

ACTA
VICTORIANA

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Acta Victoriana

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stigma

i

oh, and will— are you any good
in the sack? i was
just wondering a bit lately

because since that night
we held hands, for
no reason, i've had you
in mind.

ii

i've been busy
seducing lilies,

they cost me enough to feed
a generic child in a third world country

for an extended period of time.
the florist forgot to remove the anthers.

iii

we finally happened,
and i didn't
want to touch you.

stretched out like a modigliani
couple, on sheets that haven't been washed
since the queen's birthday, you won.

sunday morning the snow fell in clumps,
the last lily yawned, as
you told me i was beautiful.

oh, and will— william, are you any good
at removing anthers? the florist forgot
and now the white tablecloth is stained.

v

"saturday was fun",
said the boy with the whole name,
and patted me on the shoulder.

Portrait of an Uncle

You who have never heard of Led Zeppelin or
read the Holy Qur'an stand with a string
of toilet paper around your neck
fist in air, shouting *Za rodinu, za Stalina!*
with a trace of that self-deprecating Polish irony;
You who think you know everything
not knowing what you lack.

I remember your patient hands with earthen
patriotism beneath visionary fingernails
leaning over crops in lambskin cap
and polyester suit
(this one will survive, this one will die)
declaring that Confession is not for you
because you never sin;

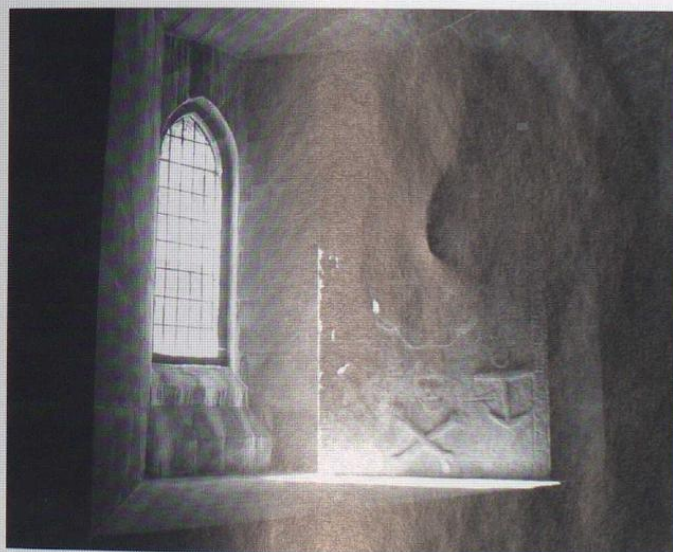
And in your laid back dub style you
lit a Blue Star American Blend
singing of Russian girlfriends who
shit behind wheelbarrows
because they ate rotten fruit.

Uncle, your brown face is like a wrinkled walnut
and yet you let me push you in rusty wheelbarrow
exclaiming *Viva L'Arte!*
until your kerchiefed wife chased you down
the dirt road with frying pan
kicking up pebbles with her wooden clogs.

Basta! Basta! Uncle run!
Chest heaving you returned, as always,
with cigarette hanging sideways in mouth
pouring German vodka (the glass was for me)
and we sat on a bale of hay watching the sun
set over the neighbor's field of wheat

until you were drunk, laughing and swaggering
like you owned the entire world
and half of Poland
forgetting that in your chest a tumor grows;

One day, soon, you will fall, Uncle,
like a condemned building imploding
to the sound of a messa requiem
but, I know, will return as
an enlightened sunflower
in a cabbage patch
behind an outhouse.



Ben Chaisson

St. Andrews

the broken record player

she wears dark glasses
(nobody sees her eyes)
pushing the same hoary, airy note between her teeth,
as if she had forgotten to go on living after she heard that song.
She coughs up a colourless tune.
The tune is decrepit, old,
punching out brokenly blow after blow.
The object of determined inattention,
she holds a bright orange neon sign — "for sale" —
against a bleak black background.
I watch the crowds milling and closing around her
while the grunting note bounces against the rim of my mind
and I hear myself go deaf inside.

After Birds Warming

for Julia

Somehow starling shadows cast on the house
next to ours by that Sunday's winter sun—

some seemed to hover with folded wings
while others flitted & darted, flapping
on a fractured length of slatted shingles—

became the loop played on the ceiling
of our curtained room brushed with blue
light by that same Sunday sun hours
later when we thrust & shook aloft

whorled pillows of warm air made
from our joining & as daylight dimmed,
our shadows too looped above us—

flapping, darting, flitting—dissolving body
into body, spectral & hovering—

Bilboa's Room

The owners never ask us for the rent.
They're shy, they sleep a lot, they're hard to find.
Their children laugh and race across the balcony,
Taking no notice of us. They do not mind
Who comes and goes, the dubious company
We keep; our voices raised in argument.

The room contains a wardrobe made of teak,
A chest of drawers, a mirror behind the door,
The desk in which you find my diary.
The sink, though loose, is large enough to store
A kilo of ice quite adequately.
The fan is one reliable antique.

Bilboa liked the place, I understand.
His lewd roman à clef (still selling well)
Started within these walls tricked out in reds
And powder blues. The seedy, faded egg-shell
Whites of the chessboard tiles between the beds
Stretch smooth and polished as a no-man's-land.

You want revenge. You've left to importune
Strangers to take you to the worst bordello:
A master-stroke. I hear him in the room,
Whispering his urgings to a girl I know.
The strip-lights buzz. The wall-stains seem to bloom.
I turn the pages of Soldier of Fortune.

Galleys

Bingham weathered the incident with the pistol
To vanish Stateside for about a year.
He returned with rather a shame-faced leer
And, later, OD'd over the galleys of his novel.

Pink Elephant Dave claimed not to miss Yorkshire,
Ran the bar quietly and loved his boys
And his football. He made a small noise
When Big Tony shouldered his coffin into the fire.

Slimming at an unceasing and alarming rate,
Jason coughed his lungs up as expected.
Boasting of all the women he had infected
In revenge, he shivered in the evening heat.

Whitwell drove past with both hands raised
In chains on the blue police lorry.
Happily, his father was a wealthy Tory.
Was there to greet him as he walked out dazed

Into the daylight and later, confessing to a peer,
Spoke of the victim, the family hovel,
But mostly of his lost pistol. His novel
(He lived to read the galleys) is expected next year.

Todd

When you're that small everything seems so big,
our small fists trying to cover dinky cars,
your older brother Donny passing by,
hurling insults like sloppy snowballs
pitched in the back park.

And there was that fall or spring
we wandered the green ski hills, finding
empty Blue Nun bottles, remnants of
parties thrown by teens
between the pines of Collingwood.

We always blocked everything out,
building a junk yard pile of cars
a mountain against your bedroom door,
the smell of cheap tin
making my mouth taste iodine.

My mother left the obits open
on the kitchen table, her pencil
pointing out your name.

A Welcome Sight

The loss of sight is no great thing. Countless species of Animalia have graced the planet possessing neither eye nor orb nor rudimentary photoreceptive cell with which to view the universe. And what of plants? There's no doubting their tremendous success — note the phrase 'God's green Earth' as opposed to 'God's fleshy-coloured Earth' — and yet nary a peeper among them.

To say that this is a world for the sighted is a tremendous conceit on par with claiming that evolution favours the rich. No natural law exists demanding that traffic signals be red and green as opposed to bitter and sweet or floral and putrid or hot and cold or screamed and whispered. If the rules are so, it is only because we ('we' being an exclusive term) have made them so.

Which brings us to Marta:

Marta Torrance, aged twenty-three, an unremarkable young woman of average appearance and constitution with interests not worth noting and experiences too tedious for even an occasional diary entry. The cliché "disappears into the crowd" would suit one such as her, except that it oversimplifies the situation. For example: In a small crowd of interesting people, Marta would stand out as "the boring one". In a larger congregation of individuals — anything over a few dozen, let's say — she would not so much "disappear into the crowd" as she would simply "disappear".

As is the case with all human beings, Marta only becomes interesting after a singular event to redefine the dimensions of her existence if even for a moment. Whether said event is beneficial or detrimental is of no consequence; just be glad there's something worth talking about. The details can wait for later.

The details: Marta Torrance, driving a '97 Toyota, gets caught in a downpour, loses control of her vehicle, and slams into a concrete embankment. Due to a unique combination of the forces scientists interpret as physics, she incurs a severe blow to the head which permanently damages the visual cortex.

At first, things are not so bad for dear Marta. The novelty of a world without sight is not lost on her. Simple tasks such as facing the right way when someone speaks or making it to the toilet without stumbling over things become challenges that are overcome with no small sense of accomplishment. If she has friends they would fawn over her, lavish her with love and concern and all those nice things; if she lacks friends, sympathetic strangers would suffice.

But then the inevitable occurs: The honeymoon ends. The memory of sight — like the memories of a perfect love or a joyous summer or a pair of shoes that go with everything — gnaws away at the seconds of her day with the taunting

reminder that something is absent and that she will miss it. Marta is not keen on an existence in which her television has been reduced to a radio that broadcasts extremely vague and uninformative programs. A trivial point, perhaps, but for some it is the difference between life and non-life.

Luckily for Marta, science has long been at work on her particular problem. Such is the nature of progress: human institutions unleashed upon human conundrums until a singular event occurs to redefine the dimensions of our existence if even for a moment. Whether said event is beneficial or detrimental is of no consequence; just be glad there's something worth talking about. The details can wait for later.

The details: A certain scientist by the name of Alexandre Ducéppe — tall, confident, a silver fox of a man — secures a sizeable research grant in order to cure blindness. The reason for his fervour is a poignant one: Dr. Ducéppe once observed a blind man from across the street and — without even speaking to the man — imagined that his life was a complete and utter hell. A vessel of pure empathy, the good doctor is.

Dr. Ducéppe believes strongly in the idea of sharing: What's yours is mine and what's mine is yours. His proposal to eradicate blindness is a seamless extension of this philosophy, as is apparent in a much-vaunted magazine interview: "Colours and shapes are not personal blessings — they are aspects of the universe that everyone merely taps into. One set of eyes is as good as another. So instead of wasting time and resources attempting to restore sight to the individual, why not simply provide

them with a means to borrow sight from others?"

That the doctor makes it sound all so easy is a testament to his winning smile and subtle French accent. In fact, the solution he eventually develops is anything but. It involves a device that is similar to a radio but with one crucial difference: instead of radio waves, it detects and amplifies brain waves — specifically, the patterns confined to the visual cortex. Implanted into one's own brain, said device allows the individual to see through the eyes of anyone with whom he or she makes physical contact. Granted, the system is not perfect. The perspective shift takes some getting used to, the need for skin-to-skin contact creates social discomfort, and of course the whole shebang is entirely contingent upon the presence of another person. But it's better than nothing.

Within five years of the initial proposal, Dr. Ducéppe and his team complete a working prototype of the thumbnail-sized device which they cheerfully christen the Welcome Sight System; all that remains is the clinical trial.

Re-enter Marta, stage right:

"Will this work with my cat?" she asks before the surgery commences.

The doctors had never considered such issues before. Lacking definitive answers, they choose to ignore the question.

The procedure is done under only a local anaesthesia. Since the brain lacks pain receptors, there is no need to render the patient unconscious; besides, once the system is activated she must be capable of informing the doctors that it is working

properly.

Unfortunately, Marta loses consciousness at the moment of activation. Being blind for half a year only to suddenly be assailed with the sight of someone jabbing at your own exposed brain can do that to you. Realizing what has occurred, Dr. Ducéppe instructs an orderly to block the gore with a tarp. Then, theatrically, he lays his hand upon Marta's forehead and commands her to awaken.

Marta stirs and sees: Her own face, familiar yet indistinct, as if the features are completely irrelevant.

"How is it?" he asks excitedly.

She shrugs. "Just like old times."

According to the parameters laid out by Dr. Ducéppe's team, the Welcome Sight System is a resounding success. If Marta Justice wishes to see, she need merely touch another human being and the world is hers for the viewing. So far so good.

For her part, Marta has some trouble getting accustomed to the system. The eyes and the head move with surprising speed and frequency; for one who is not in conscious control of said movements, the experience is at best disorienting and at worst nauseating. In addition, it turns out the system does indeed work with cats. Marta is forced to reluctantly give her precious Mr. Mittens up for adoption.

It does not take long for her to discover another nuance with the device: Its performance is inconsistent. Marta notices the inconsistency most clearly when she is presented with her own visage. Although the face is always recognizably her own, it takes on different flavours depending on whose sight she shares. For example: through Dr. Ducéppe's eyes she is always

out of focus, as much a part of the background as the wallpaper. Through the eyes of others, she sees herself as drab, or sickly, or as if bad lighting were always in effect in her immediate vicinity. About the only consistent element is the fact that nobody looks directly at her for too long, not even when she is speaking to them; their eyes wander until something more interesting comes into view, such as a plant or perhaps a cleavage.

Marta is unfazed by her unflattering appearance. At one time or another she has seen each and every one of those faces before, in her own mirror. As for the others' blatant indifference to her presence, that too is no huge surprise. Its confirmation serves as a bitter sort of vindication, a smugness born of knowledge that the optimists don't really have a leg to stand on.

However, Marta does recognize how the quirks of the system might prove problematic. She decides to bring it up during her next meeting with Dr. Ducéppe.

"Why does this happen?" she asks.

Dr. Ducéppe taps his chiselled jaw absently. "I suppose the system transmits some background noise along with the information from the optic nerve. Mind you, specific brain wave patterns are very difficult to isolate. Some were bound to slip through the cracks." He waves his hand dismissively. "A minor glitch. It's of no concern."

"But what if I touch someone who's intoxicated?" she asks. "Or delusional?"

The doctor clicks his tongue against his teeth. "You'll see what they see, obviously. The same goes if you touch someone who is dreaming. But surely you have enough common sense to judge whether

the things you see are real or not."

Marta furrows her brow. "How would I do that? Judge, I mean."

Dr. Duc  ppe sighs. "Mon Dieu. You touch everyone in the room and whatever is visible to the vast majority must be real. It's not as complicated as you make it sound."

During the last phase of the clinical trial, a new technician joins the team to make final adjustments to the device. His name is Reginald Arthurs. Marta, heeding the doctor's advice, forms her opinion of him based on consensus. Everybody agrees that Reggie is an attractive if somewhat jumpy young man with a quick smile and a manner that screams barely restrained passion.

Reggie takes an immediate interest in Marta. He strikes up spontaneous conversations with her in the halls of the research institute, periods of uncomfortable small-talk punctuated by occasional inexplicable compliments. At first Marta looks for ways to weasel out of their chats; and yet, she cannot help but feel a flicker of warmth when he calls her name. Soon she begins to eagerly anticipate the sound of his voice. If possible, she watches for him through the eyes of Nurse Samson — it's the most flattering view. At all costs, however, Marta avoids touching his skin. She does not know why, but she considers it of the utmost importance.

On the final day of the trial, Reggie makes his intentions known to Marta.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he says. "All I do is dream about you."

"Oh stop," she says but does not mean it.

"Let's run away together."

"Now you're just being silly."

"I mean it. I think I'm in love with you."

Marta frowns. "I wish I could believe that."

"Look at me. Look at my face and you'll know that I'm sincere."

"I can't, Reggie. There's no one in the room but us — and it would be awful awkward to drag someone else in here at the moment."

Reggie begins to sigh piteously, but catches himself short. Once again, following the grand human tradition, desperation gives birth to inspiration. "Look at yourself then," he proposes excitedly. "See yourself through my eyes, and you'll know why I have no choice but to love you." And before she can stop him, Reggie closes his hands around hers.

And Marta sees:

Beauty. Grace. Kindness. Radiance. Warmth.

Not once in her whole life has she ever seen this face. Not through her own eyes, nor anyone else's. It is completely unrecognizable to her. The ugliness of truth — the truth of ugliness — dawns upon her.

"That's not me," she says sadly. "Never was. Never will be."

"What are you talking about?" Reggie demands. "That's you, the real you, that's how I see you."

Gently — but firmly — Marta pulls her hands free from his grasp. "I'm sure that's what you believe," she whispers. "Maybe you should seek professional help."

And so they part, forever and ever.

Dr. Duc  ppe's Welcome Sight System

is released onto the market and becomes a runaway success. For the first time in history (barring of course the miracles of Jesus Christ and his ilk), the blind can see just as well as the sighted.

Nothing changes.

Little Sister

This house is on fire, little sister,
The walls are burning down, down.
A Greek chorus stands on the stairs, knee high
In flames, witches at the stake,
Mouths open, hair flowing,
Bare feet slapping ruined carpet.
They are ominous and you are charcoal —
A hard briquette — and God is water and
The wells are dry. Fish bake on the ocean floor in sand
Which is fast becoming glass.

This house is Ash, and you and I.
We are grey carbon dust, indistinguishable
From all the other dust. A world of dust. We blow
Up

Up
And away. You on the West Wind, I on the East.
I call to you little sister, but you are lava cooling
At my feet. You are stone little sister.

Now we circle separate countries, twin queens
Of lonely lands. The sun travels between us, a fiery and soundless postcard —
A love letter in the sky.

Sour Cream Biscuits

In a hot room I trace your mouth
With a small blue sponge on a stick.
Your mouth,
Which is a dry, lipless hole.
Which reminds me of a giant gaping fish mouth.
Which contains the whole universe.
Your whole universe.

Your breath is like a metronome.
Like a monster.
A full body spasm, a desperate dance.
A rhythmic push/suck. A sad song.
A hymn.

Your body, your house of blood and bone,
Lies nearly vacant, the tenant lingering in the
Doorway
One last look at
The skin soft and pale,
The shoulders heaving butterfly wings,
The bones so light I could hold them
In one hand.

In my dream you are swimming under the bed covers with me.
Our bodies huddle together. We are
Unlikely twins in a fabric womb.
Your hair is thin. Our eyes are four big moons.

There is no language.

Time evaporates and you sail away
On the current of our shared breath.
You traverse the small sky above my bed
And are lost.
Peace settles like pollen in my pores.

This is what I remember:

Five years old
In the green kitchen
Standing on a stool
Our hands knuckle deep in the dough
Flour on your cheek.

This is what I have:

The recipe —
A loose-leaf relic,
Transparent with time and the rubbing
Of buttery fingers.
Mine, my mother's. Yours.

Like the gauzy wings of moths
I can see my fingers through it,
Your spidery hand blurry but visible.

Between the lines and inside the bites
Of biscuit flesh
You are still fat and efficient and brisk.
Not brittle bone and white wisp hair
Like later

This is what I know:

Flour	shortening	salt.
Baking soda and powder both.		

Sugar. But not much.

Cut out with a glass.

Bake at 350.

Eat with strawberry jam.

How I Got This Line Down My Nose

I saw a man on the subway holding a bag of live catfish and I wondered if they were for eating or for putting in a tank to slowly die. Everyone on the subway was looking at the man and his blue-rimmed sack of sturdy clear plastic. His face wore the armour of *what?* so that even if you didn't initially notice the fish, his expression alone aroused suspicion. I was grateful for the catfish man because twenty minutes before boarding the train, I myself had pissed my pants and I was hoping that all the noise from all the people's wondering about the catfish would drown out the smell of my vinegar piss. I was wearing dark green sweatpants, dark enough that looking at them you would expect that if doused in a cup of liquid — urine say — the difference in colour between the wet areas and their dry neighbours would be negligible. Well, you would be — as I was — wrong. In fact, the stain was very obvious and because it was summer my torso was covered by only a small tank top, meaning I couldn't remedy my situation with a light green jacket or even a spare black cardigan tied just-in-case-of-cold to one of the straps of my purse. And I was alone. Which was why I had peed my pants in the first place, because having woken up at 4 a.m. to get in the queue for Prince tickets at five, and being only third from the front the moment my bladder gave the rest of my body its ultimatum, I could leave no

one behind with my Visa to let me take my piss.

When I arrived at my station, at Bathurst, I wasn't sure if maybe I should just walk the way home and risk the stares of pedestrians. The pee had made a dark green horseshoe starting at one knee and around to the other one. This I gathered from my reflection on the subway glass. My ass felt equally wet but I dared not draw the attention it would take to stand assback to the glass and peer around. My other option was to ride the streetcar and risk stinking — risk stinking and running into someone I knew. I would die if this happened, I decided. The shame would melt my skin and the rest would fall apart in my clothes like soft cheese.

So what did I do? I kept following the catfish man. I followed him past the turnstile and onto the street which was lemon yellow interrupted with bodies and buildings. The man walked quickly and I lost him having gotten stuck behind a thin, slow-moving family. The dad held his daughter's entire hand with his index finger and let her walk although it was clear that she was new at it and not very good. The catfish man got around them by parting the son and his mother. I resisted following because I knew one of those brats was likely to ask its mommy how come that lady made potty in her pants? The family turned into a store, and I started

Saturday morning way, keeping my eyes focused straight ahead of me. There was a high school track field to my left and it was filled with ball-throwing pet owners and players of Frisbee, i.e. the kind of people who had the time to notice a passing pissy pants person, as in: me. So I was looking dead ahead and the man and his fish were nowhere in my line of sight. And okay, maybe I wasn't that inconspicuously jogging because I lifted my legs high high high in the hopes that the wind would dry me.

I would have left the strange man and his bag of fish all alone and continued running home — once I passed the school I could have easily cut into a side street, eliminating most chance of any kind of run-in — but the bus stopped then, the 93 Harbord to Ossington station, and children were streaming out of it, coming towards me en masse, maybe fifty of them, and so I stopped short of the intersection and stuck my face to the fence, my lips protruding from one hole, my nose squashed and my eyes clearly peeking from fence holes upwardly adjacent to the one containing my mouth. I put my head to the fence so suddenly that I cut a gash down my nose, the pain of which I barely felt because I was trying so hard to be still, still and invisible to the passing monsters. Looking out into the field, I saw the catfish man lying supine sans fish. There he lay, face down on the yellowing green inside a high school track field, surrounded by Boston terriers and low-flying Frisbees, and without, from as far as I could see — his sack of fish. He lay there for a good 2 minutes. And I stood outside the fence, watching. Touching the seat of my pants maybe four times and cringing each time I

felt it wet.

And then he arose. And the fishbag was there, and he ran out of the field and across the street and I watched in something like wonder and it was then that I felt the pain of the cut on my nose, and touching it, discovered blood. And so I had even more reason to get my ass quickly home, two bodily fluids having leaked out of me. I must have looked like some sort of half-ass crackhead — all the pathetic accessories without the hard-earned skinniness.

I'm not exactly sure why I decided to march across the field. Because I like to see things through? Because without even realizing it, I had already seen the space in the fishbag as I watched the weirdo hurl himself across the street? But when I got closer to the spot where he had been, and saw the two terriers barking at a mud coloured lump before them, I wasn't surprised. The fish was flopping violently but only up and down; it didn't seem to be willing to cross some invisible boundary. The dog owners, engrossed in conversation maybe 15 feet away, seemed to think the object of their pets' harassment was me; and so the dogs were called away and surprisingly, they left. So it was just me and the fish and seeing its whiskers up close I wanted to both hold it in my hands squeezing gently, and also to run fast and far and find a friend and give up Prince. I did both. I held it in both hands, not gingerly — I held it — and I ran across the field onto Harbord street and all the while I was screaming 'AAAAHHHHHHH' because I had a frigging catfish in my hands and I don't even eat fish and all the dogs and their masters looked at me and I forgot about my pissed-up pants, I just ran

and I screamed but the catfish, it fought,
and slipped out of my hands and at the sur-
prise of it, I tripped and fell. I landed on
my hip in the space where the dirt turned
to sidewalk. My hands, I put them to my
nose and they smelled like fish. They stank
like fish.

I had to iron the Prince tickets. When
I got home I put my whole self in the
shower, shoes even. I disinfected the cut
and put vitamin E on it but still I have this
line.

Jim Johnstone

these people are dangerous

1

acrobats mount in a triangle
arms exacting themselves
on the darkness
like a scar

the multitudes push
inwards

talking of spectacle
& four fingered jugglers
but praying for death

watching a kind of massacre
that children remember in
specific glorious slides
or silent movie

2

a contortionist moves
like the lips of two men kissing

serpentine tongues
unafraid of
God

tents collapse
 rainwater washes identities
 blood semen
 red cranberries trampled & crushed

the performers deform their eyes
 for torches
 & illuminate the night's
 vulnerable shadows

shaking fireflies
 leaping
 in an overturned glass

Father's Day

I am my father's child: the hands of a carpenter and the chutzpa of a salesman — your German schnozzle, Victorian ears, and wry sense of religion. Sun shimmies all but skeletons out of the aspen in fall and rouses something of the blue in your eyes that makes the stubs beautiful again. You taught me that the mountains are cathedrals when the weather is right; but I love that you're more Presbyterian than you let on. "Never apologize for being right," you smirked when Jordan made that shot, "in sports, and in love."

While other parents recited chapters from *The Pink Panther*, you read me the illustrated edition of *Where Did I Come From?* as 8:30 entertainment. Always you'd keep a straight face until running across the caricature of a nude baby with the text, "it gets bigger as you get bigger because it has lots of work to do," throwing a knowing glance toward Mom. I soon graduated to "one cocktail plus one sperm plus one egg make one Gregory," and knew that all my friends were jealous of my knowledge. I couldn't wait to continue my sex education with *What's Happening To Me*, the fourth grade installment. This we read with popcorn. "The extra skin makes it longer, why'd you want to lose that," you'd reason to the sixth graders. You could make my friends feel like grade-A bastards just for asking. I appreciated it.

You bounced me on your knee as I learned that a swig of wine, in my case milk, must always chase Aunt Kathy's casserole. I am diplomatic when angry, even-keeled when frightened, and charming when desperate, at least that's what you say.

Mom feels beautiful around you before her first cup of coffee, with pink foam rollers in her hair and soup on the stove. You make her loud, alert, and hungry. Finding your fading youth admirable, I catch her studying the deep creases of your brow, the hardening coffee stains on your teeth from 20 years of five to nine. She has started going to the gym again; she says it's for her heart. Though still becoming, she uses just too much blush on her rounding cheeks, her laugh one octave too high and thrilled. I even caught her smoking Virginia Slims on the porch. I know you love her, but I see the softening of her curves, her hips widening so slightly. A slowing of character and form frustrates a spry mind, and I wonder if you glimpse the doubt in her eyes, a beauty now untrusted and suspect.

Mom says her name's Olivia. I can't believe you're gone.



Beth Kates

Amsterdam

Benedetta Lamanna

fall-out

loss
lands one year later,
plucked from dead air
of Wilson Station
by the mandolin
of a brown-skinned man
slouched over,
anonymous,
his half-gloved fingers
strumming Spanish heart-
strings, pulled
and teased,
diffusing your elegy
into the sunstone-coloured wall tiles,
grey shuffle of escalator,
my white bones
so that you
bristle
against
windowpanes;
beyond this,
deft glimmers
of white and red city lights:
December night
that annihilates
with its numbness,
an x-ray of things brushed
under, semi-forgotten.

old age

maybe I will be an old maid,
don a wrinkled mask
of past victories
and defeats,
watch brown spots
freckle my crumpled hands
like tiny medals
of endurance

once a week
they'll let me walk
barefoot
along the shore
of the Pacific
sand squishing cold between
my ancient toes.
every five steps,
I'll look behind my
tired, sloping shadow
for two sets of footprints,
for a stamp of you

she still thinks about him,
the blue-uniformed nurses
will say. thinks he's still
here, the old girl. I'll become a case
of wonder over coffee,
sandwiches with the crusts
cut off, plastic red and yellow
pills that burr like bumblebees
to my narrow throat.
I will stare into the Pacific,
levelling its blueness

with irrelevant brown eyes
until I feel the nurse's hand
at my thin elbow, 5 p.m. reality check,
what they call dinner

of course,
I've never been one
for extremities.
I'll lie down much sooner
in my cider bed
of roses and cyanide
chant the white song
till I slip through a crack
poised along the seams
of time, and collapse,
one at last
with the blueness of your wave.

Vladislav Malik

Bathtub Fragment

He is in the bathtub,
soaking in that idle feeling.
The muffled sound of her voice
comes through the tile,
beating on hot air,
like droplets of Hirōshima.



Julienne Lottering

Commission 1

Seeing

On our walk, it started to rain.
So, we dropped our clothes
and jumped into the water.
We sat there, like frogs,
and just listened —
the murmur of drops so thick,
you could eat it with a spoon.
When you turn blue,
we frisk back up the path
collecting our clothes
then speed across the field
towards an old house.
We huddle on the porch —
I, delirious with laughter. You, shivering.
But I'm not pouting, you say
(it seems, you couldn't find your sock).
The rain subsides. The leaky roof
drips perfectly.

I could not describe this house.
Back at the cottage,
I fell asleep and woke to find you writing.
A chill autumn breeze was
drifting through the window —
smell of pancakes
and cool rustling of leaves.
On the floor beside you, a stack of photo albums
in which you kept your poems —
You always said, Photographs are not meant to be spoken.

But you can read it, you say in the car.
Between jagged sentences,
scattered
leaves

bare space.
You said it was the seeing

being preserved.

isere.

You and me, Liberty Statue stands sky high.
-ranganthan parthasarthy

we met on the boat
that took the statue of liberty to america.
i served you sandwiches on her chest
while bigger men took inventory of the crates.

they chopped that poor copper woman into pieces.
conceived at a dinner party and sculpted by a warman.
separated from a long lost twin
who cries alone on ile des cygnes.

when we pulled into the bay
the city was in holiday attire. i heard a signal gun.
mayor grace smiled at us during the welcome,
i wiped bread crumbs and mayonnaise from your lips.

the march to city hall was a distraction.
i wanted to help decide which arm was left,
instead we held hands,
and you wore my white hat like a joke.

newsmen blew past us with notepads,
enamored by a broken woman and scrambling
to find importantmen, itineraries.
we hid in an alley

and counted the fifty thousand people.
i gave you the cold meat and bread i had in my pockets
while addresses thundered through an american sound system.

you ate quietly and contently,
the crumbs fell on your arms like freckles.
an indian man passed by me and we talked about acrostic poems and opportunity.
he was kind, i forget his name.
the melody of marching and celebration carried on into the night.

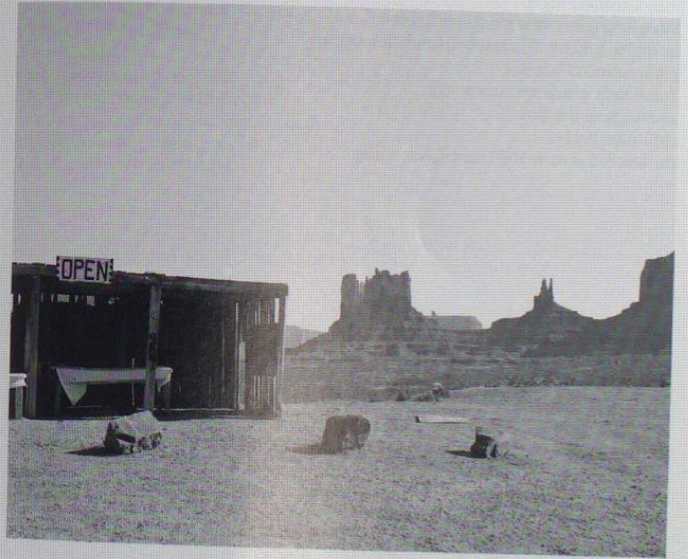
i'm sure the importantmen were off somewhere,
in a high rise, standing until morning to watch the boats come in
while their woman lies in boxes by the bay,
waiting to fill a hollow iron form.

Emma Minsky

Sunny-Side-Up

Somewhere back in the kitchen,
the savory hiss of days
lying face down upon the element:
lift flip sizzle and serve.

▲ 42 ▼



Daniel Shawn Otis

Open

▲ 43 ▼

Underwear models

I can't explain the naked feeling of lying on concrete,
Open public square,
end of summer night.
Watching underwear models and cola ads
on digital billboards, monstrous and illuminating,
cold and full of wonder.
Sometimes words are not enough,
and we need the gloss,
the bright lights,
the sense of ecstasy and christmas morning.

Tele phone

I

It must be that I have forgotten how to speak,
or it must be that I have been silenced
by the weight of things.
Morse code into the receiver
I love you, I love you, so what?
There is no room for sentiment here.
The lines between us are so thin and dark.
Your heart keeps pumping out love
as if all it knows is circulation.

II

If we set this in a pond, one of us would be Leda
(I'll let you guess which one.)
A white rush, a sudden blow then
Static

III

And what is left to say?
The mounties are falling down
around us, the men are setting themselves
on fire. A tissue A tissue we all
fall down

IV

We are collecting our silence like sediment
white noise on the sea floor.
Next time
I will revolutionize communication between us
next time, I will use semaphore.

Take Your Kid to Work

Characters

JAMES

A successful business man, late thirties

WANDA

His executive assistant, mid-forties

DMITRI

His business partner, early thirties

MANDY

His kidnapped entrepreneur, thirteen

SAMANTHA

His wife, late thirties

SCENE ONE

Curtain rises on an empty office. A small marketing firm, operating just outside Toronto. The office is divided into three sections, each with its own desk, computer and phone. On the first desk, R, a photo facing outwards: a family sits in their convertible with a dog in front of a big house. Beside this desk, a golf bag and a miniature putting green. On the middle desk, US, a cornucopia of flowers that would make it difficult for anyone to work. On the wall behind this desk, an inspirational poster with the silhouette of a person and the caption: YOU ARE REPLACEABLE.

The third desk, L, has considerably more room than the other two desks. It is enclosed, and unlike the other "open-concept" desks, has an actual door, which is closed. On top of the desk, a photo facing

inwards, so that it is concealed from the audience. Beside this desk, a whiteboard mounted on an easel. On the wall behind, a framed picture of a canoe. The phone on the middle desk starts to RING. The rings get closer together and louder until the answering machine finally picks up.

ANSWERING MACHINE: Hello, you've reached Tech West National Group Marketing Solutions Incorporated. We can't take your call right now, which means we're either in a meeting or too drunk to find the phone. *(laughter)* But seriously, leave a message. *(beep)*

MAN'S VOICE: Wanda, it's James. I see you've changed our message and may I say, very professional. What's even more impressive is that it's 9:30 and you're not at your desk yet, so... the office is probably empty. And that's good for business. I'd leave you a message saying you're fired, but I'm fairly confident you don't know how to retrieve messages. So if you do get this, you're fired. Then again, if you do get this, maybe I've underestimated you and should give you another chance... so you're not. So, just to be clear, if you don't get this, you're fired, but you won't know it because I don't like face-to-face confrontation. Anyway, I was just calling to let you know I'll be late coming in this morning — even later than you — and I'd prefer it if you didn't talk to me when I arrive. I've got a lot on my plate today and can forego the morning chit-chat. Also, cancel my meetings. You keep my

calendar in the top drawer of your desk. If you need help finding it, let me know. But not today because I want to be alone. Bye! *(We hear the DING of the elevator bell and WANDA, a woman in her mid-forties, enters R. She wears a pantsuit, fake pearls around her neck, and glasses that are too large for her face. She holds a bouquet of flowers. She crosses to the middle desk, adds the bouquet to her garden, and sits down. From somewhere under all the flowers, she finds the phone and dials.)*

WANDA: *(into phone)* Hi Samantha, it's Wanda. How are you? Oh, I'm good, tired, you know. Anyhoo, I was just calling to see if James has left yet? He just did? Oh, okay. No, that's all right, I was just wondering because someone left me a wonderful bouquet of flowers this morning and I didn't know if it was him. Yes, they're lovely, very expensive. I mean, you think you know a person... well, I'm sure you know James very well, I mean, you of all people would know if your husband were sending flowers to other women, presumably, but it's just so nice to know that some of us have secret admirers... secrets... double lives... but I'm boring you. What's that? Oh yes, I know you have a very happy marriage. Don't forget, I was married myself once. Fifteen years. And you know what they say, marriages cut off in their prime are like dead poets... better. I can't say I ever thought I'd be a widow, but who knows? Maybe I'm not out of the game just yet. Ta-ta! *(She hangs up the phone, picks up a flower, puts it down, and immediately dials the phone again.)* Hi Kerri, it's Wanda. How are you? Oh, I'm good, tired, you know. Anyhoo, I picked up the flowers from your shop this morning and they're just lovely. They really lift

Mom's spirits in these difficult times. She keeps telling me she's got the prettiest bed in the entire ward. Yes, yes, they say things like that, don't they? When they're near the end. But I'm boring you. I really called to say that I think I'm going to need another bouquet for tonight. I'll be swinging by the hospital after work, and I hate to go empty-handed. Yes, lilacs sound perfect. The colour of her eyes. Thanks so much, Kerri. Ta-ta! *(She hangs up the phone and sits, not knowing what to do next)*

(We hear the DING of the elevator bell and DMITRI, a man in his early thirties, enters R. He is well dressed in a slick business suit and looks like he has just come back from vacation.)

WANDA: Is that you, James? I can hardly see you over all these flowers.

DMITRI: Gooooood morning, ladies and gentlemen, and I use the term loosely. HA HA HA HA HA.

WANDA: *(enacting a morning ritual)* Oh Dmitri, there aren't any gentlemen here!

DMITRI: Then tell me when you find a lady!

WANDA: *(delighted)* Oh, Dmitri!

DMITRI: Come here, you piece of trash! *(She squeals with delight as he picks her up and swings her in his arms. He turns her over and spansks her as he puts her on the desk.)*

WANDA: How was your weekend?

DMITRI: Fantastic! I feel like a new man. I ran thirteen miles on Sunday, came back and cooked up a steak. Couldn't even eat it, I was so pumped up from the run. So I cut it into pieces with a chainsaw and fed it to the dog.

WANDA: Ooh, I bet Champ loved that?

DMITRI: You're god damn right he loved it! Nothing better than making love to your wife while your dog eats steak on the back porch.

WANDA: Dmitri! I'm surprised you had the energy to make love after all that running.

DMITRI: Are you kidding me? By the end of it she was begging me to stop! She believes in God and wants to have something to look forward to in the afterlife.

WANDA: Oh my! I don't know how you keep in such terrific shape.

DMITRI: I'll tell you how, it's no government secret. One word: pilates. Feel these abs.

WANDA: I couldn't...

DMITRI: Feel them!

WANDA: *(immediately feeling them)* Oh my.

DMITRI: If a man put his head on my stomach, I could kill him with a sit-up.

(We hear the DING of the elevator bell and JAMES, a man in his late thirties, enters R. He is dressed in a business suit, looking slightly ragged and carrying an occupied body bag over his shoulder. He tries to walk past Wanda, who is still feeling Dmitri's abs, but gets caught.)

DMITRI: Jimmy! Feel these abs.

JAMES: No thanks, Dmitri.

DMITRI: Come on, feel them! Feel my abs! Pilates!

WANDA: Pilates!

DMITRI: Pilates!

JAMES: Fine! *(James reluctantly feels Dmitri's abs with Wanda)* Very good.

DMITRI: I could hold a pencil with these abs. I could write a letter.

JAMES: Or a variance analysis, which was supposed to be on my desk Friday.

DMITRI: I wanted to talk to you about

that...

JAMES: What did you want to say?

DMITRI: Do you still need it?

JAMES: Yes.

DMITRI: Okay, because I didn't feel like we'd communicated on that.

JAMES: We haven't.

(Pause)

DMITRI: Right. Soo... did you have —

JAMES: I'm going to be in my office.

DMITRI: Right.

WANDA: *(as he's turning)* James?

JAMES: What?

WANDA: Did you have a good weekend?

JAMES: Did you get my message?

WANDA: You know what? I don't think you left me a message.

JAMES: You're right. I must not have. But if I did, it would say that I want to be left alone today. That means no calls, no clients, no knocking on my door for a 10 a.m. dance break. Understood?

WANDA: Yes.

JAMES: Good.

WANDA: *(as he's turning)* James?

JAMES: Yes?

WANDA: What's in the bag?

JAMES: *(a little offguard)* Golf clubs.

WANDA: It looks like a body bag.

JAMES: *(attempting joviality)* The way I played this weekend, it might as well be!

DMITRI: HA HA HA HA HA.

(Dmitri's laughter is immediately followed by an uncomfortable pause. James stands with his hand on the door, balancing the body bag.)

JAMES: Well... nose to the grind.

(He opens the door to his office, goes inside, shuts it hard behind him and begins to hyperventilate. He forces himself to

take a deep breath, walks to his desk, and lays the body bag down on top of it. Wanda returns to her desk, but Dmitri walks over and knocks on James's door. James jumps. He looks at the bag, looks at the door, comes over and opens the door a crack.)

DMITRI: What did you shoot?

JAMES: *(defensive)* What are you talking about?

DMITRI: You said you played this weekend. What did you shoot?

JAMES: Oh, right. Dmitri, if you don't mind, I really want to be alone right now.

DMITRI: That bad? Why don't you step into my office and we'll work on your swing.

JAMES: No. I don't want to step into your office. I want to stay in my office.

DMITRI: Then leave your door open.

JAMES: No.

DMITRI: Come on, let's knock down these walls and have some real fun.

JAMES: No.

DMITRI: I don't understand why you won't leave your door open.

JAMES: I know you don't understand, Dmitri. Look, we're different people. You shouldn't take it personally, but I have a very introverted personality, and I just feel that sometimes I really, really need to be on my own.

DMITRI: Jimbo, don't say another word. I'm exactly the same way. You know, we should spend more time together.

JAMES: No, we shouldn't. That's exactly my point.

DMITRI: Something's lost on me here. Why don't we discuss it over a brew?

JAMES: No. I don't want to discuss anything with you right now, Dmitri. I want to be alone, in my own space, with my

own thoughts, and that's how I work best.

DMITRI: But if you need me...

JAMES: If I need you, I'll call you.

DMITRI: Okay, I'll call you in T-minus five.

JAMES: No, I'll call you. Understand?

DMITRI: Yes, now, you want to talk golf scores...

JAMES: NO! *(He slams the door on Dmitri and the lights go down, leaving only his office illuminated. James paces back and forth. He stops at the whiteboard, picks up the felt pen, and writes on the board the word OKAY. He comes to his desk, opens the body bag, lifts out a SMALL GIRL and lays her on her back. She wears a school uniform and a neon lanyard around her neck. Pause.)* Mandy. *(James opens the top drawer of his desk and takes out SMELLING SALTS. He passes them under MANDY's nose.)* Mandy.

(The girl finally perks up. She stares at James in bewilderment.)

MANDY: What's going on?

JAMES: There we go. Everything's all right, Mandy. It's just like you've taken a nap. Except that you're in a strange office with a strange man and you've been drugged.

(Mandy screams. The lights come up on Wanda, US.)

WANDA: James? What's going on in there?

JAMES: I'm fine, Wanda, just leave me alone.

WANDA: Are you all right?

JAMES: Yes, I just stubbed my toe. *(James pinches Mandy and she screams again.)* See?

WANDA: Do you want me to get you

flowers?

JAMES: No, just leave me alone, please. *(The lights on Wanda go back down.)*

JAMES: Mandy... don't do that again, okay?

MANDY: Who are you? How do you know my name?

JAMES: My name is James and I'm a successful businessman. I know your name because I met you at the Young Entrepreneurs Conference. I was very impressed by the work you did with your classmates.

MANDY: That was today.

JAMES: Yes.

MANDY: Did we win?

JAMES: Well I don't know yet. That depends on whether or not you can help me.

MANDY: Are you going to kill me?

JAMES: What? No! Do I look like a killer to you? I'm a businessman, like you. I'm in marketing and I'm very good at it. But I haven't been so good lately. So what I need is for you to help me come up with some really good ideas... by today.

MANDY: Are all the kids doing this?

JAMES: Mandy. What's the third 'T' of the Young Entrepreneurs Conference?

MANDY: Inspiration.

JAMES: No, the other one.

MANDY: Imagination?

JAMES: Okay, the third one.

MANDY: Innovation?

JAMES: Yes. Doing things differently. That's what this is all about. Not what your friends are doing or your friends' friends, but what you can do for me... and for you.

MANDY: Does my mom know about this?

JAMES: Of course not! What are you, crazy?

MANDY: You need to tell my mom. She'll call the police if she can't find me.

JAMES: Fine, I'll tell your mom.

MANDY: Tell her now.

JAMES: Fine, sit up and dial the number for me.

(Mandy sits up and picks up the telephone.)

MANDY: I feel woozy.

JAMES: You'll be fine, just dial. Press nine first. *(She dials and passes the phone to James.)* It's ringing.

(Throughout the ensuing phone call, Mandy wanders around James's office and examines his things. She eventually stops at the picture of the canoe.)

JAMES: What's her name? *(into phone)*

Hi, Mandy's Mom? Hi, this is James calling. I'm here with your daughter. Yes, she's fine. What? What are you talking about? She's not missing. I only took her half an hour ago. If anything she's lost, but not missing. No. No, I don't want to get into a discussion of semantics, either. What? No, I'm not going to kill her. Do I sound like a killer to you? And why would I be calling you if I were a killer? How many times has a killer gone out of his way to get your number, called you up on the phone and said, "Hey, Mandy's Mom, just wanted to let you know..."? What? No, I'm sure Mandy hasn't been kidnapped before, but she's not kidnapped now. She's just coming to work with me for the day. It's Take Your Kid to Work Day. I know she's not my kid. It's not Take My Kid to Work Day, it's Take Your Kid to Work Day. What's that? *(to Mandy)* Your mother says to comb your hair.

MANDY: I don't have a comb.

JAMES: *(into phone)* She says she doesn't have a comb. *(to Mandy)* Your

mother says to go to the bathroom and wet your fingers...*(into phone)* Look, Mandy's Mom? I don't really have time for this. Your daughter and I have a lot of work to do. Okay. Okay. You too. Bye. *(He hangs up the phone)*

MANDY: Why do you have a picture of a canoe in your office?

JAMES: I don't want to talk about the canoe.

MANDY: You shouldn't say that.

JAMES: Why not?

MANDY: Because it only makes me more curious.

JAMES: Well there's no story there, I just have about ten things I need to figure out how to sell, and a canoe is not one of them.

MANDY: What about lanyards?

JAMES: What are lanyards?

MANDY: *(indicating her own)* These things. It's what our team came up with for the Young Entrepreneurs Conference. What about these?

JAMES: No, you don't understand, I have the products, I just don't know how to market them.

MANDY: Well, do you have to come up with ideas all by yourself, or can you work in teams?

JAMES: You can work in teams, but that's the problem. I don't want to talk to any of the people I work with. I just want to stay in my office all day and not have to see any of them, because as soon as I see one of them they do something that pisses me off. Pardon my French.

MANDY: What do you mean, "Pardon my French"?

JAMES: I said a bad word.

MANDY: Piss? Piss isn't a bad word. What do they do to piss you off?

JAMES: I don't know, they breathe really deeply through their noses, or they sniffle every five seconds, or they complain about being tired all the time, when everyone in the world over twenty is tired, or they laugh in this really fake way. Like, it's exactly five beats every time. Like, HA HA HA HA HA.

DMITRI: *(from his unlit office)* What's so funny in there?

JAMES: See? They won't leave me alone.

MANDY: Did you ever think that maybe you just don't work well with other people?

JAMES: Yes, all the time. But no matter whose fault it is, I can't stand listening to these people, and I can't stand their ideas. They spend so much time trying to be these things, you know, coming up with ideas for how they should be as people, that they don't spend any time thinking of ideas for their work, you know what I'm saying? There's no originality... no creativity... no...

MANDY: Innovation?

JAMES: Exactly. Let me show you what I mean.

(He puts his phone on speaker mode and dials. Lights up on Dmitri's desk. His phone starts to RING but he is busy putting on the miniature green beside his desk and ignores it. Finally, James opens his door and stares at Dmitri.)

JAMES: Dmitri.

DMITRI: *(not looking up)* Jimmy-Jims!

JAMES: Your phone's ringing.

DMITRI: Ohhh. Can you get that for me?

JAMES: No. You get it.

DMITRI: Fine, but you owe me one.

(He picks up the phone and — before James has time to go back into his office — hangs up.) No one there.

JAMES: Can I see you in my office for a minute?

DMITRI: I don't know. I'm expecting a phone call.

(He follows James into his office, taking his putter.)

DMITRI: (re. Mandy, winking) Ohhh, now I see why you wanted to be alone.

JAMES: Dmitri! She's thirteen!

DMITRI: Please accept my apology, Angel.

JAMES: Her name's Mandy and I've brought her in for Take Your Kid to Work Day. Mandy is very interested in marketing, and I thought you might be able to talk to her about some of your projects.

DMITRI: You've come to the right place, Angel. Marketing is a big, scary word, but at the end of the day, all it means is... (pauses, searching)

MANDY: Selling products?

DMITRI: (almost overlapping) Selling products. Good. (using his putter to lecture) Now, I'm dealing with a client right now who manufactures bottled water. And I said to the guy, I said, Why is it that you always see picture of mountains and trees and dirty things from nature on water bottles? That's not going to make me want to buy your product. What do I want to see on a bottle of water?

MANDY: Water?

DMITRI: Women. So why don't you take some hot chick, put her in a bikini, or a really tight T-shirt, and just have her pouring spring water all over herself?

JAMES: Why not?

DMITRI: And why not call it "Oh Baby: Water for Guys"? The first bottled water

just for guys! And here's the best part: we spell "Oh" E-A-U, like the French for water.

MANDY: Pardon your French.

JAMES: You're excused.

DMITRI: Thank you.

JAMES: (indicating door) No, you're excused. Thank you for that wonderful presentation.

MANDY: Wait a minute. Do you know why James has a picture of a canoe on his wall?

DMITRI: Yes! The famous canoe!

MANDY: (to James) I thought you said there was no story?

DMITRI: Oh, there's a story. The story of the canoe.

MANDY: Really? I'd like to hear that.

JAMES: Mandy, we don't have time...

DMITRI: Come on, Jimbit, tell the story of the canoe.

MANDY: Yeah, come on, James. Please?

JAMES: (sighs) Fine. The story of the canoe.

(The lighting changes to DREAM LIGHT as James steps downstage C, crossing in front of the wall. As he speaks, he gradually transforms into Dmitri: confident, proud, the ideal frontiersman. Dmitri, listening intently, picks up the felt pen and writes the lines he repeats on the whiteboard.)

JAMES: When I was a boy, I built a canoe. Three summers I spent. Building

DMITRI: (writing on the whiteboard) Three summers.

JAMES: Up at the cottage. Looking out on the lake. Building a canoe with my hands.

DMITRI: Your hands.

JAMES: Every day, for three summers,

I gathered the wood, took it up the hill to a clearing, a clearing that looked over the lake. The sun beat down on me, all afternoon, my brown skin, glistening, my muscles, glowing, my hands working the wood. Mahogany, buddy. You know mahogany? I'm talking about real wood.

DMITRI: Wood.

JAMES: All afternoon, every afternoon, three summers, working the wood with my hands, sawing the wood, cutting it, putting it together, building a canoe. I found myself a clearing at the top of the hill, overlooking the lake. A clearing.

DMITRI: A clearing.

JAMES: And then one day, the canoe was done. So I hoisted it on my back and took it down to the lake. Set it in the water. The water was so still. Like glass, buddy, like glass.

DMITRI: Glass.

JAMES: And it floated. Three summers, my own hands, wood, mahogany, buddy, like glass, buddy, and it floated.

DMITRI: It floated.

JAMES: The story of the canoe.

(He walks around the wall and back into the office, rejoining Mandy and Dmitri. The lights return to normal.)

MANDY: I like that story.

DMITRI: You really sold it.

JAMES: That's what I do. But right now I've got about ten things to sell and I'm running out of time.

DMITRI: Maybe I can help?

JAMES: Actually, you can. I left something at home this morning and it's really important. Will you go and pick it up for me?

DMITRI: You got it, Jim-Sum. What is it?

JAMES: It's a bag and it looks like this.

(holding up body bag)

DMITRI: I hope it's heavy. I've been working out.

JAMES: It is.

(As Dmitri opens the door and exits, Wanda enters.)

WANDA: James, I know you don't want to be disturbed, but I just brought you a bandage for your stubbed toe. (noticing Mandy) Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize there was anyone else in here.

JAMES: That's all right, Wanda, but if you don't mind, we have a lot of work to do.

WANDA: Of course. (Wanda exits and gingerly closes the door behind her. Lights down on James and up on Wanda. She stands just outside his door for a moment, pressing her fingers to her lips. She walks to her desk, sits down, picks up the phone and dials.) Hi Samantha, it's Wanda. How are you? Oh, I'm good, tired, you know. Anyhoo, I hope I'm not bothering you by calling again. You're not busy, are you? I mean, you're not actually doing anything, are you? Good. Well, it's no big deal, I was just calling to see if James has a daughter he's never told me about? No? He doesn't! Oh, okay. No, that's all right. I was just wondering because I just found him in his office with a young girl. Pretty little thing. But if you're sure he doesn't have a daughter, then I guess it's just someone else. But I'm boring you. I should really let you go. Talk to you later, Samantha. Ta-ta! (She hangs up the phone, picks up her purse, and heads for the elevator, R.) Lunch!

BLACKOUT

SCENE TWO

(Same as before. An hour later. Lights rise R, leaving James's office in the dark. We hear the DING of the elevator bell and Dmitri stumbles in, hauling a large body bag over his shoulder.)

DMITRI: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and I use the term loosely. HA HA HA HA HA. (Getting no response, Dmitri starts to look around the empty office. Throughout the following speech he struggles more and more with the heavy load.) Wanda, baby, where are you? James? Jamie? Jameson? All right, James, if you're in your office, to be honest, I just want to touch base about what you want me to do with this gigantic body bag going forward? Because I think we're on the same page here, but I'd like to address the issue sooner rather than later, because to be perfectly honest with you, yeah, I'm absolutely in top shape and have no trouble carrying this 24/7 for as long as it takes, but basically what I'm asking for here is just a ballpark figure. And I understand you want to be alone right now, absolutely, I think we're singing from the same hymn sheet, but, with all due respect, if we could just blue sky a guesstimate of when this bag situation might be actualized, at the end of the day that's literally going to make things easier for everyone involved. (Finally breaking down and yelling) Son of a bitch this bag is heavy!

(Finally, the door to James's office swings open and James steps out.)

JAMES: Dmitri?

DMITRI: Hey, Big Guy.

JAMES: Come on in.

(As they enter James's office, the lights

rise, coming down on the rest of the stage. There are now bunches of crumpled up paper on James's desk, and the words on the whiteboard have been erased and replaced by the single word: LANYARDS.)

JAMES: Just set it on my desk for now.

DMITRI: (dropping the bag) Hey, can I ask you something? Do I look all right to you? I mean, is there something wrong with my hair or something?

JAMES: No, why?

DMITRI: I was getting weird looks on the elevator.

JAMES: You know what? I think it is the hair.

DMITRI: Really?

JAMES: Yeah.

MANDY: You should go to the wash-room and wet your fingers.

DMITRI: That's why we pay you the big bucks, Angel. (exits)

MANDY: Are you really paying me big bucks?

DMITRI: Not unless you start pulling your weight around here. I mean, come on, Mandy, the best thing we've got so far is glow-in-the-dark lanyards. I thought you were an ideas girl?

MANDY: Not really. I'm a good salesgirl, but Sean Fletcher came up with all the ideas.

JAMES: Then this is our lucky day.

MANDY: Why?

JAMES: Guess who's in the bag.

MANDY: Sean?

JAMES: That's right. I thought we might need backup, so I had Dmitri go pick him up. (Suddenly, Dmitri bursts through the door of the office, his hair dripping wet.)

DMITRI: Jamers, one more thing. When I went to pick up the bag from your house,

I noticed someone had punctured some holes in it. But don't worry, I sealed them up. I'm not going to let anything happen to your merchandise!

(He winks, snaps his finger at James and exits. James stares at the door, speechless. He looks back at Mandy, who is horrified.)

MANDY: Oh my God! Sean! You suffocated him!

JAMES: No I didn't! There's plenty of air in these bags. (struggling to get the bag open) Come on, Sean. Don't be dead don't be dead don't be dead.

(James manages to rip open the bag, and his wife SAMANTHA pops out, gasping for air)

JAMES: Samantha! Honey! Are you all right?

SAMANTHA: (slapping him across the face) You bastard!

JAMES: What are you doing in there?

SAMANTHA: Trying to breathe! You're lucky I'm a swimmer or I'd be dead! But maybe you'd like that.

JAMES: Honey, that's insane! I never put you in the bag.

SAMANTHA: No, you didn't. I got in myself. It was the only way of sneaking into your office to catch you with your floozie.

JAMES: Honey, listen to me...

SAMANTHA: No, you listen to me! Every day, these bags pile up at our front door. I nearly break my neck tripping over them when I come in with groceries. And so today, when I got a very suspicious phone call, I came up with a plan. I'd get in one of these bags myself and get taken in to work with you. But what do I find when I open up the bag? A little boy covered in lanyards! What kind of sick busi-

ness are you running here?!

MANDY: I think I'd better go.

SAMANTHA: You're not going anywhere, Floozie!

JAMES: Honey, she's not a Floozie. She's thirteen.

SAMANTHA: And that makes it all right?

MANDY: Wait, let me explain...

SAMANTHA: (seething) No, I want to hear it from him. Go ahead, Honey. Tell me the whole story.

JAMES: (sighs) Fine. The story of the canoe.

(The lighting changes to DREAM LIGHT as James steps downstage C, crossing in front of the wall between his office and the outer office. This time, James is not transformed by the speech. Samantha, taking the place of Dmitri in this telling, picks up the felt pen and writes the word BASTARD on the whiteboard every time she repeats a line.)

JAMES: When I was a boy, I tried to build a canoe. Three summers I spent. Trying.

SAMANTHA: (writing BASTARD on the whiteboard) Three summers.

JAMES: But no one ever taught me how to do these things, and every canoe I built sunk. I've never been good with my hands.

SAMANTHA: Your hands.

JAMES: And in the fall, I came back to school and I told my friend Paul about trying to build a canoe. And he said he had a plan, and told me to meet him after school at the mall. And I said I would.

SAMANTHA: Wood.

JAMES: So we met at the mall, and we went into a sporting goods store, and we found a canoe. And Paul took out a plastic

bag that he'd saved from a baseball glove he bought at the same store, and he tied the bag to the bow of the canoe to make it look like we'd already bought it. And then we lifted down the canoe and waited for an opening.

SAMANTHA: A clearing.

JAMES: And when the coast was clear, we just walked out of the store with the canoe and never looked back. Paul said the only thing that mattered was looking confident. He said he could never steal a diamond ring because they're small and precious and kept under glass.

SAMANTHA: Glass.

JAMES: But the canoe, he said, was so big and so impossible to steal, that no one would ever believe we would try it. So we did. And it worked. And it floated.

SAMANTHA: It floated.

JAMES: The story of the canoe.

(He walks back into the office, around the wall, and rejoins Samantha and Mandy as the lights return to normal.)

MANDY: I like that story.

SAMANTHA: You hear that, James? The canoe likes your story.

JAMES: I'm not saying you're the same thing as a canoe, Mandy. But that story was in my head the first time I went to the Young Entrepreneurs Conference. They were holding it in the lobby downstairs and I thought I'd check it out on my lunch break. And as I passed through the exhibits, one by one, I realized that it didn't matter whether they were selling tie-dye clothing, or electric whatever, or lanyards... what mattered was that these kids were doing it in a way that was honest, and genuine, and original.

SAMANTHA: So you thought, "I'd like to steal a kid."

JAMES: Yes. Well, no, it wasn't that simple. I knew I wasn't a kidnapper, or a killer. I was just a businessman who'd run out of ideas. So I thought, where's that old confidence, James? Where's the guy who knew what he wanted and took it? Where's that creative spark, that riskiness, that...

MANDY: Innovation?

JAMES: Yes. I said, James, if you can walk out of a store with a canoe, why can't you—

SAMANTHA: Steal an innocent kid?

JAMES: I didn't want to steal a kid.

SAMANTHA: You wanted to be a kid.

JAMES: I wanted to be alone. That's all I wanted, was to be left alone. I wanted to come into work, come into my office, close the door and be left alone.

SAMANTHA: But you couldn't be alone.

JAMES: No.

MANDY: Because you were scared.

JAMES: Yes.

MANDY: You were scared to be alone.

JAMES: No. I wasn't scared to be alone. I wanted to be alone, but I couldn't be alone, and I was scared. I didn't want to be with people, but I couldn't be alone. How do I explain this? I was like one of these body bags, right? You put a body in it, you put someone in it, and it's heavy and there's something there. But when there's no one in it, it's just an empty bag, and that's how I felt. Just sitting here, in my office, trying to think in silence, but every time I tried I got... scared... that the phone would ring, or the e-mail would pop up, or suddenly someone would knock on the door and say... (Suddenly, Dmitri knocks loudly on James's door. He remains in the dark, as

only James's office is lit.)

DMITRI: Jimmy! Let's play golf!

JAMES: (rushing to the door and holding it shut) Oh God, it's him. What do I do?

SAMANTHA: Okay. Everyone be quiet. Maybe he doesn't know you're here.

DMITRI: Jimbo, I know you're there. Let's play golf! Come on. Let's go hit a bucket of balls. Come on.

JAMES: (panicking) I don't want to hit a bucket of balls. (to Dmitri) I'm snowed under, Dmitri. I can't come out.

DMITRI: Come on. Open the door. Let's go running. Let's run somewhere.

JAMES: I can't. I have to work.

DMITRI: Pilates? I know you love pilates!

JAMES: (sotto to the others) I hate pilates. For months I didn't even know what they were. I thought they were those potato things stuffed with cheese. I was eating them like crazy!

DMITRI: Pilates time! Let's go work on our abs.

JAMES: You know what, Dmitri? I'm doing them in here. I'm doing sit-ups as we speak.

DMITRI: I'll join you. Open the door. Why don't you open the door, Jimmy? Let my love open the door. HA HA HA HA HA.

JAMES: I'm not opening the door, Dmitri.

DMITRI: (getting a little testy) Come on, open it. Don't make me knock down these walls.

JAMES: Just go back to your office, Dmitri.

DMITRI: (not joking anymore) Seriously, James. Open it.

JAMES: No.

DMITRI: (angry) I will knock down these walls!

JAMES: Oh my God, he's going to kill me. I'll be the first man to die of anti-socializing.

MANDY: You have to go out there, James.

JAMES: I can't.

SAMANTHA: Just talk to him, James.

JAMES: You don't understand, I can't. I can't talk to him anymore. I can't work here anymore. I don't like this job and I don't want to do it. I don't want to have to get on that elevator again, or walk past those people again, or sit in this office again. I need to get away from this. I don't care what I do, I'll be a gardener... or a for-ester... or a painter. I think I could paint.

DMITRI: I can break boards with my hands, James! Walls are like paper to me!

JAMES: Speaking of papers, how's that variance analysis coming?

DMITRI: LET ME IN!

SAMANTHA: James, he's going to kill you. You have to go out there and talk to him.

JAMES: I can't.

MANDY: Wait. I think I have an idea.

JAMES: Lanyards aren't going to save me, Mandy.

MANDY: No, listen. You never want to see these people again, right?

JAMES: Never.

MANDY: Then just pretend to be dead.

DMITRI: James, I'm going to count to seven and then I'm coming through this wall.

JAMES: How am I supposed to do that?

MANDY: I don't know, just fake it. You can think of something.

JAMES: He'll want to come in here and see the body. He'll probably try to bench-press my carcass.

MANDY: We'll carry you out.

DMITRI: I'm not even going to count out loud, James. I'm just going to count to seven in my head. So you'd better stand back from the door.

JAMES: I don't know if I can play dead, Mandy. I'm not that good of an actor.

SAMANTHA: Neither am I.

MANDY: It doesn't matter. We'll put you in the body bag. It's just like when you tied a shopping bag to the bow of the canoe in the sports store. All we have to do is have confidence and no one will ask any questions. We'll get you out of here.

DMITRI: James, I'm not counting out loud, but I'll warn you right now that I am very close to seven.

JAMES: Hold on, Dmitri! *(He looks meaningfully at Mandy and Samantha and then starts to cough.)*

DMITRI: James? Jimmy? You all right?

JAMES: *(coughing)* I think I'm choking, Dmitri. I was eating a piece of steak. *(Mandy and Samantha give him the "thumbs up.")*

DMITRI: You were eating steak, Jimmy? You shouldn't have tried to talk to me if you were eating steak. You have to really chew it. That's what I tell Champ, I say, "Chew your steak, Champ!"

JAMES: *(pretending to choke)* Dmitri!

DMITRI: Jimmy! Pound yourself in the back, Jimmy! Is the girl in there? Get the girl to pound your back? Jimmy! Jimmy! I don't know anything about medicine!

(As he says this, the lights on James's office go down. They come up on the rest of the stage, revealing Dmitri in a kneeling position outside the door, holding his

putter.)

DMITRI: *(teary-eyed)* Jimmy? Are you gone, Jimmy? Please.

(We hear the DING of the elevator bell and Wanda enters, carrying her purse. She makes her way towards her desk, and is about to sit down when she notices Dmitri and freezes.)

DMITRI: Please, Jimmy. Come on out. Come on out and I won't even talk to you. I just want to see you. Just come on out, Jimmy. Come on out and tell me a story. Tell me the story of the canoe.

(nearly sobbing)

Three summers.

(pause)

Your own hands.

(pause)

Wood.

(pause)

A clearing.

Like glass, buddy. Like glass.

(Mandy and Samantha emerge from James's office, carrying his body in the bag. They carry it as though they are portaging. Wanda gasps and collapses in her chair. Dmitri stands and follows the funeral procession.)

DMITRI: It floated.

(They exit. R. Wanda is left alone, sitting at her desk, pressing her fingers to her lips. A long pause. Finally, she picks up the phone and dials.)

WANDA: *(into phone)* Hi Kerri, it's Wanda. How are you? Oh, I'm good, tired, you know. Anyhoo, I think I'm going to need more flowers.

CURTAIN

Sara Saab

A Murder

Untidy wild child,
sat, limbs all splayed, like an exploding
cigarillo.

Who knew why you sat poised still, battered your
cat

Until it died
with the impression of a slate of marble
veined with fauxgold
in its miserable skull.

I looked at you
You shot sparks at me,
glinting altogether.

The final sliver of decency had been
scratched off your
barbaric cardiac urgency.

I kept silent.

Before mother could know your plain sin

A

marble slate was sent flying
Nearby thickets of rasp-
berry devoured its bulk.

Mother wished to know what killed the
barnyard cat

(I kept silent)

Not for a dim instant did she suspect. It was
her feral little daughter's work.

Bike

the bike of the goldfish who doesn't need a man
the bike leaves a question mark in the back of the boy
the frame of the bike is the skeleton, the heart, the soul
the woman on the bike tilts in the wind
the bike of a three year old is a tricycle
the bike of a slut knows no shame
the bike that connects with a streetcar is a train-jumping machine
the bike is the horse of an urban cowboy
the seat of the bike is a pervert with a penchant for asses of all types
the square ass of the boy who rides his bike
the shadow of a bike stretches late in the day
a bike in the snow leaves one continuous line drawn throughout the city
the cow didn't jump over the moon but instead rode a bike
i found my lover in bed with her bike
some say that a bike in the city has bad manners
the becoming-bike of the girl began in her feet
the image of the bike is a fast blur on two wheels
the bike is the chariot of the masses
the bike of a prof has a big basket
the movement of the bike is a swerve or a line sliding by
a bike should wash regularly, especially behind its ears
the wheel maker should be praised for making the bike go 'round
a bike is more pragmatic than a chess piece
bike-bike-not car
Albert Einstein thought of that while riding his bike
i thought of this while riding mine.

Fragment of White Noise # 5

"I want to be
the evening sky
the dark unfathomable blue
thick upon tongue and eye," she said.

and I
stood in the street watching
the sky
until its colour was a bruised place
inside my chest.

Savings

There was a new lobster outlet opening up across the road from Providence Wholesale Religious Paraphernalia, or across the four-lane divided main thoroughfare, would be a more accurate description. The builders — carpenters, electricians, foreign laborers obviously without visas — were putting the finishing touches on the place, installing the final sheets of Plexiglas, painting the edges of the bright neon yellow sign, hauling in the last of the massive lobster tanks.

From her seat behind the cash register at Providence Paraphernalia, Jane had an excellent view of the entire construction. "COMING SOON:" the sign said, "Larry's Wholesale Lobsters!" This had originally struck Jane as absolutely absurd. Why in the name of hell, she thought, would someone decide to build a lobster outlet on this desolate stretch of industrial-zoned warehouse land. This was the middle of Scarborough. There was never supposed to be anything mildly interesting here. Warehouses, paper-mills, outdated tech centers, an occasional strip mall with a porno-store, a cheap dermatologist and a feeble-looking coffee chain with cigarette burnt wallpaper and inside, a tired looking forty-year-old newimmigrant behind the counter wearily asking one-sugar-or-two? These were the stores that lined Warden Avenue. What right did a bright neon yellow sign advertising fresh lobster have setting up shop, disrupting the un-

checked, unmedicated depression of late-seventies urban sprawl?

This store was doomed to failure, thought Jane, and a spectacular one at that. For surely, she reasoned, any potential niche market that a lobster wholesaler had would be completely discouraged by the obscurity and engorging drabness of the location, and would take their wholesale lobster purchases to a cleaner, more modern, and less dilapidated strip of commercial warehousing.

This wonder, like most things in her life, this incessant speculation of Jane's regarding the store, soon turned to idle boredom. Larry's Lobsters, she surmised, had just about as much right to exist as Providence Religious Wholesale Paraphernalia.

At least you could make a nice bisque out of lobsters. All that Providence had to offer was eternally delayed salvation vis-a-vis the magic of lowest common denominator bulk-store pricing.

The warehouse on Warden Avenue was one of three Providence outlets in the Greater Toronto area. But as Ted, Jane's boss and co-owner of the franchise, liked to say, "This is our flagship store." (Ted was a man with teeth a little too white and a face a little too stretched, as if to say, I'm trying really hard here, and I'd appreciate it if you'd clench your own butt-cheeks a little tighter and try harder too — thanks very much in advance.) The store was the

rock upon which the entire Providence chain was firmly incorporated.

There were thousands of square feet of unadulterated Christian bells and whistles. Everything one needed to start up a church of any denomination or creed, as long as you "Liked Christ" (another Tedism). There were stacks and stacks of crucifixes, at every level of gore ("The Catholics love the gore, Protestants like the symbolism, the French love the gold"). There were Christian books, calendars, motivational tapes, posters. The store sold holy water, communion wafers, incantation incense, and boxes and boxes of Bibles, all in bulk. New items came in every day: Testamints (Halloween candy with psalms inside), Christian rap, Christian kids' videos, Christian bath soap, Jesus clocks, all packaged and sold in mass quantities without the slightest hint of irony. This lack of ironic perspective applied to Ted, the management, and the entire patronage of the store. They entered, ordered, and purchased, without finding a single thing funny about the company's ability to make a mint through the packaging and commercial cannibalizing of our lord and saviour, Jesus Christ, amen. They were more interested in the savings.

Jane yawned and fiddled with her own crucifix, a small gold pendant her grandmother, Baba, had given her on her thirteenth birthday. She appreciated the crucifix for the heartfelt and misplaced emotion that her old-world Greek grandmother had placed into it, believing that Jane was, like her, a flesh-and-blood practicing Catholic. True enough, she had gone through the motions, did the first communion, the Catholic high school, the Sunday school classes. But these things she had

treated like any other of her extracurricular activities, to her, learning the verses and psalms of the Bible were akin to swimming lessons. Except with the Bible you didn't have to get wet.

Jane consciously wore the crucifix on the days that she worked at the store, and days when she felt like a real Catholic; rainy days mostly, meditative spring mornings near Lent or Easter. The rest of the time the crucifix stayed securely in the velvet case on her dresser.

God, how had she ended up here? No chance for escape in months. A summer job, yes, but one that seemed more like a sentence, one that ran on and on, and didn't really go anywhere.

Jane had finished a year at university. More like spiked it. Thrown it down in the end zone with disgust. Flunked one of her courses, Introductory Sociology, cruise-controlled through the others. Then fell down in March completely blank with no friends from high school (didn't return calls) or university (didn't make any).

She had commuted from her basement and kept to herself, except occasionally to repel overzealous frat boys with bloated necks who figured, what the hell, let's take a shot off her bow.

And now she had lost the inner drive, the motivation that had propelled her to such heady heights in high school. Second-to-none average, star history student, number one in theology class. Potential valedictorian candidate. She had landed, ass-down, in this ridiculous job, a job that was her only structure in her life, her only contact with the rest of the world.

I used to take interest in things. I used to want to do stuff. To make plans. To go on trips. To be a teacher. I would think

about the way in which I would set up my classroom with little plants and animals, quirky things that showed my personality and expanded the children's pre-adolescent imaginations. The kids would like me. They would buy me coffee mugs for Christmas that said "world's best teacher" and wrap them in tissue paper and make me hand-made cards, not because their parents made them, no, because I was their number one teacher, who held their hands when they had accidentally peed their pants in the playground, and because I was always fair and never picked favourites, even with the Attention Deficit Disorder kids. But now, I don't want to get there. It seems like so much effort, three more years and then teachers college. Then, after that, a lifetime. I'd rather just sit here and look out onto the interstate, watch the cars go by on the highway, dust these idols. Be content with the permanent state of dull grayness that doesn't hurt too much when you think...

The chime signaling a customer woke Jane from her reverie.

The small brown man was built like a jukebox. His features were rounded and sloped downwards, an art deco Indian. He had a small neatly trimmed mustache and deep brown eyes. The sags of his skin were beginning to droop down into his neck, where they were met by a bright orange-and-purple-checked wool sweater, too hot for the season and definitely handmade. He wore a smile, which, to Jane, would be difficult to accomplish without the assistance of prescription medication, but he pulled it off quite well. He gave off the air that he practiced the smile a lot and was genuinely happy to see you, a complete stranger, even when there was no compel-

ling reason to be so optimistic.

"Hello," he said, his voice ripe with the trace of a foreign accent, one Jane could not locate geographically.

"Hi... Can I help you look for anything?"

Her voice was cracking. Not opening her mouth for so long had congealed the spittle at the sides of her mouth making her already high-pitched and soft voice even more distorted and inhuman.

"Oh no, no." He stuck out his hand.

"I am Larry."

He pronounced it "Cheri."

She shook his hand.

"Oh! As in, Larry's Lobsters?"

"Yes." The name of his store immediately lightened up his face. It was the cardinal sin of pride.

"We are opening tomorrow."

He handed her a pamphlet. A flaming neon lobster wearing dark sunglasses was featured prominently on the cover, as well as the words, in bold lettering, "2 for 1!"

"The first week, we are having a two for one special, buy one lobster — get one free."

"Thanks."

"You should come in to see the place, it is beautiful."

"Yes?"

"The tanks have been installed. The water is running. It is a haven for lobster lovers."

This was a joke. And so Jane smiled.

"Are you a lobster lover?" Larry asked.

"Me? ... Well, they're not my favorite. I've only had one once."

"I suppose at Red Lobster?"

"Yes."

"Canadians and Red Lobster! Red Lobster is terrible, terrible, you come in, and

I tell you what, I will cook you a lobster, and it will be delicious, it will be melt-in-your-mouth fantastic."

He was not selling her anything, and this relaxed Jane. Yes, he was pitching her his store, but in a relaxed jovial manner, not really expecting her to buy anything. It was more like his hobby, and you could tell he had run these lines to all the construction workers, family members, people he met in the coffee stores, everyone, over and over again: they bore the smoothness of a worn pebble. But yet Jane didn't mind talking to him because he wasn't pushing, wasn't selling.

So many people came in trying to hawk their wares to Jane. Independent religious nuts wanting to get their paperweight Christs onto the shelves. She referred them to Ted, but always their fiery pursuit of a buck drove them to attempt to pawn a hunk of junk off on Jane. Come on, they said, it makes a great gift. ... Once again, Jane did not appreciate their use of the clichéd salesman one-liners. She had read all about the Arthur Miller door-to-doorers, and John Steinbeck bible sellers. Snake-oil and persistence wouldn't work on her. She politely showed them the door. But Larry was different.

She had been transfixed by the store for so long. Hypnotized. And now here was an incarnation of Larry in the flesh.

"What made you want to open up a lobster store, Larry?"

He was now perusing the shelves. Fingering the bobble-dolls and smelling the scented cross-shaped candles.

"Well I suppose. ... I never got your name."

"Jane."

"A beautiful name. ... I suppose that the

reason why I started into the lobster business is that I never eat them myself."

"No?"

"I am a vegetarian. A Muslim."

"Oh..."

Did this store enrage him? Signify everything that is wrong with Westernized culture? The commercialization of divinity, the pursuit of the buck. In the Muslim religion they aren't even allowed to draw a picture of Mohammed, or God, it's all just those wiggly line drawings and pictograms. Right?

"So what do you think of this store?"

He paused a little. Soaked in the aura.

"I think it's nice. Could use a little colour though. A splash of red."

Lamb's blood red. It could be a new line of indoor paint.

"Excuse me for asking but doesn't selling lobster for a living, and being a vegetarian Muslim, well, isn't that a bit of a conflict of interest?"

"Yes it is my dear."

"So how do you rectify that?"

"I keep my beliefs and my actions separate. That is how I survive. The bright neon signs, the tanks, the clothes, all of these things, they are not the same as what lives inside, what breathes, my soul. My belief in God is inseparable from me, no matter what I do. If I sell out, if I commit a blasphemy, it is of little consequence to him, only if my inner-self wavers, then that is of great consequence. ... That is why I find a place like this quaint. These items might be gaudy, please excuse the pun, they might even compromise the entire belief systems of Christianity."

He held up a particularly terrible item. A "Jesus playing sports" figurine. Our Saviour, in skates, playing with two porcelain

Aryans. The statues had been featured on late night talk shows as a comedy segment. Providence was selling the entire set for \$69.95, once again, without irony. "But in the greater scheme of things, they matter little, and they give some comfort."

He placed the figurine back on the shelf.

"You must come over to the store. I will show you the tanks. They are very beautiful. I will cook you a lobster."

He smiled, the well-practiced smile, and left the store. The exiting bells resonated in the now near-empty warehouse.

Jane sat in the television room. The basement. She sat on the leather lazy-boy chair. Her parents sat beside her on the couch. The television was on, loud enough to stop any conversation. Except occasions during commercial breaks that were not used up by washroom breaks or Coca-Cola runs to the kitchen. Jane wasn't quite sure what television show they were all now watching, a decorating show most likely.

She got up and walked up the stairs, through the kitchen to the backdoor, opened it. The night was awake with the sound of rushing cars. From the backyard — one of many in the compound development fifteen minutes from the Providence store — she could see the pulsing neon curve of Warden Avenue. The passing cars, each like a Christmas light blinking, and then sliding out of view.

The heat had not yet lifted from the ground, and Jane thought she could see waves coming from the direction of the store. Or maybe it was smoke. No, waves, surely it was waves being emitted from

the dark warehouse.

In her mind's eye, she could now see the figurines and crucifixes in the store, all synthetic, plastic limbs, sealed tight and sterilized, erupting from their packages, bursting and vibrating in epileptic fits on the floor. Like the prophet Mohammed receiving messages from God, the objects vibrated on the ground, emitting a faint whine, a whine of remorse. They praised their maker while simultaneously wishing him dead, for the flaws in their design, the cracks in their wood crosses, the shoddiness of their paint job, the toxic chemicals inherent within their plastics, the prices sealed onto their sides with adhesives.

All this was happening on a gray street in the middle of the night, in an absolute zero town.

They were calling out, waiting for someone to touch them and ingrain them with meaning, with emotion. Alone in the warehouse they sang.

Jane almost wept. Instead, she went back inside, and back down into the basement.



Christina Wollensen

Grange

Moment in Time

My mouth is dry. My throat burns.

The man across from me has his elbows draped over his knees and is glaring out at the world through a pair of sunken in, hooded eyes. Next to him there is a small, youngish woman with a mouth like a rose bud. I can see from the streaks on her face that she has been crying. Between us there is an unconscious boy, his face pressed to the bedding of the truck, his eyelids split open a little so that I can see the whites of his eyes. Patterns of dappled sunshine from holes in the tarp up above us race across him.

"You know," says the man, "They mean to execute us as soon as we get there."

"You can't be sure of that," says the woman shrilly. She brushes her hair out of her eyes with a tiny porcelain white hand. "And even if that is what they mean to do, it can't possibly happen."

The man sneers. "And why not?"

"Because we've done nothing wrong!" the woman says passionately.

"You read your history books?" says the man. His voice is gravelly, dangerous. "That's never stopped anyone from killing someone." He spits. "We've done nothing wrong!" he repeats in a falsetto. He laughs.

"But that happened somewhere else, not here," the woman replies. "I grew up being told that this was a free, democratic country. It can't happen here. Someone will stop them from killing us. They might get us down on our knees and have guns

pressed to the backs of our heads, but they will never pull the trigger. Someone will come to their senses or they will receive a command from someone else who knows we've done nothing wrong."

"Will you listen to this," says the man. He is addressing me now. "Can you believe this girl?"

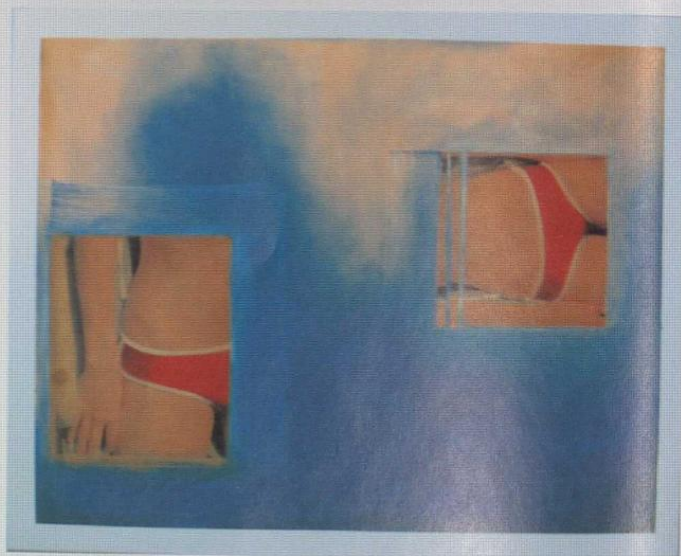
I swallow. Slowly. My tongue feels like cardboard. "I can," I say.

He makes a face and snorts. "But you're not going to get down on your knees, like a little dog are you? Wait for them to just kill you? You, girl, you look like a fighter."

I think for a moment. My stomach is turning inwards, hell bent on consuming itself. It's been more than thirty-six hours since I last ate anything. I'm used to three full meals a day plus snacks in between. "I don't know what I'll do, to be honest," I say. "I want to say that I will fight, but I'm not sure I will. When do you decide to flee or fight exactly? Right now I don't know how it will go down. They might open the back of this thing and shoot us all to hell. Or they might escort us two feet and then shoot us without warning."

"If they do that, then no one can blame you," the man says. "What I'm saying is, will you get down on your knees and just wait for it to be over? Will you be obedient?"

"If you cooperate with them," the woman interjects, "You have a better chance of survival overall. You'll have more time. How would you feel if you decided to



Christina Wollensen

The Lake

fight and they kill you and a minute later a pardon is issued?"

The man spits again, his eyes blazing. "You watch too many Hollywood movies. You think the real world is about happy endings? You need a wake-up call. This life, it ain't a fairytale. In case you haven't been paying attention, we've already been imprisoned for no reason, tortured, starved and now we're going to be executed. I don't understand what about that is so hard for you to comprehend." He jabs her roughly on the side of her head. "Get it through that thick skull of yours — this is it. We've been forgotten, abandoned...there is no such thing as democracy or freedom. You follow?"

The woman leans slowly away from him as though in terrible pain. Her movement is a delayed response to his jabbing. Her mouth twists. When she speaks her voice is almost a howl. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. I was supposed to finish university — I had one more year! I wanted to get a good job, move out. It's hard to let go of that! I want the world to go back to the way it was when it made sense!"

"You have to adapt, or die," the man says fiercely through locked teeth. He looks almost as though he is about to strike her but he calms suddenly and scrapes his palms together, the fire draining from his eyes. "Maybe it's easier for me though. I never had dreams like that. I never had a future, so this is no bother to me; it's just more of the same, just slightly different rules and scenery."

The truck we are in swings around a tight corner. I slide sideways, the man and woman across from me fall into me and the unconscious boy flops over. His eyes roll open all the way and his head lolls back at

an unnatural angle.

I remember that when the trip began he was breathing lightly so that his back rose and fell. I never got a chance to talk to him, never so much as knew his name. I reach out to touch him, my finger tips tingling. I find the place on his neck where his pulse should be and wait. The man and woman look at him with apprehension. My hands start to sweat. "No pulse," I say.

"You sure?" the woman asks.

"Here, you try." I move to take her hand and she pulls it back, shakes her head, presses her lips tightly shut. We untangle ourselves from each other and the dead boy and let him slide into a corner, his limbs in disarray.

The truck starts to slow. My heart rate sky-rockets. And then it drops off all at once. I feel cold and empty, light-headed, dazed but at the same time finely attuned to everything.

I can smell something foul and rotting. I can hear seagulls crying. I feel the summer heat for the first time.

"So this is it," says the man, "are you gonna be a pushover and wait for them to cap you or are you going to fight back and if you die in the process, die with some dignity?" He looks at the woman with traces of affection. "You can wait for someone else to save you and die realizing that no one cares, that the world doesn't make sense and never will again, or you can die relying on the only person that can do anything, and that's you."

The woman is crying and hiccupping and fanning herself with her hands. She is nodding and shaking her head all at once.

"Maybe it's all the same," I say, my hand on her shoulder. "I'm not religious but I've

heard it said that if you trust in yourself and you do what you think is right, you're also really trusting in god."

The woman looks at me softly, her eyes full of tears. For a moment I think I have succeeded in comforting her or spurring her into action, but then her mouth splits open wide and she lets out a long moan. "I think maybe this is the end, this is it. It's over. There isn't any point in resisting. God knows, it's my time. I don't want to live in a world like this."

The man throws up his hands. "Lost cause," he says to me. "She's looking for excuses to give up."

The woman begins to sob wretchedly, loudly. She is clawing at the air as though she cannot breathe. I turn my gaze away from her and clench my fists.

Through a hole in the side of the truck I see a field of garbage. It is sun-bleached white. The whole world is too bright. There are men everywhere with machine guns. I count at least ten. They look bored and hot. I hear one say something about having ten minutes of his shift left. Another is drinking what looks like lemonade.

The engine shudders, stops.

CONTRIBUTORS

Caroline Alexis Xenia Aksich has a name which far outweighs her credentials. She is a former Montrealer who wants to visit Shannan and Rhydaman before 2014.

Veronika Isabella Bryskiewicz breeds monarch butterflies for the Lithuanian government. As a side project she analyzes the marginalized post-colonial Polish experience, dividing her time between Kraków and Mumbai.

Ben Chaisson is a Multimedia theatre designer in Toronto and abroad. His work was most recently seen in the Dora-Award-winning show *Bigger Than Jesus*.

Christine Choi is currently in her third year of undergraduate studies at Victoria College, University of Toronto. She is pursuing an English Specialist degree.

Kevin Grant lives in Toronto.

Kevin Halligan dropped out of St Mike's and wound up in Cambodia, so let that be a lesson. "Dry Season Offensive" is expected next year.

Kerri Leigh Huffman has had poems and short stories published in numerous Canadian journals including *The Fiddlehead*, *CV2*, *Kiss Machine* and *Taddle Creek*. She lives and works in Toronto.

When he was seven, Bryan Jay Ibeas was traumatized by a novel about alien abduction; he has sought vengeance on the written word ever since.

Kate Jenks is currently in her fourth year of study at Victoria University. She spends entirely too much time watching "Gilmore Girls" and the Food Network.

Aisha John is working on a short story collection and dancing with *Nouvel Expose*. Her work has appeared in *Exile*.

Jim Johnstone is the editor of *Misunderstandings Magazine*. His chapbook, *siamese poems*, will be published by Surly Editions this summer.

Elizabeth Karp loves to appropriate male narrative voice as well as male clothing. She hails from Salt Lake City, Utah, home of Polygamy Porter, Donny Osmond and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Beth Kates is a Dora-Award-winning Lighting Designer and Multimedia Artist whose work in theatre takes her around the world. This photo was taken while sailing on a canal in Amsterdam.

Benedetta Lamanna is a fourth-year English and Italian Studies major and History minor. Her poems have appeared in *The Grammateion* and *Surface & Symbol*.

Julienne Lottering is living in the French Alps exploring secret passages and eating baguettes. She no longer wears a nose ring but is still an artist.

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Daniel Shawn Otis is a University of Toronto student who would always rather be swimming in seas of music, poetry, and photography than bleeding out philosophical balderdash.

James Papoutsis is a Victoria College alumnus and a doctoral candidate in English at York University. His play, *Ditching Mackenzie*, will premier in Toronto this March.

Sandy Pool is a poet and a multi-disciplinary performance artist who lives in Toronto. Someday she would like to graduate from University and become a real person with a real job.

David West Read would like to dedicate this script to all of the scripts that have been sent overseas, only to be massacred by directors.

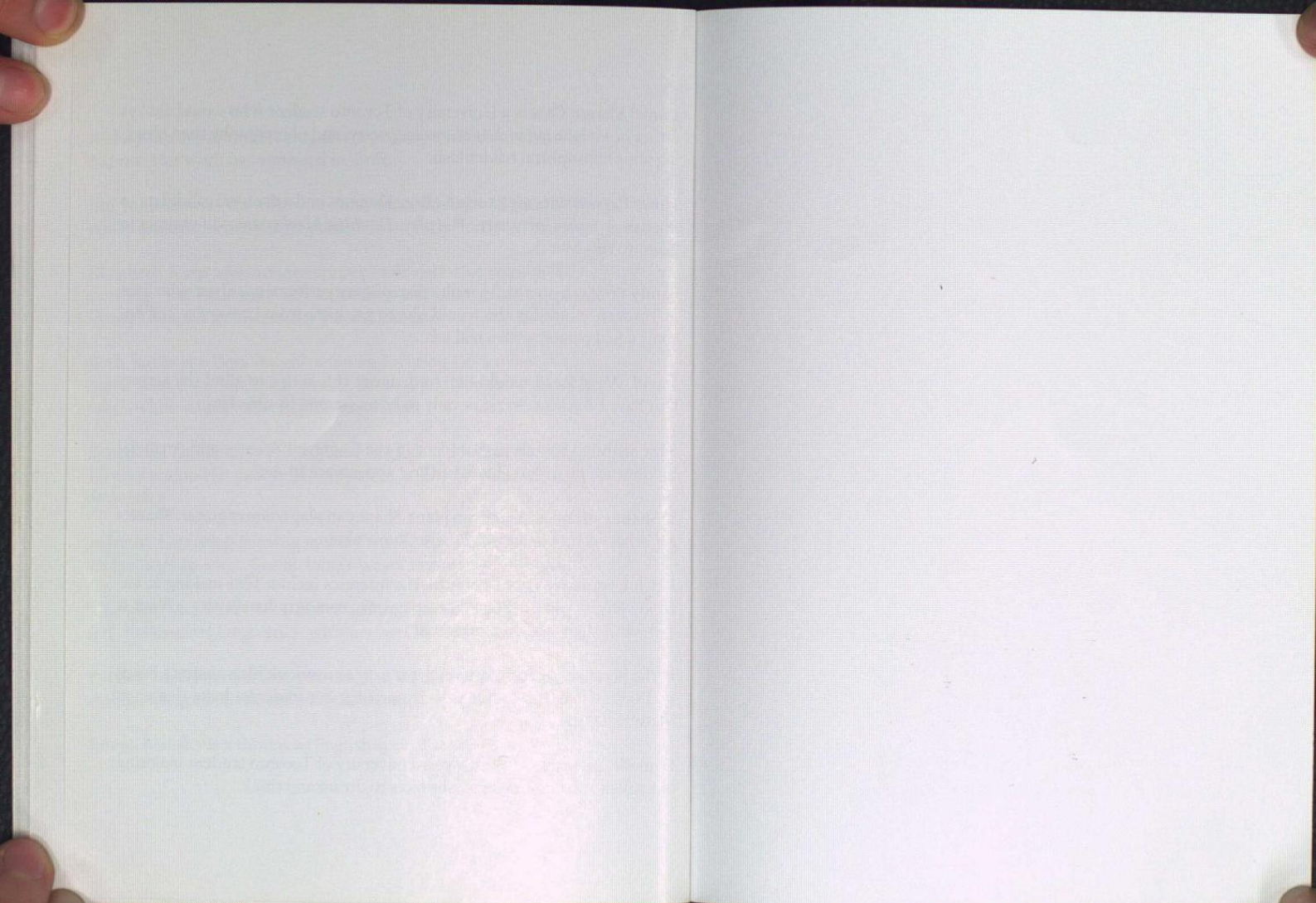
Sara Saab is a fourth year student in the Cognitive Science and Artificial Intelligence program. This is her first appearance in *Acta*.

L. Shane can dance. Shane can plant. Shane can play country guitar. Shane's got other secret talents you'll never know about

Keith Urquhart is from Toronto. His interests include film-making & karaoke. His website is <http://homepage.mac.com/urquhartkeith> . . . Visit it and win a slightly used tamagotchi.

In the practice of everyday living, it is easy to overlook life's abstract beauty. Don't. Christina Wollensen is pursuing her undergraduate degree at Victoria College.

Danielle Zacarias is a fourth year University of Toronto student majoring in English and Criminology. She likes to dream and think.



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