive window of context, no longer signifying the earthly form of the Self that Mary so desperately wishes that he discovers and defines in relation to her own.

Roger Jeffries climbs back in the mini-van with the USB distending his breast pocket. He drives across town, between squares of manicured and ratty residential/commercial lawn. He parks in the lot of the EPC office with his headlights beamed on the adjacent cornfield. Roger Jeffries gets out. A breeze runs across the landscape, carrying across the vague smells of fertilizer and machine exhaust. The feathered drone following him perches on a corner of the building, honing in. Systems Analyst Roger Jeffries takes out the USB drive and curls his grip

Mary's touch moves as though sentient, reading the dips and swells of his body, his physical text. It's like she's trying to prove to herself that he's there, that he isn't some manufactured/computerized hologram. A disbelief which continues as they wander the grounds and the vast flows of people, as though clasped between the palms of their holding hands. They enter the Iowa State Fair Agricultural Building, where the Monsanto / EPC exhibits are housed in adjacent showrooms. Cousin Chet sniffs out the Monsanto display in the main showing area. Simulacra abound: miniature tractors, flat facades of red barns and quaint country cottages, ads for Monsanto, Cargill, Jenni-O, etc.—pictures of crops and smiling Family Farmers—strung up like pieces of hanging art. Most imposing to Systems Analyst Roger Jeffries: the maze of artificial corn that covers the majority of the floor. People drift in and out, observing these contemporary artifacts of the rural US Midwest. The many cultural talismans arranged in a diorama of the present. The customary body fossilized, an object of study.

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around it. The virulent code contained: a type of behavioural reactor that will alter the facets of his self-concept upon broadcast and proliferation, something to destroy the walls or render them irrelevant. A termination of endpoints: *Project* **Ω**. Roger Jeffries strides toward the office building. The dull yellow colour of the galvanized steel siding suggests a type of granularity, like it would crumble and stick if one were to rub it with one's finger. He turns his gaze to the corn, to the blackness lurking between the stalks.

← →

Cousin Chet and the PR man at the Monsanto display shake hands. They laugh together. The strap of Roger Jeffries's briefcase digs into his shoulder, a physical pain, though in the face of imitation corn—that virtual reality given physical space—his mouth remains empty of words. Through a doorway, which is propped open like a mouth spewing foot traffic, Roger Jeffries spots a corner of the EPC SelfCycle™ Application Set® exhibit. The interns there move from spot to spot and seem as bright and self-assured as Cousin Chet. The corn maze then grows in Roger Jeffries's periphery, as two people, a man and a woman, come tumbling out.

Edmund and Julie go tearing into the maze. The stalks, bejeweled with robust ears, are eminently straight and green, more an imitation of TV corn than the real thing, Roger Jeffries supposes. Mary continues to feel/read his body. The kids become immersed in the crop reproduction. Roger Jeffries breathes deeply. The corn: Where eight months prior he had stood after having summoned the courage to ask District Manager Allan Ringwald, man to man, for a promotion in title to Project Manager and the increases in pay and self-worth which would accompany it after co-worker Kathleen Obermiller's scheduled retirement two months later. Unbeknownst to Roger Jeffries, Allan Ringwald, the man in the chair in front of him with a look on his face so vehemently indifferent that Roger Jeffries considered for a moment playing the whole thing off as some odd and unsuccessful joke, had recently interviewed for a vastly more enviable promotion to Director of Corporate Operations, which would have meant a move out of Podunk Iowa, into the corporate spotlight of the Chicago office. The promotion ultimately went to a battle-scarred industry vet lured out of International Paper, leaving the aging and wheel-spinning AR quite bitter, with an ancient kind of vengeance throughout, such that when he heard Roger Jeffries's pitch he sat for a moment with his hands folded over his grain-fed belly protruding beneath his shirt, and contemplated. The question AR asked seemed as rotund and oppressive as his bulging stomach,

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words as ruinous as a slung boulder. He asked whether Mr. Jeffries had ever noticed the continental sheets of corn that carve up the US Midwest and in all reality act as the very context of life in the region. For example, how the field just beyond Allan Ringwald's office window nearly touched the parking lot, the stuff being so abundant. He wondered aloud if Roger Jeffries had ever noticed the stuff's ubiquity either in crop or processed form, that perhaps Roger Jeffries might consider taking a walk outside and inserting himself in the thickest green cluster he could find and let his feet sink into the topsoil while inspecting the literally millions of stalks and ears for a few hours until he noticed the abject sameness of it all. How whether viewed externally or from within its midst Roger Jeffries would be utterly consumed. AR, then leaning forward across his broad oak desk with his index finger extended violently at what felt like the very centre of Roger Jeffries's now quite demoralized and abject soul, pondered that maybe then Roger Jeffries could return to AR's office with an accurate sense of his and everybody else's place in the system. Maybe then they could talk about individual performance. Maybe then he could see what it means to excel.

Cousin Chet now undoes a strap of his overalls to affect a more folksy appearance. Mary is sullen. She points out the artifice around them, as Roger Jeffries has come to expect. "Which," she inquires, "the real or the image, is the reflection of the other?" Roger Jeffries watches, through the steel-event-barricade-lined doorway, a patron approach an electronic tablet mounted on EPC's display counter: the *SelfCycle® Application Set*™ test pod. Of course Roger Jeffries has no intention of visiting the EPC exhibit. He decides he could use a smoke. He feels around his pockets. Flat, empty of Nicorette.

Outside, a police unit creeps by, the lights flashing from atop the cruiser. A young officer advises pedestrians via bullhorn to promptly exit the walkway and enjoy themselves from the curbs on each side. The police unit is followed by the official Future Farm Moguls of America Marching Band, coursing slowly across the walkway as their horns and woodwinds blare and their percussion rumbles. Sounds blend; the peripatetic blip causes a crowd to form on each side of the walkway, one poised to rush the Agricultural Building when the band recedes. Several patriarchs film the scene with their families. From Roger Jeffries's side, a man deviates, capturing a bird as it lands, which has curiously excessive birdlike tendencies, picking steadily at its down plumage. Mary jostles Roger Jeffries's shoulder and nods at the simulated corn. Shall we go in here for a while? *Might as well*, Roger Jeffries says. He watches Cousin Chet and the PR man yuk it up, white smiles which seem inaccessible, like a specialized form of knowledge. Roger Jeffries's inner-Self then exits from the pores, disseminated, lost among the throngs.

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ERIC LLOYD BLIX's stories do or soon will appear in *Necessary Fiction*, *Birkensnake*, *REAL: Regarding Arts & Letters*, *theNewerYork*, and elsewhere. He studies in the MFA program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where he also teaches writing. He is currently working on expanding "Project Ω" into a novel.

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CAMILLE MARTIN

EIGHTEEN POEMS

foothopper

grassprint

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A notion bolted out the starting gate
like a startled colt.

•

The Milky Way is teeming with billions
of manatee idols.

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•

pre-Beatles
Norwegian folk song

•

If it's still winter, why
do the days grow longer?

•

And Adam gave taboo names
to every beast in the field.

•

in the jargon of crickets,
cricket

•

from apples

to oranges

and back again

•

it out

as in
dorks duke

.

•

mirror mirror doesn't show "me"

(embryonic gesture of salve and wink)

"as I am"

•

retracing in winter sky
clusters of memories in constellations
of b-movie motorcycles
and goldfish anuses

•

Lateral thoughts
quietly spin on either
side of a cusp pretending not
to notice but nonetheless
keen to claim their wit.

•

plane’s buzz, christened in one
over-determined moment

•

Thou comest unto
me and him, tinking
many informations.

•

Close your eyes and click
your heels to a time when no one
will get the reference.

•

-S-

-E-

-N-

-S-

-E-

a sea in a sea

•

Matter stills and
is nothing in
the whelk's
eye.

•

last word,
poised on one leg of a
flamingo

CAMILLE MARTIN is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Looms* (2012) and *Sonnets* (2010), both from Shearsman Books. She holds a PhD in English from Louisiana State University and an MFA in Poetry from the University of New Orleans. She lives in Toronto. Blog: http://rogueembryo.com. Website: http://www.camillemartin.ca.

JIM SMITH

CENTO IN FOUR

I

The little notebook of poems in the pocket of a corpse,
At my age, granted, quite a few.
Outside your body is a set of bleachers,
As if they were not men.

II

Why your ear would call by now Elohim—
When we kissed straight on—
I was trying to describe the perfect library
To find, to rip to bits the lips.

III

There's no reason to horse around
On the tree branch, and the hangman, who is blind
It is not a happy place to be
Let war fade away, let it become.
Mr. Death, when you came to the ovens it was short
By then he will be dead and gone,
An empty bag of Fritos,
A tree stuck in the earth,
An orange radio, green seas
A story laced inside this one—
Leaf! You are so big!
The richest man in Delaware!

IV

I remember Jim Smith's phone number!

.

BRAINARD'S IRON LUNG

I tripped on your step. Fell 360 degrees, my tail coiled round. As I swung into position, I passed my mother, black hair, an apron, who wears an apron.
I tripped on your step. From my left, from my right. Two red trucks ran over me. Victor leaned over. Seven dogs sniffed me. A flower grew from my eye like a cliché. The chakra collectors came.
I tripped on your step. What are you doing with your nose down here. I remained in position, sort of impressed that my nose, stomach and penis could support my weight & the column of air that lay on top.
I tripped on your step. Groceries spilled from my ears.
I tripped on your step. You laughed and it was snow. You laughed and it was like mud sandwiches. You laughed and I resolved to alert the navy.
I tripped on your step. A green board lay beside me. Although no specific words were exchanged, I understood it wished to be sanded to a beautiful finish & be held against my breast, that is, to be loved.
I tripped on your step. The end.

JIM SMITH's last two fab books are *Happy Birthday, Nicanor Parra* (Mansfield Press, 2012) and *Back Off, Assassin!: New and Selected Poems* (Mansfield Press, 2009). He will read just about anywhere. Just ask him.

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CATHERINE GRAHAM

THE ANIMAL GAME

after "Gradma's Zoo" by Dorothy Molloy

Now I'm a bird in the nest of your lap.
I flap my blanket of feathers.
Elongate my growing neck.

You take another one out, and I leap:
frog-green and slippery,
my tongue slides, ruler-long—

I aim for your fingers. You pretend
to dribble and present it to me.
It roughens my tongue like wolf teeth.

We feel the drumming tremble. Mean fists.
Our game is bruised.
Sit down. Your grandmother's coming.

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MY SKIN IS MY GRAVE

after "Bones" by Dorothy Molloy

Why should dying be news?
The bug is in the matchbox.
The shoebox holds the bird.
The first grave is our backyard.

And Mister Death, the high grotesque,
grins above. Aired in the room
before the earthworms' dark,
lidded and locked, my bones will be

like the cut tree, no longer expanding
in rings. Time skins me, and soon
my *bones will lose their marrow, but they're*
brave disintegrating; being change.

No longer serving their calcified
purpose, *they'll hollow themselves out*
for more sonority and air will song
through them as throats of birds.

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LUCY

after "Grief Therapy" by Dorothy Molloy

She wears a bell so the birds
know when she's coming.
She pads the grass to collect the dew,
walks gingerly through tulips and daffodils.

Mottled fur, she licks the white
endlessly, her tongue sandpaper tough.
And yet *her fur* has *lost its glitz. Sex*
with stray toms wasn't nice.

She's fatter now. Plods
along like her tolling bell,
silver tinkle on a pink collar.

Silence. She must be sleeping
or being eaten by animals
with bigger teeth, that wear
no warning round their furry necks.

But there she is, like yesterday, where
listless, she lay on the grass *to consider*
her next move. And later, between
taunting bird chirps and the electricity
of crickets, she's meowing for her bowl to fill.

I always pet her when I visit. We have no cat.
Dad's allergic, so he says, though he never
sneezes when Lucy rubs against him.

She's *mesmerized by the twitch in her tail.*
Down on my belly I slither to her.
She answers my hiss with a purr.
I strike at her face; she responds *with one bite.*

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DOMESTIC

after "My heart lives in my chest" by Dorothy Molloy

He sculpts my words with the chisel of his mouth.
Fits me inside his mind's binding. I do what I'm told
to get my playpen back, the edge of no to end
each *day*. *What did I do* to exit his eyes?
Blue-blinding marbles detached from the brain
that stems them. He won't answer. Sits
in his fat easy chair. What did I do *or what*
did I do not but wear something pretty? He spits
his words in blurry circles; hurls stones
of vowels at fields of bruises. Clothes
with round edges give too much of me to see.
Who you trying to impress? Some fancy man?
He's laughing now. You think I'm serious? Just
want you to be safe, Pet. Blind *heart, pack up and run.*

CATHERINE GRAHAM is the author of *The Watch* and the poetry trilogy: *Pupa*, *The Red Element* and *Winterkill*. Anthologized in *The White Page / An Bhileog Bhan: Twentieth Century Irish Women Poets,* Graham's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Room Magazine*, *The Malahat Review*, *Descant Magazine*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Rusty Toque* and *The Fiddlehead*. A Board member of The Rowers Reading Series and co-facilitator for The Platform Reading Series, she teaches Creative Writing at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies and has read her work at numerous venues including the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Her forthcoming collection, *Her Red Hair Rises with the Wings of Insects*, will appear Fall, 2013 with Wolsak & Wynn. Visit her at www.catherinegraham.com.

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STEPHEN BROCKWELL

STANDARD POODLE

(anthologized in the improbable book Psychic Projections of Domestic Pets*)*

Everywhere I go I bring violence,
a savage mongrel snapping at my heels.
Last night at the bar, two young women yanked
each other's hair as grandmothers might tug

dandelions from a spring lawn. A man
with too much white hair screamed and smashed his fist
into a non-compliant parking meter.
He continued to scream as I walked off.

A week before writing to tell you this,
two white men with clubs broke a black man's arms
at the door to the mall. I shrieked, "Stop that!"
and called 9-1-1 from a safe distance.

Ever since that Doberman with billiard balls
for gonads mounted my neutered poodle,
I can't take my dog off-leash in the park
without saving the neck of some terrified

terrier from my shamed real dog's grinding jaws.
Now I leave him behind when I go walking.
His disobedient shadow follows.
Unleashed, violence increases its strength.

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BROWN MACKEREL TABBY

(anthologized in the improbable book Psychic Projections of Domestic Pets*)*

Inside my cat the soul of a mother
cries for her unborn children.

In the prison of her upstairs rooms
she mewls to be fed and comforted.

She dabs my chin with cotton swabs
of declawed front paws, one for each

never-conceived kitten of a litter.
If she knew how much I'd sacrifice

for absolution, would she be content
to knead my chest and wake me

with her small, idling chainsaw engine?

STEPHEN BROCKWELL is an Ottawa poet and small business owner. His book *Fruitfly Geographic* won the Archibald Lampman award. His fifth book of poems, *The Complete Surprising Fragments of Improbable Books* will soon be published by Mansfield Press.

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ASHLEY-ELIZABETH BEST

SONGS FOR REJECTING BOYS AT PARTIES

1. "Don't Call Me No Mo" (Project Pat)

Your hollering can be heard from the texts you exile to my phone. My inbox has become an archive of confessions. I pipe up at the party, see you across the room, throw aside my cigarette, ask you to step outside.

2. "Never Gonna Happen" (Lily Allen)

When we first met the stars were snowing down, my flesh showing openly all I had yet to lose. The music is jackhammering behind me. We haven't touched in weeks, I'm trimming back across the lawn, the voltage from your smirk more than I can bear. I'm the only sobbing witness, finally ready to extinguish the fires of our worship.

3. "Cold Hearted" (Paula Abdul)

His lust detonates through the party, we both refuse to lose ground. The longer I avoid his eyes, the more he lacerates my body, his friends' laughter slicing through the music.

4. "Shut Up and Let Me Go" (The Ting Tings)

Hunched over the deck railing, my shadow form laying down the excitement I once had for you, like the shudder of steel. Love is a thin artery, incomprehensible in its leaving.

ASHLEY-ELIZABETH BEST is from Cobourg. She was on the poetry shortlist for the 2011 *Matrix* Litpop Awards and *Prism*'s Poetry Prize 2012. She has poetry appearing in *The Toronto Quarterly*, *Tampa Review*, *CV2*, and *Branch Magazine*. She recently placed first for poetry in *This Magazine*'s Great Canadian Literary Hunt 2012 and was the poetry runner up for *subTerrain Magazine*'s Lush Literary Awards 2012. She has a chapbook published with Cactus Press called *Slow States of Collapse*. Currently, she lives and writes in Kingston.

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BILL HOWELL

THEY ARRIVED ON VALENTINE'S DAY

I cannot accord sympathy to those
who do not recognize the human crisis.
—Jack Spicer

Little men from space
are the size we imagine them to be because
if they're quite small
they'll take up less space (in there,
perhaps going farther out there) thus saving
their alien bosses' interplanetary gas money
& other essential expenses.

Quarters are undoubtedly cramped
& with all that gravity-free free floating there
there probably isn't
much worthwhile fucking going on
especially since
after all they're only little men
who can't help missing their little women.

In fact by the time they get here
they feel like cats on long car trips—
angsty if not downright pissed-off & vengeful
more than ready to barf venomous
flaming non-biodegradable intergalactic effluents
on what's left of the upholstery
& completely unimpressed by our symphonies.

BILL HOWELL has five poetry collections, including *Porcupine Archery* (Insomniac Press). Recent work: *Antigonish Review*, *Canadian Literature*, *Descant*, *Grain*, *Existere*, *Vallum*, *Windsor Review*. Further information: http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/howell.

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LAURA CLARKE

ARCHITEUTHIS

When I finally saw the giant squid, I was like, it's not that big.
My dog pissed a heart shape on the sidewalk and it was bigger than that.

I wanted the squid to go on forever, elephantine sub-spherical suckers
with finely serrated rings of chitin, lively tentacles circling space
and emerging in the future, waving, eyes like soulful car tires,
ecstatic ink clouds enveloping birch trees and bridges.

It's true a scientist brought the eye to my house to show me
how it was as large as a dinner platter and explain that only
some extinct aquatic reptilian predator had ever matched
the diameter of its pupil, 9 cm or 3.5 inches.

Predictably, he put it on an actual dinner platter, and it looked
right past me. In my own house. Squid eye/dinner platter
combo, how unfair is it that we don't get to choose, how unfair
is it that I loved you when and if you were small.

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MEXICO

If the cargo pants hang inside out on the rooftop clothesline,
baggy pockets splayed like elephant ears,
does it signal to a lover not to come on Sunday?

If an orange rolls down 30 feet of wet cobblestone
before being crushed under the wheels of a pickup truck,
is it possible the rubbered tires became briefly human to feel
the sweet push of white seed against teeth?

If a listless bark is lost forever, reverberating backwards in time
against the current of string-bound cardboard and branded street
garbage, what separates it from the selective noise endlessly
circling the planet, played like a lullaby to the 100 year
orbit of a doomed satellite?

If you become an astronaut from the future, will the sight
of sheets bound by splintering clothes pegs snapping
against rust coloured walls at 9 a.m. always break your heart,
or is it something that will come upon you in your late twenties?

When you hear that sow-nippled dog's 20-year-old bark cut
across your radio and time, will you contemplate the universe
or think of simple, plain things—teeth-marked dog toys,
large hands, strands of dill caught in the sink drain?—
and yes, you have to choose.

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BEAR SAFETY TIPS FOR SEMI- REGULAR TRIPS TO A CABIN IN ALGONQUIN PARK

If you encounter a black bear, it is likely to react in one of four ways.
—Algonquin Provincial Park newsletter

1

Wake to paddles slapping water. Sounds cold.

Stage whispers scrape pine trees, land on Emerald ash
borer-infested firewood, squeeze through dusty screens.

Chipmunks rustle for attention in blueberry plants, cast black bear
shadows across the rusty barbeque. Sunshine illuminates pork fat.

In most cases, a bear will hear or smell you before you are aware of it.

Especially if your dog has her period.

Especially if you drink a mickey of Fireball and spin an antique globe
really fast, watching the pastel colours blur while you yell-explain
the tragic nature of the children's book series *Animorphs*.

2

Yesterday, floating on my back, studying the sway of yellow birch,
I was almost run over by waving German tourists in a fibreglass canoe.

Habituated bears: some lose their fear of humans from frequent contact.

Some people lose their desire to cook or wash their hair or leave their house.

From frequent contact. From habitat.

.

3

I sit in the outhouse, cranking the windup flashlight.

Tacked into the rough wood are yellowing Family Circus cartoons,
spider webs shot across them, lending an odd translucence.
Fly carcasses dot the outer edges of newspaper like punch lines.

Reacting to a defensive bear: do not climb a tree—
bears are excellent climbers.

Your best course of action is to stay in the outhouse forever.
The image of you growing old, crying over 20-year-old comic[s] strips
until your fingers blacken with newsprint and the paper dissolves
into dust which in turn clings to the spider's leg, is kind of arousing.

4

A dock spider springs from the chalky rocks enclosing the fire,
dragging a filmy sac as large as her own quarter-sized body.

That's quite the quivering crystalline burden you have drooping
from your thorax, my friend.

I'll feel those little spider children for weeks afterwards on my arms,
and how are any of us really to know what the tickle of almost-invisible
silver limbs feels like at night alone?

Reacting to a fleeing Black Bear:
Enjoy the fleeting sight of a wild Black Bear.

Reacting to a fleeing anything:
Enjoy the fleeting sight of a _____.

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MOVIE REVIEW

I really like the opening scene where it's revealed the purple shawl has been hiding the pots and pans all along,

as well as the part where the husband and wife approach the mousetrap tentatively in fluorescent light and discover a ball of hair writhing, braiding itself in hysteria.

I didn't like the ending because I hate when plants get their way and only robots get to have blue eyes.

I thought the cinematography accurately captured the velvet texture of the donkey's ears and the poignant loneliness of books kept apart from each other.

My favourite scene was when the husband, wife, dog and purple shawl all do drugs and go to the grocery store, and the husband and wife sob uncontrollably in the condiments section, and the dog takes a picture of himself in the lobster tank with that sombrero,

and they put the purple shawl in the ice cream freezer as a joke, but then they forget about it, and the purple shawl is stuck there for like five years because it's lodged behind the maraschino cherry ice cream.

I thought eight years was a bit long for a movie to run, and I didn't like how my children had grown old and the locks had been changed on my door when I finally got back from the theatre.

No, I didn't think the final scene was that devastating if you look at it in the sense that hairballs belong in the garbage, ice cream has a finite shelf life, and velvet is subjective.

That a dog shouldn't be in a lobster tank to begin with, and jars of mustard are delicate and break so easily.

LAURA CLARKE is a Toronto-based writer and a graduate of University of Toronto's MA in Creative Writing program. Her work has been published in various journals including *The Antigonish Review*, *Grain*, *PRISM international*, and *Qwerty*. She is the winner of the 2013 RBC Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers from the Writers' Trust of Canada.

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AARON TUCKER

WHAT MONTH ARE WE?

(for Perec + Beckett, Endgame*)*

discipline: to abandon a language begin in another is

neighbour's front lawn + discarded furniture
rusted joints nibbled gnawed enamel
discard-web with legacy concerns
tides of brackish coffee tables
chipped at its corners small diagrams of
granular shapes litter its underside
groans + wind shifts that pile that furniture-mountain
rises + your neighbour's self portrait dwarfs the house

that extreme excess of search terms + status updates
as uncontainable as old couch springs
grain of splinters mixes with cotton stuffing
a desk a set of drawers || metal of lawn chairs
jut into footholds + the neighbourhood
races each other to the top grabbing spare cushions
always one shelf from summit

*/
we stealthy emerge each night
take one object back for ourselves
reupholster it in French
/*

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EXCUSE ME SIR, DO YOU KNOW MRS. PENNYBLOSSUM?

walking distance cafe windows open to the street
each patron writing a novel || a manual +
each typing each person typing in chorus
finger-voices sing clone sloppy non-homerow
sing across laptop screens sing mp3s sing loops sing clones
|| reading subscripts||a novel ||a cookbook
flip pages simultaneously synced with each array
each flip a flap of thunderous wings a gale the wind
shoves stirred coffees + apple slice salads loop
punctuation in large strings picking bursts pause gusts pause
flip pause stir pause peck pause blast pause slice pause

binary signals: pages turning || keys clicking

.

DO YOU HAVE: HAIR THAT FEELS WEIGHED DOWN?

I insist 2in1
cannot stand elevator lag
nor the bandwidth
of utterance to ears

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DON'T I KNOW YOU FROM SOMEWHERE?

somewhere parallel-me
drives up + down highway-cut valley
pick-up mud up the sideboards out of wiper fluid
only the highway curves left instead of right
fence posts slightly opposite askew
other-me has his windows down
passing the Chevron that never changed into an ESSO

another-me still drifts up and down the Island
letting the ocean seep through his shoes still
the horizon-water reminds him of how big the mountains can get

a version moves rook axis to back rank
clicks clock and waits

another-still-me floats in circuitry driven by coloured pulses
+ passwords posts photos + snippy status updates
jets up + down wikis reciting
movie quotes from Joel Pepsi like
"I'm walkling here" or lyrics from
"I Kissed a Grill (and I linked it)"
alternate-me dresses in tighter t-shirts pants
squeezing his body until micro-thin
can hyperlink between pages OMG

AARON TUCKER's poetic works and reviews have been published across Canada. His chapbook, *apartments*, was shortlisted for the 2010 bpNichol Chapbook award. His current project, tentatively titled *punchlines*, is coming out in chapbook form from above/ground press in the summer of 2013. More of his work can be found at aarontucker.ca. In addition, he is a professor in the English department at Ryerson University where he is currently teaching essay writing and digital literacy to first year students. He is working on learning chess in between watching his beloved Raptors lose games.

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"AMUSING SPIRITS AND ATTENTIVENESS:"

A Review of Jan Zwicky's *The Book of Frog*

Pedler Press
113 Bond Street
St. John's, NL A16 1T6

2013, $20, 94 pp, ISBN 978.1.897141.49.6

REVIEW BY PHOEBE WANG

Long-time readers of Jan Zwicky's work, which includes several collections of lyric poetry as well as her free-form works of philosophy, may be perplexed by her most recent offering, *The Book of Frog*, subtitled *an amuse-esprit*. Consisting of short chapters and a series of conversations between Frog, Al, an imaginary albatross, and their human friends Liv and Hugh, *The Book of Frog* may feel like a departure from her restrained and meditative books of poetry. Yet this whimsical yet earnest prose work does have a definite place in Zwicky's body of work. It continues a trajectory that has been advanced through a long writing career, a course shaped by her concern with metaphor, ecology, and how non-human ways of understanding can illuminate human society and relationships.

At the same time, this slim book gives Zwicky more room and laxity to adopt an intimate and amusing tone, difficult to achieve in the kind of poetry and lyric philosophy she has engaged in for over three decades. *The Book of Frog* allows its author to comment upon more quotidian, casual topics, such as social media, students, and travel. It also continues an ongoing conversation between Zwicky and her husband, Robert Bringhurst. Bringhurst has a strong interest in Haida myth, oral cultures and polyphony, amongst other topics, and his 1987 work of poetry, *Conversations with a Toad*, has many parallels with *The Book of Frog*. Readers not familiar with either author's work will still enjoy the book's touching portrait of a marriage over long distances and its quirky exploration of the natural world. My main concern is that its allegorical elements may be too subtle for a casual reader. Those unaware of Zwicky's grounding in both Zen Buddhism and the Western philosophical tradition might miss the book's subtle, playful allusions. It is worth discussing whether or not a book such as this succeeds at drawing the readers' attention, and how it might serve as an introduction to Zwicky's oeuvre.

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Ecologists argue that while we can only guess at the kinds of knowledges, feelings or thoughts that animals and plants contain, all life forms are sentient and we must adjust our self-serving attitudes toward our environment. Yet a sense of stewardship is difficult to foster in a society accustomed to viewing the natural world as an endless well of resources. Ecologically minded writers in Canada have created a body of literature that imagines nature in different ways. If we can imagine that the stones and trees speak to us, and if we tell stories about it, we're more likely to feel a sense of responsibility toward these species. Zwicky's work attempts to expand the readers' attentiveness to nature, and to this end, *The Book of Frog* sidelines its human characters. But is a literature that imagines the feelings and thoughts of other species still ultimately self-serving? Zwicky cleverly sidesteps the danger other writers have faces when attempting to speak or write on behalf of animal or plants species. Frog is not a real frog but a bit of barnacle-encrusted rock, and Al is not a real albatross, so the two are more like totem spirits than real animals.

Many indigenous cultures acknowledge the importance of totem spirits as not only symbols of one's clan or tribe, but also as reminders of a living myth and lineage. They are inanimate, yet they reflect the most animate parts of ourselves—imaginary, while connecting us to the most real, living things. While First Nations tales of animal spirits offer many moral lessons, there are blatant problems with North American writers appropriating such stories for their own use. In *The Book of Frog,* what Zwicky has attempted to do instead is to offer the reader ways of finding our own guides.

We're told in one of the opening chapters that "Frog had come to live with Liv and Hugh out of the sea." Hugh may be the one to pick up the rock with four barnacle feet out of the low tide, but note the animate language that describes Frog, as though he were the one to take action. "It's nice to meet somebody who doesn't suffer from an exaggerated sense of his own unimportance," Hugh muses. At any time, at any place, like Hugh and Liv, we can pick things out of our surroundings that seem to have chosen us. *The Book of Frog*'s quiet metaphors operate this way, too, like small pebbles that can be collected yet also easily missed. Where Liv and Hugh live isn't specified, though we can surmise that it's somewhere on Vancouver Island or one of the neighbouring Salt Spring Islands. This avoidance of place names may be deliberate—Zwicky may prefer that the reader identify the place through its geologic and physical description.

Frog shares in a dish on Liv and Hugh's kitchen table with a number of other "friends," including Fly, a white shell, and a pair of striped feathers called Feather. There are other objects as well, such as a Douglas fir cone, and a dried petal from a golden rose given to Liv when she and Hugh first met. "From time to time, other things got added to the dish: the polished halves of an

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ammonite, for example, or a pale red samara from the Japanese maple." The descriptions are understated, a gentle lighthearted tone informing us that Feather "frequently got lost and were not as keen on travel as Frog and Fly and Al." Things are removed when it becomes too crowded in the dish, either returned to nature or moved elsewhere. This bowl itself becomes a metaphor for what we bring into our lives and our houses, and how knowledge can reside with us, for a time, before returning to its source. This way of treating objects and possessions aligns with Zen practices, which teach us that the desire for acquiring material possessions is ephemeral. What is precious to Liv and Hugh are how the things that have come into their lives serve as totems and touchstones for memory and experience.

In recent decades, ecocritical and environmental writers have been responding to a number of cultural tropes and traditions that Zwicky is touching upon. There has been intense criticism of Romantic and pastoral literature that typically depicts country life as simpler and idealized, in contrast to corrupt, sophisticated and complex urban lifestyles. These depictions are unrealistic, as perceptions of the country or the wilderness are already shaped by cultural and social views. Another point of contention are anthropocentric views of nature that solely reflect a human set of values[1].

The Book of Frog disrupts the boundaries between nature/culture by portraying non-human characters, but not in overly idealized or cloying ways. The great wide open, skies and beaches, are not the only spaces to contain Frog and Al, who travel with Liv and Hugh to hotel rooms and foreign cities. They keep them company when Liv performs at a concert, or Hugh goes to a conference, and aren't always critical of city life and civilization, nor do they speak on behalf of some vanished, remote wilderness. Frog enjoys his Internet cafés, which remind him of his dank, moist home, as well as garden courts and museums. Zwicky has infused the book with their banter and opinions, but she does so in order to offer an alternative to homocentric narratives and perspectives. It's done with a light touch, to create minimalist allegories that linger like riddles without a clear solution.

The special emphasis Zwicky places on the role of metaphor is not as fleshed out in *The Book of Frog* as it is her other works, such as *Lyric Philosophy* or *Wisdom & Metaphor*. Both of those texts explore the ways in which metaphors help us find connections between divergent spheres (i.e. between music, nature, philosophy, mythologies, human relationships, and so on). They introduce

[1] A more through discussion of the rejection of anthropocentric concerns in ecocritism, please see Steven Rosendale's introduction, "Extending Ecocritisim," in *The Greening Of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and He Environment*, University of Iowa Press, 2002.

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multiple ways of seeing that aren't necessarily logical or rational, but can come about through a flash of intuition, feeling or a moment of contemplation. These connections and patterns help us view experience differently, as we see how *this* can also be like *that*, and how paradoxical perceptions of the world can simultaneously "occupy the same space," as Zwicky writes in *Wisdom & Metaphor*. I'm grossly oversimplifying Zwicky's thesis, but Adam Dickinson's review in *Canadian Literature* gives a more faceted explanation.

Connections made by the characters in *The Book of Frog* become resonant with meaning. The idea of resonance has ties to music, where melodic and harmonic motifs, phrases and rhythms build to a complete and layered experience for the listener. Perhaps the most explicit demonstration of resonance is in Liv's exploration of the Golden Ratio, a special irrational number without a recurring pattern. A line divided into two parts so that the longer part, divided by the smaller part, is also equal to the whole length divided by the longer part, results in the Golden Ratio, a number that appears frequently in geometry, architecture, and—as Liv realizes—a logarithmic spiral also occurs in the plot of a chromatic scale as a function of proportional wavelengths. Advanced mathematics may be beyond the scope of most general readers, but what seems more meaningful is that these details about the Golden Ratio comes from Liv's friend, Kazuo, also a cellist. As well, Frog points out her towards the frequent appearance of the number five in nature. Seeing a photo of a diffraction pattern of a quasi-crystal with five-fold symmetry, Liv notices its beauty, and then immediately marvels at how the lengths of each crystal segment are related to other lengths by the Golden Ratio. Without driving home the universal significance of these patterns, Zwicky presents this example of how we can become conscious of discernible contextual connections. Accompanying photographs, diagrams and images prompt readers to find these connections on their own.

Frog and Al make their human friends more conscious of these connections, so vitally important to our sense of ethics and to our interrelationships. What makes this process even more perplexing, and even at times nonsensical, is the fact that Frog and Al don't always communicate in ways that are intelligible to humans. Frog speaks mainly through thoughts, or emails to Al, peppered throughout the book—"Twitter, he felt, allowed him insufficient scope," but for someone without a voice, he "managed to express himself quite clearly on most subjects." Al prefers to be unplugged, without Facebook, TV or an iPod, configuring his email account to "bounce everything back into cyberspace." While he occasionally listened to radio waves while flying, "Mostly, though, he glided, looking and listening in silence … He thought missing out from time to time was a small price to pay for freedom."

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The Book of Frog presents multiple voices and conversations, as well as stressing the need for silence. Liv is concerned about the inability of her students to listen, to stare out of windows, to be alone, worrying they have nothing to stimulate their imaginations. Frog and Al's response to these anxieties is to suggest a walk. They don't have any satisfying answers, though, except to say that despite all human forebodings of environmental disaster, "the rocks are going to be here, and the sea and the sky." While this reassurance is somewhat deficient, maybe it's meant to feel that way to the reader.

One of the voices in Bringhurst's polyphonic *Conversation with the Toad* announces, "In this poem a man talks/ to a toad. The toad may listen/ or he may not. That, perhaps,/ is not the man's concern./ I suppose it is not the toad's concern/ either." There are correlations between Bringhurst's insistence that it is "the silences of the toad" that are most meaningful, and the gaps and unanswered doubts in *The Book of Frog*. These silences fill "the dark shells/ of the man's ears ad the spaces/ between his sentences," and fill "his eyes wherever he looks/ and his lungs whenever he breathes." In Zwicky's book, silences may also engender rooms and capacities for other kinds of understanding.

Presented in the background of *The Book of Frog*—like a painting's underlayer—is Liv's and Hugh's marriage and how it has survived time and distance. Frog and Al also become the means by which they send messages to each other and stave off the solitude. There are details about meals, the weather, reminders to each other, and affectionate messages that Frog calls "mushy chick stuff," though he concedes to Al that, "I think she feels about him the way you feel about the wind." It's plain that Liv and Hugh share an abiding love, but their absorption in quotidian and domestic details prevents them from catching onto Frog and Al's subtle lessons. This portrayal is deliberate on Zwicky's part, to show how difficult it can be for even well meaning people to shift their perspectives. Wisdom is hard to come by, and it isn't always conspicuous, and metaphorical thinking often doesn't translate smoothly to daily life and its myriad tasks and worries.

While Zwicky's other books can take on rigorous proofs and metaphysical arguments, *The Book of Frog* considers how theories of being and knowledge trickle down to our conversations, and to our daily practices of silence, listening, and contemplation. It hasn't received much critical attention, most likely because the book isn't easily classifiable into categories of genre and style. I would love to see this text on a college course syllabus, as an introduction to ecological writing, mythology, polyphony, or what role totem spirits and spirit guides might have in our technology-steeped world. In another writer's hands, it might be more transparent, and less allegorical—more

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direct, and less chatty. But then we wouldn't be pushed to puzzle out the book's meaning in the same way that Liv mulls over what Frog never says. We require silence in our lives in order to make room for the wisdoms that evade language. *The Book of Frog* is about paying attention, and it deserves exactly that.

PHOEBE WANG's work has appeared in *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *CV2*, *Canadian Literature*, *Descant*, *Grain,* and Diaspora Dialogue's *TOK 6: Writing the New Toronto*. She graduated from the University of Toronto's MA in Creative Writing program, and was recently a finalist of the CBC Poetry Prize. More of her writing can be found at www.alittleprint.com.

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"THERE ARE ONLY STORIES:"

A Review of Lisa Pasold's *Any Bright Horse*

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REVIEW BY E MARTIN NOLAN

There is power in "you." This is why Mathew Henderson used "you" to "implicate the reader" in *The Lease*. Even though his "you" was obviously the speaker talking back to himself, by choosing not to use "I" Henderson forces the reader not to regard the speaker, but to regard the speaker regarding himself. Or we can also enter the poem directly through the "you" by assuming the "you" addresses the reader, who becomes the one imaginatively cranking levers on the rig, watching the prairie sky, and otherwise working in the oil patch.

"You" is also a ready subject for longing. Eddie Vedder begging "I need you" on "Come Back" springs to mind, but the move is equally effective in Darren Bifford's *Wedding in Fire Country*, wherein he devotes a moving sequence to a departed "you." If he wrote "she" instead, he'd simply be telling us of the beloved, but "you" allows us to inhabit the speaker's longing, assume the role of the out-of-earshot beloved, or we can listen in on a private confession offered up to a thoughtless universe. The same could be said of Aisha Sasha John's *Gimme yr little quiet*, although the longing there is of a slightly different sort.

In all these cases, "you" gives the reader options. You can select one, but more likely it's a mix, with the "you" operating simultaneously on all of these levels, giving the poem a dynamism the active reader can play with. In *John Ashbery and You: His Later Books*, John Emil Vincent writes "it can be as alienating as it is intimate, because the 'you' a poem addresses could be anyone or anything." Vincent identifies four manifestations of Ashbery's "you": the reader, an exclusive "you" like a lover, "you" as God or—in the absence of God, reader or lover—"you" the anybody. Vincent claims this final "you" as "spatial" and able to become empty, allowing for "an absurd and unmoored

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playfulness."

In *Any Bright Horse*, Lisa Pasold employs a similarly unmoored strategy, also with the help of "you." Her unmoored-ness is given a distinct direction, though, and in the end she is using the indetermination of "you" to capture a broader truth concerning story telling itself. The book begins neatly:

> A Man goes on a journey.
> When he returns, he is changed.
> It's not an original story. It keeps happening.
> This is one way it happens.

This is condensed Joseph Campbell, and Pasold knows it. *Any Bright Horse*, as Beth Everest has written, is "a narrative about narrative." And while "this has been done many times before," Everest is correct in pointing out that despite the obvious central concept, "Pasold's strength is in her words." Any writer's strength is in her words, but by so blatantly showing her conceptual hand, Pasold is daring herself to prove that concept doesn't matter, or that a baldly exposed concept can still be interesting. In either case, we know what she's doing, so she has to hold us in how she does it.

Any Bright Horse starts out well in that regard. It begins by establishing a complication within its established concept in the second poem, with the journeyer—still just "a man"—going to "Pamir, roof of the world," where "Lucifer brought us light." Lucifer, in some traditions, is a "bringer of light," and shares this distinction with Prometheus, who is said to have stole fire from Zeus for us humans. Pasold gives us just this one line on Lucifer, and never specifies the version(s) of the Lucifer/Prometheus myth to which she refers, instead letting that mythical potentiality hover over the poem. The speaker, meanwhile, is "looking at the hoodoos of Southern Alberta" but "thinking of his Taklimakan Desert." "His," it soon becomes clear, refers to Marco Polo, who—legend has it—travelled to both Pamir and the Taklimakan Desert.

Thus, in the book's first two short poems, nine lines total, Pasold establishes narrative play, destabilization and retelling as the reigning control mechanism and theme of *Any Bright Horse.* These first two poems define narrative as at once universal (the hero's journey) and ever changing (due to constant re-telling). At least two oft-retold myths and legends are touched on (the Prometheus connection is just hinted at, but Lucifer and Polo are identified directly). But Pasold also lets us know that these poems will bring those narratives forward to her own time and place, and that she

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will liberally play with the versions of the stories she's telling, freely merging time, place and plot because, as she writes near the book's close, "everything is alongside us, simultaneous."

Having framed the book's approach in the early going, Pasold wastes little time jumping into the main narrative stream, focusing on a Viennese captive in Genoa in 1298—Marco Polo, or a version of him. We get little of Polo's travel narratives, with the focus instead being on his captivity in Genoa, where he told his story to Rustichello da Pisa, his neighbouring inmate, who would write down the first in a long line of retellings. This narrative is told from what mostly seems to be da Pisa's perspective. In any case, it is observed that "the whole city is drawn" to "the Venetian commander who commands nothing but his story." Not just any story, of course. Pasold writes that Polo has "one hell of a story," and in her acknowledgements she mentions a copy that inspired a young Christopher Columbus. Stories, the poet is suggesting, have consequences, and so does their telling.

And so, in *Any Bright Horse* we are drawn not just to the story, but also to the layering of the story. Pasold hints at how far she'll stretch her narrative play when her Polo recounts the "customs officer" who makes him "fill in dishonest declaration forms." Recounting this, he calls his "forged identity" a "masquerade of place, on paper." Add the element of time to that recipe, and you might get something like Pasold's book. "There is always a road," her Polo tells us; "I merely followed it." Pasold is herself a traveller—her bio makes this abundantly clear—making it simple to answer the leading question that follows: "is he speaking only for himself, or for all of us?" However, Pasold does not stop with the universalizing of story, but extends this tendency to language itself—"water flowing beneath ice"—which her Polo regards as a proper path to wonder, but not faith. "Why insist on a deity?" he asks, invoking a question that haunts this whole book, when "no god watches over such journeys."

Any Bright Horse is split into five sections. The first focuses on Polo and the co-dependent nature of stories and journeys. The anachronistic customs agent, though, is like the small crack in a dam, as in the second section the book's narratives begin to mingle. But in the book's third poem, Pasold introduces an even subtler narrative destabilizing element: "you." The speaker in this book is at times undetermined (is the poet describing Polo, or is it da Pisa? It's not always clear), but when the "you" is used it is almost always clear that it is one or another version of Polo employing it. In this case, Polo asks, "what if, when you return, the landscape seems wrong?" He also tells us "no wonder you can't rest. You have returned speaking a language your neighbours refuse to understand." Polo is presumably explaining his own predicament, but given the *Hero of a Thousand*

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Faces framework Pasold has already established, we are certainly invited to think this predicament goes well beyond him. Just as Hemingway was lost to his home in Michigan, and vice-versa, Pasold suggests some journeyers can never really come home. Hemingway never even tried to come back, so with Pasold we can ask, "what becomes of the people who don't come back?" Her answer: "they become the Journey."

Such is the condition of the book's second journeyer, who is introduced in the book's second section. This one started out "near the Credit River," where she "waited for the Cardinal" with envy. One day, she tells us, the bird took off and "I stared at the empty place where he was no longer." This instantly connects her to Polo, who has already mentioned red birds and told us "look from any window—our eye pursues the road until we see it no more." Our second traveller is a modern-day dancer with a neighbour who "believes he's Marco Polo." In *Any Bright Horse,* to believe *is* to be, so this person is Polo, as opposed to some madman who "spends too much time talking with the dead people" (as a church-going, and presumably well-rooted, neighbour puts it). This Twentieth-century Polo is as stationary as his captive, thirteenth century manifestation, but this time his neighbour—standing in for the Thirteenth-century da Pisa—is the active traveller. This is a twist on the Thirteenth-century narrative, but only slightly ,: both Polo and da Pisa are said to have travelled extensively, but da Pisa was not coming and going from Polo's presence, as is the modern day dancer.

Like his historical precedent, this modern Polo knows a thing or two about travelling. Indeed, he waits for the dancer to return before confidently telling her, as Pasold's Polos are wont to do, "what you saw." The presence of a streetcar on a "Canal Street" in a city with a "carnival" suggests these exchanges take place in New Orleans, but Pasold never names the city. But New Orleans has been compared to Venice, and with good reason, and given that Polo was eventually freed from Genoa and retired in Venice, we can assume this modern day version of him stands in for the retired Polo, knowingly reading the age-old traveller's tale on his neighbour's weary visage. He begins, "let me tell you what happened to you" before spending four pages regaling the "you" with the tale of her recent tour as a dancer in a production of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The Polo-inspired Christopher Columbus, remember, was the original Caribbean pirate, and thus he serves as the connection from the thirteenth century Polo to this modern day dancer, who the twentieth century Polo reminds, "you're just Pirate #3." Despite that lowly rank, Polo wonders, "should you believe a god looks after everything, simply/ to have the pleasure of leaning back, of being taken,/ taken over, consumed, to choose the spirit moving you?" Neither version of Polo ever seems

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convinced of this god, but he can never shake it off, either. This is as close as he gets to an answer, as he tells his modern day neighbour:

> Closing night, you're with your nightcap in the hotel's
> rooftop bar—the skyline, the whole world out there,
> blinking slowly on, blinking slowly off.

But while Polo's god remains as elusive as Ashbery's god-you, the story remains an ever-present vehicle, in this case symbolized by the titular horse. Thirteenth century Polo imagines hearing horses running along a non-existent river, but while they're not there in reality, he cannot accept their non-existence. "This space is as possible as any other," he tells us; "it is a question of perception, to willingly accept uncertainty." Through Polo, Pasold is implicitly referring to narrative space, the malleability of which allows present day Polo to anticipate missing the streetcars because they're "always *en route*" and "almost as convincing as horses' hooves." These hints at a central horse-metaphor are resolved in the third section, in which the horse-symbol appears in thirteenth century Genoa, a museum in Russia (Pasold provides no notes to hint at what, where or when exactly this is, but Petersburg, Petrograd, Leningrad and "our Leader" are all mentioned), and back. In the museum ("the manifestation of history") the speaker, who could be our dancer or the modern day Polo, descends to a hidden room where a preserved horse and the shoe of its rider, "a long-dead woman," lie "more eternal than our Leader's mummified corpse, more noble, more ready to rise up." But even this symbol of the story is inadequate and "less permanent than its rider might have once imagined." That is because the narrative is never encased behind glass and frozen. Instead it intends "to cross the snow-covered courtyard and gallop out onto the frozen Neva." Likewise, on the next page we get this from the thirteenth century Polo, who seems somehow aware of this later-day exhibit (although he may be just citing a coincidental stray memory): "we ought to be galloping across the frozen Neva, our hooves hard on the surface of the ice." We've already been told that language is the water flow below a frozen river, and so in telling stories, Polo suggests, "we are walking on water."

If a story is like a horse, though, its value is in its legs. To this point in *Any Bright Horse*, Pasold has presented bits of narrative and a lot of subtle play and argument concerning the nature of narrative. She is aware that this cannot carry a book, and so the fourth section moves us deeper into the dancer's story, told partly in the second person by her Polo-neighbour and partly in the first by the dancer herself. Unfortunately, this long-awaited story falls slightly flat. It reminds me of a

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musician friend, whose tedium with touring—even successfully—is undeniable each time he comes through town with his band. He always has a few highlights to tell of, just like our dancer has a "favourite hotel bar in Mombasa" with "a round green parrot." But mostly it's mundane details, like "your bags packed into the truck of your latest half-ass/ car, a series of gigs you've booked for yourself." But Pasold seems aware of this shortcoming, having her speaker end up at the dog races, wishing she were watching horses. She writes,

> the dogs must recognize that thing is not a rabbit,
> even if they chase it, but they have no other
> choices; the gates will open and away they'll go, forwards.

Having romanticized the journey, Pasold now deflates it to its mundane possibilities. She even begins doubting the horses she's seen:

> I know the race is wrong, made
> dishonest by money's ambitions.
>
> But the horses didn't know that,
> back then, they were just running.
> Maybe running for their lives, maybe for ours.

Pasold's dancer has become aware that a symbol can be abusive, that by pinning our knowledge of human longing on the symbol of a horse, we can paper over the potential failure of reality to live up to that symbol's connotation. Sometimes travelling is like a horse on the open road, sometimes it's like a dog bound to chase a fake rabbit in circles, and sometimes, as with Polo's trip to Genoa, travelling is exile. Walker Percy, another expert of the journey, would recognize these possibilities (see his "the Man on the Train").

The Thirteenth century Polo claims there is a language for disappointment, one akin not to water, but to "the hard clattering of rock." But while he needed this language to survive, he was "ill designed … for anchoring" and remained tied to the fluid language of story, unable to resist "the Genoese children['s] chant, *Messer Marco, tell us another lie*." So despite reality, the story remains bright, because it can lie. And why not? Who would prefer to be as the Genoese Scholar, who in discussing the horse as symbol of the story in the book's third section, "pokes at the story as if a corpse were appearing beneath him" and claims "such things aren't love"? He says this to a prostitute, who

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knows better, telling him "that's exactly your problem." "That night," we're told, "the horse appears in her dreams" with "a shaking mane and a route across the snow." This leads to "one missing whore, gone from Genoa, accompanied by the sound of hooves." A story can save us then, if only in our dreams.

This theme is echoed in the book's fifth section, when the medieval Polo tells a story in which prostitutes near a river "that was liquid silver" lock themselves inside all day and sing in the night, "when the stars were reflected like points of hope in the silver of the river." All, of course, because of belief in a story, in which the prostitutes are destined to become birds trapped in cages of silver—with the moral being, perhaps, that the story gave them something to avoid: the songs of the birds, their future selves. Stories, Pasold is suggesting, are as much for the trapped as they are for the free to roam, because both need lies to see them through.

This tale of the silver river comes in the final section of *Any Bright Horse*, and is followed by an echo of the book's opening poem:

> In that desert, there are no lies, he says, only miracles.
>
> Do you believe that?
>
> No. There are only stories. All of them true.

What's the difference between a story and a miracle? Is it that you can believe in a story, even if it's not true? Discussing Gilgamesh near the book's close, a speaker who could be Polo, could be the dancer, could be anyone, dismisses the fact that "what Gilgamesh brings back doesn't save him" because "the power is in the story itself, that he has been heroic and tells his story and then he dies." So it is in the manner of telling, and not the actual outcome, that a story finds its value. This is supported in section four, when the book lags a bit and the dancer is put in mind more of dull dogs than bright horses, when the twentieth century Polo to attempts to alter the dancer's story for the better. He begins the section with a mundane second-person prose narrative of an eye injury sustained by the dancer. Then he transitions into a four-page re-telling of her tour (mentioned above), which is followed by her first-person account of the disappointing dog racetrack. But here's the key: in that middle passage, when he's telling her story, he recounts that she comes home in a sour mood, trying to "resist your 'everything goes' persona." Soon enough, though, "you cringe,

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longing so/ hard for exhilaration," and then this "you" is off again, "a nomad … for whom/ all lands are familiar." We could ask how he might know these things about the dancer, but that's not the point. The point is that Polo recognizes in his neighbor a longing for a brighter story, and so he gives it to her, and to us. Who has time for the truth?

Any Bright Horse is a testament to narrative possibility, but it should be noted that its prose and prosy-verse, while efficient and clean, is not particularly musical or dense. This could result in a deceptively quick read that would miss Pasold's subtle play of argument and narrative, which when fully teased out is surprisingly dynamic, as is her play between poetry and prose. This works, because for Pasold the story is always on the move, a boat "slipping from its lines" and moving off in the distance, unmoored like language and like "you." But Pasold's "you" is just a part of her play, which condenses into a pleasant unity near the end when Pasold identifies "our genius in dwelling within and yet without our own invented walls." A similar thing might be said of any worthwhile poem. That said, some commentators might think *Any Bright Horse* is more theoretical examination than original creative work. I'd argue that she more "unmoors" the line between the two, and does so effectively.

E MARTIN NOLAN writes poetry and non-fiction. He received his MA in the Field of Creative Writing from the University of Toronto in 2009. He's a poetry and blog editor at *The Puritan* magazine, where he also publishes interviews and reviews. His essays and poems have appeared in *The Barnstormer*, *The Toronto Review of Books*, *The Toronto Quarterly,* and *Contemporary Verse 2*. He teaches at the University of Toronto. You might know him as Ted.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ASHLEY-ELIZABETH BEST is from Cobourg. She was on the poetry shortlist for the 2011 *Matrix* Litpop Awards and *Prism*'s Poetry Prize 2012. She has poetry appearing in *The Toronto Quarterly*, *Tampa Review*, *CV2*, and *Branch Magazine*. She recently placed first for poetry in *This Magazine*'s Great Canadian Literary Hunt 2012 and was the poetry runner up for *subTerrain Magazine*'s Lush Literary Awards 2012. She has a chapbook published with Cactus Press called *Slow States of Collapse*. Currently, she lives and writes in Kingston.

ERIC LLOYD BLIX's stories do or soon will appear in *Necessary Fiction*, *Birkensnake*, *REAL: Regarding Arts & Letters*, *theNewerYork*, and elsewhere. He studies in the MFA program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where he also teaches writing. He is currently working on expanding "Project Ω" into a novel.

STEPHEN BROCKWELL is an Ottawa poet and small business owner. His book *Fruitfly Geographic* won the Archibald Lampman award. His fifth book of poems, *The Complete Surprising Fragments of Improbable Books* will soon be published by Mansfield Press.

LAURA CLARKE is a Toronto-based writer and a graduate of University of Toronto's MA in Creative Writing program. Her work has been published in various journals including *The Antigonish Review*, *Grain, PRISM international,* and *Qwerty*. She is the winner of the 2013 RBC Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers from the Writers' Trust of Canada.

CATHERINE GRAHAM is the author of *The Watch* and the poetry trilogy: *Pupa*, *The Red Element* and *Winterkill*. Anthologized in *The White Page / An Bhileog Bhan: Twentieth Century Irish Women Poets,* Graham's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Room Magazine*, *The Malahat Review, Descant Magazine, Poetry Ireland Review, The Antigonish Review, The Rusty Toque* and *The Fiddlehead*. A Board member of The Rowers Reading Series and co-facilitator for The Platform Reading Series, she teaches Creative Writing at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies and has read her work at numerous venues including the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Her forthcoming collection, *Her Red Hair Rises with the Wings of Insects*, will appear Fall, 2013 with Wolsak & Wynn. Visit her at www.catherinegraham.com.

KEVIN HARDCASTLE is a fiction writer from Simcoe County, Ontario. He has also lived in Birkenhead, Cardiff, and Edmonton. He has studied writing at the University of Toronto and at Cardiff University. Hardcastle's short stories have been published in *Word Riot, subTerrain Magazine*, and *The Malahat Review*. He is represented by Meggie Macdonald at Transatlantic Literary Agency, and his first two novels are on offer with them. An excerpt from his second novel, *Work*, was published in *Noir Nation: International Journal of Crime Fiction*. Hardcastle also has a short story forthcoming in *Little Fiction*. He currently lives in the west end of Toronto.

BILL HOWELL has five poetry collections, including *Porcupine Archery* (Insomniac Press). Recent work: *Antigonish Review*, *Canadian Literature*, *Descant*, *Grain*, *Existere*, *Vallum*, *Windsor Review*. Further information: http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/howell.

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Originally from Halifax, **AMY JONES** is a graduate of the MFA Program in Creative Writing at UBC. Her short fiction has appeared in several Canadian publications, and she was the winner of the 2006 CBC Literary Award for Short Story in English. Her first short fiction collection, *What Boys Like* (Biblioasis, 2009) was the winner of the 2009 Metcalf-Rooke Award, and was short-listed for the 2010 ReLit Award. Amy currently lives in Thunder Bay, where she is working on a novel.

CAMILLE MARTIN is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Looms* (2012) and *Sonnets* (2010), both from Shearsman Books. She holds a PhD in English from Louisiana State University and an MFA in Poetry from the University of New Orleans. She lives in Toronto. Blog: http://rogueembryo.com. Website: http://www.camillemartin.ca.

E MARTIN NOLAN writes poetry and non-fiction. He received his MA in the Field of Creative Writing from the University of Toronto in 2009. He's a poetry and blog editor at *The Puritan* magazine, where he also publishes interviews and reviews. His essays and poems have appeared in *The Barnstormer*, *The Toronto Review of Books*, *The Toronto Quarterly,* and *Contemporary Verse 2*. He teaches at the University of Toronto. You might know him as Ted.

JIM SMITH's last two fab books are *Happy Birthday, Nicanor Parra* (Mansfield Press, 2012) and *Back Off, Assassin!: New and Selected Poems* (Mansfield Press, 2009). He will read just about anywhere. Just ask him.

AARON TUCKER's poetic works and reviews have been published across Canada. His chapbook, *apartments*, was shortlisted for the 2010 bpNichol Chapbook award. His current project, tentatively titled *punchlines*, is coming out in chapbook form from above/ground press in the summer of 2013. More of his work can be found at aarontucker.ca. In addition, he is a professor in the English department at Ryerson University where he is currently teaching essay writing and digital literacy to first year students. He is working on learning chess in between watching his beloved Raptors lose games.

PHOEBE WANG's work has appeared in *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *CV2*, *Canadian Literature*, *Descant*, *Grain,* and Diaspora Dialogue's *TOK 6: Writing the New Toronto*. She graduated from the University of Toronto's MA in Creative Writing program, and was recently a finalist of the CBC Poetry Prize. More of her writing can be found at www.alittleprint.com.

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