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They Say

by

Brianne O'Grady

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts at the
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Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2011

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They Say
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Abstract

They Say is a collection of seventeen short stories that draws its inspiration from Canadian folklore. The stories use a variety of different styles and genres in order to reflect certain aspects of folkloric tradition, particularly folklore's communal and performance-based qualities. These styles/genres include first person narration, direct addresses to the reader, mock play scripts, song lyrics and prose poetry. Overlapping images, phrases and characters also appear throughout *They Say*. While the stories in *They Say* can be read as complete, individual stories, the overlaps serve to create a shared textual universe for the collection as a whole.

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They Say

They say Aunty Sarah walked out the door on a Monday afternoon. Helen Edwards says it had to have been in the afternoon because she had lunch at one o'clock on the porch that day and she saw Aunty Sarah come outside and get the mail and go back into the house. So Aunty Sarah definitely left after lunch time. Helen Edwards always knows what time it is. She has a clock in every room and a watch for any occasion. She gave me a broken pocket watch once that I could wear as a necklace.

Just so we're clear, Aunty Sarah definitely *walked* out the door. She didn't *run* away. They say she just let gravity pull one foot after the other down the hill and towards the sea. They say Aunty Sarah walked out the door and down the street and when she got to the shore she took off her shoes and walked on the rocks with her bare feet so she could feel their hard, wet surface one more time. She walked to the edge of the Atlantic and let her toes get wet but not her ankles. Mother says a taxi was waiting for her by the shore. Aunty Monica says she got into a boat with a black-haired man. They both say that Aunty Sarah took the green suitcase. They also both say that the suitcase belonged to them first. I don't remember either of them having a green suitcase, but apparently it is a very important detail.

Cousin Julia says a monstrous sea-serpent shaped like a lion swam up out of the waves and swallowed Aunty Sarah whole. All in one bite, Cousin Julia says, and she can demonstrate by opening her mouth really wide. Brian Reed who lives down the street says that the lion roared and Aunty Sarah got so scared that she started running and hasn't stopped yet. He says one day she'll run straight through Vancouver and into the Pacific. I

say the lion swam up and roared and Aunty Sarah roared back and she hopped onto the serpent-lion and rode it all the way to Greenland. That's what I would do.

They say a lot of things, but Uncle Jeff doesn't say anything at all. Because no matter what they say, Aunty Sarah is never coming home.

What Remains in the Mine

Sam remembers the mine but not its silence. There had always been an abundance of sound. Conveyor rattling, coal shaking, the high-pitched snorts of pit ponies, the loud-deep yells of men. Yet Rick had said all that noise was nothing. The sound you heard when you were alone and the last one out of the mine – that sound was something.

“There are a lot of things inside this earth,” Rick had said. “And sometimes they go strolling about. We aren’t the only ones come down here. ”

“Sure, Rick. There’s the ponies,” Sam had said.

“Like ponies were the first things down here.” Rick had rolled his eyes as if Sam were simple.

Sam rolls his eyes now. Rick’s inside the earth now, though not this earth. At a cemetery an hour from here.

“I thought mines went down,” Jessie says, smiling, at seven years old just big enough to go on this tour. The mine shaft starts in the valley below and tunnels upward into the hill. The tour guide leads the string of tourists up the shaft, her rehearsed voice barely raised yet reaching all of them. Reaching Sam and Jessie at the back of the line, though Sam isn’t listening.

“Grampa, were the trees frozen when you were here?” Jessie whispers.

Trees? Sam looks at the thick round beams holding up the earth, still covered in bark. White veins of frost creep across the wood. Sam imagines phantom limbs reaching

for the sun, phantom roots stretching down, holding the tunnel in place. A row of trees just to keep the dirt off his head.

“It’s cold in the mine when you aren’t moving so I imagine they was always a little frozen,” Sam says.

“Are there fossils in here?” Jessie bounces up and down.

“I don’t see any hanging about if there are.”

The tour guide stops the line, jumps up on the conveyor and starts telling stories. She asks them to turn out their headlamps and the tourists gasp at the dark.

“Grampa, I can’t even see my hands!”

Sam reaches forward, places a hand on Jessie’s shoulder though he can’t see her. Losing your light in the mine is a dangerous thing. The tour guide tells them about how the early miners wore helmets with real flames, how these men could relight them in the pitch black if the light went out. She discusses the battery operated helmets that came next, the kind Sam knows well. But the tourists are thrilled by the dark, by the idea of candles. Sam exhales slowly. A dark mine is a dangerous thing.

“I heard this mine is haunted,” someone at the front of the line says.

Someone else laughs. “Is that true?”

The tour guide turns her lantern on. She sits cross-legged on the conveyor belt with her helmet in her hands. She tilts the light back so it shines on her face, looks closely at the line of people. She’s trying to decide if they want a story or if they’re teasing her.

Then she starts speaking in a soft voice. Everyone leans forward though even Sam at the back of the line could hear if he wanted. Instead Sam's eyes scan the stray pieces of coal that lie on the unmoving conveyor. *Now this here, this machine, is a fossil*, Sam thinks. An un-working reminder of the men who worked here.

The tour guide tells them to turn their headlamps back on before leading them forward.

"Grampa, are there really ghosts here?" Jessie whispers.

"No, Jess. It's just stories," Sam says. Sam glances back down the mine shaft. There had been men and noise once, but now it was empty. Sam had never cared much for superstitions that weren't true. Why would men haunt the mine? They'd spent enough time down here while alive. Even Rick would never have gone on about mining ghosts. Only the sound heard in the silent mine when no one else was there. Now that Sam is in the silent mine, all he hears is the shuffling feet of tourists, the tour guide's speech, Jessie's occasional whispers, silent trees.

Then afternoon sun appears in an opening up ahead. The line moves a half-pace faster, drawn by the warmth, the light.

Sam doesn't rush. As the line leaves through the small entrance, he pauses for one last look down the mine shaft. He can almost picture himself and the others down there, moving through the dark. Sam feels the earth shake over his head. Jessie doesn't notice, follows closely at the heels of the person in front of her. Sam is alone in the mine. Sam

feels the floor tremble, hears the deep booming echoes of something pounding overhead, feels the sound deep in his chest.

“And why would they go strolling about?” Sam had asked.

“‘Cause would you want to stay under here forever?” Rick had said. “Everything has to stretch its legs now and then. ‘Specially them big giants.”

“Talk crazy all you want, as long as you remember it’s your turn to buy the drinks.”

The pounding of giants. This was Rick’s sound.

“Grampa?” Jessie stands in the entrance.

“Get going,” Sam orders and she turns to follow the group. Sam follows behind her.

The heat hits them as soon as they step outside. In the valley below, the faded wooden buildings rest on the dust, quiet save for the few tourists drifting in and out. Cars sit in the parking lot. Sam picks out the dark lines of coal in the rolling hills. Too little to bother mining.

“That was fun!” Jessie says and Sam can tell she means it.

“Want to go to the museum now?” Sam asks. He looks toward the direction of the museum, a short drive away, nestled next to its own set of dusty hills.

“Okay! Can we look at all the dinosaurs? They used to live right here. Can we look for fossils after the museum?”

“Sure.”

The tour ends. Jessie skips back to the truck, bounces into the passenger seat. Sam eases himself into the cab, turns the key in the ignition and drives away.

Tom

When I wake up, the sun is rising. I sit up, stretch, run my fingers through my hair. If I wait a few moments, the sun will dry the grass and I won't catch my breath on chill morning air. But I never wait. The path is too nice this time of day. This is the time for walking.

On my morning walk, I pass Tom. He is fiddling with a new camera. It's all metal limbs and little green lights and probably involves a complex timer system. How early did Tom wake up this morning? Even I wait for sunrise. He attempts to cover the camera in branches, to hide it from the local wildlife. The best way to capture a natural picture, I suppose. Tom's dog, Fiddlestick, lies in the grass. Every so often his tail thumps the ground and his ears perk up.

“There, that should hold it. Where'd I put the....”

Fiddlestick realizes that Tom is talking to the machine and not to him. He puffs a sigh and rolls onto his back, waiting to be noticed.

I pass by Tom again at noon. Tom's wife, Sharon, brings him a sandwich in a Ziploc bag. He smiles, but doesn't say thank you. Sharon scratches Fiddlestick behind the ears and listens as Tom points to this metal switch and that glass lens and explains what he has been doing all morning. Sharon smiles and reads Tom interesting stories from the news. She asks questions. Tom lights up and dives into several more high-tech explanations. I wonder how she smiles with such patience. Fiddlestick leans against Sharon, oblivious to everything but the pale hand scratching behind his ears.

“So how do you know this is where to set up the camera?”

“I saw tracks here once. Wish I’d had my camera then. But this is the path it takes.”

“And what does that do?”

“This triggers the camera to start taking pictures. See I’ve attached it to...”

I have had enough of this and walk away.

I see Tom every day. Every day he makes adjustments, every week he adds something new to his camera contraption. A new month comes and he has a new machine entirely. I think Tom used to have a job. There was a time when he didn’t spend all day toying with camera angles and timer settings. There was a time when it was all just a hobby – a Saturday, Sunday and occasional long-weekend Monday affair. Perhaps an evening or two now and then. He would murmur to Fiddlestick about too-short holidays and never having enough time.

“I know we’re close,” Tom might say and Fiddlestick would wag his tail as if he cared.

Now Tom’s hobby is Tom’s life. Morning and night he watches the green lights and glass lenses and waits for it all to work out. He has so much time now. He can wait.

It has been two months and Tom has gone through two tripods and yet another camera. Sharon brings Tom his lunch, but she doesn't ask any questions. While Tom explains the purpose of that knob and this light, Sharon nods and says nothing.

“And this attaches to the flash over here. See, it's different from the old one. Much sturdier.”

When Tom's back is turned, Sharon murmurs to Fiddlestick and rubs his belly. Tom doesn't notice.

“This is still the right spot. I saw bark stripped from those trees and there were tracks. Small tracks – I mean they were still twice as big as yours, but that's on the small side according to – well, that's not important. This is still the right path.”

I sit for awhile, out of sight. I see Tom's dedication, his unwavering enthusiasm. I want to be interested; Tom is trying so hard. I silently tell myself that I care more than Sharon and Fiddlestick, but I don't understand much about cameras and soon I leave too.

Sharon did not bring lunch today. I am so used to the routine that I feel a sudden urge to investigate. But no, it is none of my business. Why should I care? I stand for so long that Fiddlestick looks in my direction. Perhaps if I stay here, Tom will see me too. What would he do if he saw me? What would I do? I could find out if I wanted to, if I just stay here. His back is to me, his eyes focused on the camera. I don't wait for him to look up. Did Fiddlestick whine as I walked away? I won't go back to look.

Sharon does not bring lunch all week and then suddenly I realize I haven't seen her for a month. I think she still makes the lunches, because the Ziploc bags are now labelled TOM in black marker. If Tom made the sandwiches, he wouldn't need to label them. Sharon must make two lunches now – his and hers sandwiches sealed away in baggies and neatly labelled so as not to be confused when their owners go their separate ways. I am glad she still makes the lunches. I think Tom would starve if she didn't. Fiddlestick still lies next to Tom every day, whining softly now and then and pretending that Tom's murmurs are for him. I sit and listen to the murmurs. Camera settings don't make me so impatient anymore. Perhaps I am learning.

Another month is gone and Sharon has not come back. Tom talks to himself.

“I know you're out there. Come on, beautiful, let me catch you...”

He adjusts another knob so he can catch the beautiful. That sounds so lovely, though I suppose “beautiful” is what some hunters call their prey. But Tom is no hunter. He is a photographer, an artist, who can't quite see his muse.

“You're a tricky one, but this time...”

He pushes another button. Fiddlestick wags his tail, but his ears are down. He knows he is being ignored. He is starting to give up. I sit silently and listen. I care, Tom, even though I never say a word. I like Tom's murmurings. They have become part of my

daily routine. I listen to him murmur beautiful, tricky, this time and think, yes, maybe this time.

Sharon is here. She is angry, her voice is raised.

“ – always here! What did you expect?!”

“Sharon...”

“No!” A Ziploc bag flies through the air and smacks Tom in the chest.

“I’m close, Sharon...”

“Screw close! You can come home now or you can stay here.”

“I can come home now...” His hand strays toward the camera timer, to set it before he leaves.

No, don’t go Tom. Sharon doesn’t care. I glare at this angry woman, at her stupid labelled sandwich bag lying on the ground.

“No.” Sharon walks right up to Tom so he cannot look away. “You can’t come home now and then be out here again tomorrow. I’ve had enough! You are coming home or you are staying here. Pick one.”

Tom looks from Sharon to the camera and back. He doesn’t say anything. He is loyal to them both.

“Fine. FINE! Fiddlestick, come!”

Fiddlestick whines, but does not move. He is loyal to them both. Sharon marches up to Fiddlestick and clips a leash onto his collar.

“Fiddlestick does not have to spend all day out here. You don’t even pay attention to him!” She pulls on the leash and Fiddlestick obediently follows.

I am angry. The closest thing at hand is a pinecone and I fight the urge to throw it at Sharon’s head. Tom is patient. Tom is dedicated and passionate. Tom murmurs his thoughts out loud to cameras and to no one and to me. Because I sit and listen. How can she just walk away?

Sharon turns around. She is crying, but she keeps her voice low. “You’ll choose a stupid conspiracy over me and Fiddlestick. And for what? You’ll never find it. Come on, Fiddlestick.” But she doesn’t move yet. Her pale hand scratches the dog’s ears, leaving time for Tom to answer. Or change his mind.

I feel like I have been punched in the stomach. I look at Sharon’s tears and the anger is forced out of me. The phrasing is trivial – she says “it” because it is the only word she has. I know what she means: “You’ll choose *her* over me. You’ll never find *her!*”

Yes, Tom is patient. Yes, he is dedicated and passionate – for me. I am another woman. An other woman that Sharon cannot compete with because I will always have ten times the mystery she has. And that’s what Tom wants, right? The mysterious beautiful, the hunt. So many people look for me and I ignore them. They obsess over me, but I never care. It is none of my business. So why did this one get me? Because I loved

listening to those murmurs that I knew were mine. Now I wish Tom had taken Sharon to the lake to seek sleeping ancient beasts, had taken Fiddlestick up north to find giant nightmare women. There are so many fame-seekers, monster hunters and so many others to hunt. Why did he have to go after me and why did I watch him do it? If Sharon walks away, if she takes Fiddlestick, then Tom will be hurt and it will be all my fault. I don't watch Sharon walk away. I walk away first.

Tom is attaching something new to his camera. He is alone. Fiddlestick no longer lies in the grass, thumping his tail and sighing. It seems so much quieter without his silent company. Tom eats his lunch out of a paper bag. At least he has something to eat.

Tom has gone home for the night. I wonder if it is to a house that still reminds him of Sharon and Fiddlestick or if he is somewhere new.

It is raining.

This is the path it takes...I saw tracks here once...small tracks...

Sharon smiles and reads Tom interesting stories from the news:

“The woman claims she saw it running through a strand of trees outside of town. While some take this sighting as evidence for the legendary creature’s existence, others maintain that if there was something to find, it would have been found by now. ‘Pictures, footprints, those are easily faked’ Miller says ‘we have yet to see any real proof’...”

...maybe you’ll be the one, Tom...

Always so much concern over the size of my feet. But if I am all Tom has left, I feel I have to give him something.

I walk to the path I take every morning, just out of sight of the camera lens. I dig my heels into the wet ground and drag them forward before squishing my toes into the earth. I leave a trail of big feet behind me for Tom to find. It isn't much, but it's something.

Stories Told to Sisters

Once there were two sisters and they were walking home together. As they walked, the sky began to grow dark. The little sister shuddered.

There, there, said the big sister. *Just keep walking. Take my hand – we'll be home soon.*

A fog was rolling in behind them. A thick, heavy fog that hid everything it covered. The big sister squeezed the little sister's hand tight. They both knew that they mustn't let the fog catch them. A grey tear rolled down the little sister's cheek.

Just keep walking, said the big sister. She looked behind her. *We'll be home soon.*

The fog crept silently closer and closer. The little sister looked back at the rolling, grey-white wall slowly advancing. She paused. It seemed that the longer they walked, the further away home felt. She was so tired. Maybe they could stop for just a moment. The fog wasn't that close...

Come on, said the big sister, tugging the little sister's hand. *Walk a bit ahead of me and you will get home faster. Keep hold of my hand. I am right behind you. I will get you home safe.*

So they kept walking and the little sister repeated to herself, *just keep walking, we'll be home soon, just keep walking, we'll be home soon, just keep walking, just keep...*

Suddenly she realized her big sister's hand was gone. When had she let go?

Sister! Sister! the little sister cried.

I am right behind you.

The big sister shuffled forward at the edge of the fog. Her steps were slow and heavy.

Come on, said the little sister. *Just keep walking. We're almost home.*

But we could stop for just a moment, the big sister replied. The fog stirred at the big sister's back. *Aren't you tired? Why hurry home? It is only fog.* She smiled an overstretched smile.

The little sister looked around in panic, but there was nothing there to help her. *No, no,* she said. *Let's keep going.*

The little sister walked ahead a few steps, then glanced back to make sure her big sister was still there. The big sister followed slowly. They continued on in this way for what seemed a long time. Every time the little sister looked back, the big sister seemed to be falling further behind, but she was still following so the little sister kept going. At last, the lights of their house appeared up ahead. A voice called from the house. It was their mother, calling them home.

Come on, said the little sister. *We are almost there.* She took a few steps forward, but her big sister had stopped completely.

The little sister ran back to the big sister and reached for her. *Here, take my hand.*

Their mother's voice called out their names.

The big sister stretched out her arm. Fog swirled around her fingers.

Why hurry home? It is only fog. Stay here with me instead.

The big sister smiled that overstretched smile. Their mother's voice called through the dark.

Stay here, the big sister commanded. She was almost invisible in the fog.

The little sister pulled back her outstretched hand in fear. She turned and ran to the house. The fog raced behind her. The little sister ran through the door and shut it tight and the fog did not take her.

Made of Air

The technician handed Samantha a large white paper square for modesty before stepping out of the room. The click of the shutting door sounded like a lock turning, closing Samantha off from the fluorescent hallway. The dim light inside the room turned the walls a soft deep rose and left the corners in shadow. The effect would have been soothing had the small space not been dominated by an examination table and the large humming ultrasound machine.

Samantha took a deep breath and began removing “everything below the waist, please.” The whole leg needed to be examined, all the way up, the technician had explained. Samantha’s jeans clung to her skin as she reluctantly pulled them down. She hid her underwear inside her pants before rolling them into a ball and hiding the bundle in a shadowy corner. As if the technician had never seen a person’s underwear before. Well, she had never seen Samantha’s underwear. Samantha gave her pants a final nudge into the corner with her bare foot and then quickly climbed onto the table. She wasn’t sure how long it took to “be back in a moment” and she was determined to be ready when the technician returned. She placed the paper square over her middle. The thin sheet hovered just above her body as if hesitant to protect her.

Don’t worry. It’s just a precaution, the doctors had said. But if there’s a clot, you won’t be able to fly. Don’t worry.

I thought I just pulled something, Samantha had argued, staring in frustration at her sore leg. It was supposed to be a routine physical. Why had she even mentioned it?

It's probably nothing, the doctors agreed. They said nothing more about clots or planes. *Don't worry.*

Samantha stared up at the white ceiling tiles and thought: *Please just let me go home.*

I can probably take a train or something, right? Samantha had told her mother over the phone.

Don't worry, it's probably nothing, her mother had answered. *And if it is something, you were only going to be here for a week anyway. We can mail you your presents and have a nice turkey dinner the next time you're home. Don't worry.* Samantha had listened to her mother's reassurance while staring at the unadorned walls of her apartment and imagining her mother sitting on the couch next to a glittering tree. Outside the windows, her mother's lawn would be waiting for late-December snow.

Samantha exhaled slowly and waited. "Back in a moment" felt like a long time. She tried to find shapes in the dots on the ceiling tiles. She found a constellation, the Big Dipper, then countless pairs of eyes. Then a moment felt like no time at all as the door opened and the technician re-entered the room.

The technician told Samantha to lie back, breathe. She sat down on the stool in front of the ultrasound, pulled out a plastic wand and some gel. It looked just like the gel Samantha had seen on TV, the kind that was spread across the taut stomachs of happy-nervous pregnant women.

“This will be cold,” the technician warned. Samantha pre-emptively winced, but when the thick substance touched her leg, the sensation was surprisingly soothing. Like a cool hand on a fevered forehead.

The technician moved the wand along Samantha’s calf and up her thigh. Samantha tilted her neck around until she could see a slice of the grey image on the screen. It didn’t look much like anything, let alone her leg. She couldn’t tell if it looked normal or not and the technician’s passive expression didn’t help. The technician moved the wand up and under the paper square. The paper shifted slightly to one side, but continued to cover Samantha’s middle. Samantha closed her eyes.

“Now we are going to listen to the blood,” the technician said. Her voice was even and calm. It was a nice voice, but a trained one. Samantha wondered how many people the technician saw in one day and if she got to give ultrasounds to pregnant women and if that was more fun. Samantha heard the technician push a button on the ultrasound machine before making another calm statement: “It should sound like wind.”

Witches are made of air.

Samantha’s eyes opened. The thought was instant and unexpected. A partial memory from childhood stories involving cats and broomsticks and the reasons women could fly. Her mother telling bedtime stories on the couch, some from a book and some from her mind. A little girl dressed in black and carrying a stick, leaping around an October-brown lawn. Flying up the street at night, landing at the houses with the best candy – the brick house on the hill, the blue house on Queen Street, Gramma’s...

Suddenly the room was filled with the hollow whistle of wind moving through a narrow tunnel. The sound of Samantha's blood moving through her veins.

I am made of air, Samantha thought. She stared up at the ceiling tiles and imagined herself flying home. She closed her eyes and pictured herself at airplane height. She stretched her legs downwards, dipping her toes into the cool nimbus soup. It felt like ultrasound gel. She felt the wind against her face. She heard birds flying below her. She heard the creak and groan of wood sailing though the sky. She heard the wind blowing inside of her.

The technician jabbed Samantha in the leg. The noise emanating from the ultrasound gave a strange squeaking jolt and then the steady wind resumed. *I am made of air*. Samantha willed it to be true. The technician systematically moved up Samantha's leg, jabbing her every few seconds. The wind jumped and skittered but did not stop.

I am...

The technician switched off the machine and the wind vanished. She handed Samantha a cloth to wipe the gel from her leg and then left the room so Samantha could get dressed. Samantha retrieved her clothes from their dark corner and pulled them on. She was made of air; this had all been a precaution. She turned the handle and left the dim room for the over-bright hallway. It would take three hours for the results to come back. She headed to the waiting room. She was made of air, she had heard it blowing. Don't worry, she was flying home.

I am

I am. Slight wind, slow movement, warm smell of life moving unaware. Tense muscles inching forwards. Watching watching. Shivers of anticipation. Watching watching. Speed bursting, legs reaching forward, impact of grass soil rock beneath feet. The moaning sounds of fear, the beating sounds of attempted escape. The smells of sweat and heat. Strike at air, strike at warmth, strike from desperation, strike from hunger, strike alone, strike together. Drive it forward into teeth. Stop. Birdsong. Slight wind. Warmth hunger rest. Still. Closed-eyes, darkness and the swell of my chest, the sound of my voice. The high-low sound of answer. The echo of my voice and answer my voice and answer voice answer.

I am Amarak. She is calling my name and I hear her and I come. When I arrive, she is not there, but below me flow the caribou. A slight wind. They smell of the earth from which they were fished – grass soil rock. Two sides of one whole. I chase, they run. I strike, they die. I take the weak, they keep the strong and we are all stronger. She called my name to find balance, the other side of caribou. Closed-eyes, darkness and the swell of my chest. She hears my voice and shivers. They all shiver. The hunters know these teeth and eyes could take their souls. My voice rises and falls over the dark plains. Silence.

I am a sign. I come to those who wait. Closed-eyes, darkness. Shivers of anticipation. When I arrive, they are ready. I am a rite of passage. My voice calls to them and they follow. Their voices echo their learning to their children; their hands echo my image in wood.

I am Fenrir. From beneath the earth – grass soil rock – I track the movements of the ship. Slight wind. The moaning sounds, the smell of sweat as the men row toward a new land. Most of them do not know me. They live here and leave here and by the time they get back, they have all forgotten me. They cross themselves and pray. My voice never stops. It rises and falls and rises again and they no longer hear it, but at least it is never silent.

I am loup-garou. I am Cursed. Speed bursting, legs reaching forward towards escape. They cannot know what I am. They would be filled with accusations. They would kill me with their guns. I will return in the morning and no one will know that I have been running. Running. The impact of grass soil rock beneath my feet. But in the morning I will have hands! Strike from desperation, strike from hunger. Falling further into this form. Closed-eyes, darkness and the swell of my chest. My voice rises and falls over the dark trees. The high-low sound of my voice. But this is not my voice! This is not my voice!

I am sheep and cow and chicken killer. I am Too Close For Comfort. Their comfort. I am a dark shadow against dark trees. Slight wind, slow movement. They cannot know that I am here. They would kill me with their guns. They would tell stories of their dangerous close encounter whether it is truth or lies. My high hollow voice echoes in the dark and makes the blood in their veins and the marrow in their bones shiver.

I am horns chasing the string quartet inside the music player of a fourth grade class. Complex music before a symphony of recorders. I am Big Eyes Big Ears Big Teeth in a kindergarten play and when I am murdered all the parents on the wooden gym benches applaud.

I am wild ideal. I am freedom and beauty and power and nature. They seek me out through the bars at the zoo, through the trees at the edge of their campsite, through nature documentaries. They tell stories of their spiritual close encounter whether it is truth or lies. I am a reminder. Overhunting, deforestation, Global Warming. Grass soil rock disappearing beneath my feet. I am observed. Tense muscles, shivers of anticipation recorded in the name of Science. I am a realization that life exists outside the lives they know. Yet they reach over. Their voices sing in high-low moans, coaxing my voice from me.

I am...

tense muscles running
Amarokothersideofcariboutotemguideteacher
Fenrirchainedbeneathgrass
soilrockloupgaroubutonlysometimesmurderer
TooCloseForComfortmusicchasingmusic
murderedstudiedembraced.

I am. The echo of my voice and answer. Slight wind, movement. The impact of grass soil rock beneath feet. Smell of life. High voices, small heartbeats. Cool noses touching. Warmth hunger rest. Sleep, dream, voices calling no names, calling me. I am.

Things To Do

“Top of your class! Way to go honey!” My Dad held up the progress report that I’d left lying on the kitchen table underneath my lunch bag. I had put it under the lunch bag on purpose. I wasn’t trying to hide it or anything – I just didn’t really want to talk about it. I should have known Dad would find it right away.

“Top of your class,” Dad repeated and kissed the top of my head. He walked down the hall to the living room and I heard him repeating the same thing to Mom. I took my time pouring a glass of orange juice.

You should know that my report did not actually say “top of the class” on it. I don’t think teachers are supposed to say things like that. They say things like “you are excelling” or “you need improvement.” This is because if you have a top of the class then someone has to be at the bottom and teachers aren’t supposed to point that sort of thing out. I guess getting told that you “need improvement” means the same thing, but it sounds better.

Dad came back to the kitchen. He didn’t say “top of your class” again but he grabbed a magnet and stuck my report to the fridge. I wonder when I’ll be too old to have my things stuck to the fridge. Mom appeared in the newspaper a few months ago and Gramma cut out the article and stuck it to her fridge, so I guess the answer is never.

Maybe you think my Dad is one of those dads who brag about their kids all the time. I guess he is, but I really am the top student in my grade. It's just that it's not really hard to be the top in the grade when there is only one other person in my grade and that one other person is Kyle.

When you are six and doing the unit on pioneers, the fact that you are in a one-room schoolhouse is cool. Okay, it's not *really* a one-room schoolhouse. Back when the town was bigger, they built a school with classrooms for each grade and teacher offices and a cafeteria. Then people left town because it turned into a dried-up tourist stop and there were hardly any kids left to fill the school. So now they put everyone in one classroom with one teacher no matter what grade you're in and you eat lunch at your desk and the rest of the school is marked out-of-bounds with a line of tape and all the lights are kept off. Anyway, this is all really cool when you're six and going to school with the older kids, but then one day you realize you are going to school with the little kids. I mean, everyone in my class is nice, but next year when Becky Silva leaves I will be the oldest person in the school and that's weird.

Dad says that being in a one-room classroom makes me unique and I'll be able to tell interesting stories about my life when I grow up and go away to a university where everyone grew up in suburbs and had over-crowded classrooms. I don't know. I think my interesting stories will "need improvement."

That night for dinner, Mom made lasagna. She didn't say it was because I did well on my progress report, but lasagna is my favourite so I think that's why.

“Are we going to have a party for your birthday?” Mom asked just as I put a big piece of lasagna in my mouth. I swallowed it whole, coughed, and then answered.

“Um, I don’t know yet.” My birthday was in a few weeks. I hadn’t really thought about a party.

I have one friend who is my age. Her name is Lucy. She used to go to school with me, but when we were in grade two Lucy’s mom decided to drive her every day to a bigger school forty-five minutes away. Lucy and I still hang out sometimes, but when she does things with her friends from her school, I’m never invited. I told my Mom about this once and she said that Lucy wasn’t a really good friend. That’s easy for her to say. I’ve seen pictures of Mom when she was my age surrounded by girls that are all the same age as her, dressed in pyjamas and sitting on puffy sleeping bags. I’ll take what I can get.

One time Lucy taught me how to predict my true love’s name using an apple. She’d learned how to do it at her new school. You have to hold the stem and twist the apple around until the stem breaks. You say a letter every time you turn the apple and whatever letter you’re at when the stem breaks off is the first letter of your true love’s name. When we tried it my stem broke on the eleventh spin.

“What’d you get?” Lucy asked me.

“I don’t know, I lost count.” Okay, I was lying, but I didn’t want to tell Lucy. She wouldn’t stop bugging me, so I said the apple thing was dumb. She said I would get it if I didn’t go to a one-room school. We stopped trying to predict true loves after that. I gave her a chocolate bar as a peace offering the next time I saw her. I didn’t tell Mom.

A week after Dad found the progress report, it was Teacher-Parent conference night. I sat on the swing set and watched my parents through the window. They shook the teacher's hand before sitting on the plastic chairs. They take these things so seriously even though it is the same teacher every year.

"What are you doing here?" Kyle stood on the other side of the chain link fence by the parking lot.

"Teacher-parent-conference," I said, pretending he hadn't surprised me. You shouldn't be surprised by guys like Kyle.

"Huh." Kyle climbed over the fence and came to sit on the swing next to mine. We sat in silence because we don't really hang out when we're not in school. I know I didn't have anything to say.

"Ever done Bloody Mary?" Kyle asked suddenly.

"Like the drink?" I asked. I know Becky Silva steals alcohol from her grampa sometimes, but I'd never had any.

"No..." Kyle twisted his swing away from mine so that the chains crossed and then let go so he could twist back into place. His cheeks were red.

"You mean the thing with the mirror?"

"Yeah." Kyle twisted his swing away again.

"No, that's stupid," I said.

Kyle drilled the toe of his shoe into the sand and didn't say anything. I looked through the window. My parents were still talking. The teacher was showing them a stack of papers.

"Why, have you?" I asked.

"No, 'cause I thought it was stupid, like you did," Kyle said.

"Oh."

"But it works if you do it in the bathroom where the kid killed himself."

"That didn't really happen," I said.

"Did so," Kyle said. Every year someone says that a kid killed himself in the bathroom down one of the off-limits hallways as if no one has ever heard it before. Sometimes they say the kid was murdered by a teacher so you know it isn't true because the story doesn't stay the same.

"Anyway," Kyle said, "you wanna try it? Just to say we did."

"Not really."

"Come on, what else you doing?"

"Swinging."

"You're not swinging, you're just sitting here."

"My parents will be done soon."

“No they won’t. You gonna sit here and not swing for another hour?”

He had a point. I jumped off my swing and followed him inside.

Kyle and I walked up to the tape stretched across the hallway entrance. The bathroom was just a few doors down. Kyle ducked under the tape and walked towards the door without waiting for me. My heart was beating really fast but I pretended it was cool and steady. It was just a piece of tape, right?

I slipped under the tape and followed Kyle to the bathroom. The sign on the door read “GIRLS.” So a kid definitely couldn’t have killed *himself* in there because this was a girls’ bathroom. I gave Kyle a look, but I don’t think he got it. We pushed open the door and stepped inside. It was pretty dark in there. The sun was halfway set and hardly coming through the dust-covered window at the far end. We left the lights off though because even if you are doing something as stupid as Bloody Mary, you may as well do it properly.

“Okay, you first,” Kyle said.

“This was your idea,” I answered.

“Fine.” Kyle walked up to the mirror and got ready to summon Bloody Mary. He held up his hands as if he were going to punch Bloody Mary in the face. As if you can really punch a ghost – or whatever she is – in the face. Like I said before, there’s a reason I’m top in the grade. Kyle started to spin in a circle. “Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary...” He spun his third circle then stopped.

“You didn’t say the third one.” I said.

“Did too. I whispered it.” Kyle said. “Didn’t work.”

“Fine then.” I started to walk towards the door.

“Wait, it’s your turn.”

“But it doesn’t...oh, fine.” I walked towards the mirror.

“Bloody Mary.” I spun around once.

“Bloody Mary.” Out of the corner of my eye I saw something pale turning in the mirror, but it was just me. I spun around a third time.

“Okay, done.”

“You whisper the third one too?” Kyle asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. My back was to the mirror and Kyle was staring into my eyes without looking away.

“Okay, let’s go. This was stupid.”

“It was your idea,” I pointed out. Neither of us looked at the mirror as we left, but there was nothing worth looking at anyway.

From the direction of our classroom, I could hear my parents saying goodbye to the teacher. Kyle and I ran down the hall and under the tape.

“What are you doing?” Mom asked when she noticed us standing there.

“Nothing,” I said and pretended really hard that I wasn’t out of breath. Mom offered Kyle a ride home and we sat silently in the back seat because the only thing we had to talk about would get us into trouble.

After we dropped Kyle off, I wondered if this was the kind of story you could tell when you were older. I don’t think so because it’s too boring – nothing really happened. I did whisper the third one, though.

Mom asked me again if I was having a birthday party and I said maybe and that I would invite Lucy and Becky Silva. Then Dad started talking about the conference and I remembered that I had a science project due next week. There was a lot for me to do.

Working the Night Run

The headlight turned the land ahead white-grey as the train sped across the dark prairie fields. Matthew sighed. He checked their speed, checked his watch. Joe glanced over at him. Almost done for the night. For some reason, this run always felt like the longest.

Then up ahead another light, cutting through the darkness, racing towards them.

“Joe!” Matthew’s voice rang an octave too high. “Joe!”

“I see it,” Joe’s voice, tense and low. Joe rang the emergency bell. It screamed over two engines, two sets of wheels running across one set of tracks.

The headlights met in the middle. The land between was white, half invisible.

“Dammit, Joe, jump!” Matthew yelled as he reached for the brake. Joe was still there. The brake would not save them, but he reached –

– and was too late –

– the trains met.

Matthew caught a glimpse of terrified eyes. He raised his arm to wave, to reassure himself and the other engineer that everything was somehow fine.

Sounds echoed strange and hollow as the phantom train sped through the other. Matthew could see the other crew, the other cargo flicker past, continuing on.

The cab burst back into open air as it passed through the other train. Matthew slowly let out his held breath, relaxed his hands.

“Joe,” he half-whispered.

But Joe was still looking behind them, eyes bulging, mouth open.

Matthew turned in time to see the cars of their own train vanishing behind them, in time to realize that the phantom train was his –

– in time to open his mouth –

– but not in time to scream –

– the headlight lunged forward, pulling behind it an echo of rattling tracks, turning the land in front white-grey in the darkness.

Cold

“The nights and mornings no longer, by their Canadian temperature, froze the very blood in our veins...”

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

The night you left, the snow was falling thick. Through ice-glazed windows, the drifts looked slightly blue and glowed softly despite a cloud-hidden moon.

You didn't raise your voice that night, but every word was weighed down with anger and thoughts unspoken. I didn't raise my voice either. I refused to raise my voice over an argument about the thermostat spun out of control. Instead I calmly undermined your words in an attempt to show you the stupidity of your arguments. I wish I could say that you were being stubborn or unreasonable, but I wasn't trying to argue your point, only your words. As if making your words trivial would make your arguments trivial as well. Because if that were the case, then none of what you were saying would matter and it could all just go away.

You started to cry first. You walked to the door and pulled on coat, scarf, boots and hat in a haphazard order. You cried first, so it was okay for me to cry and cling to your gloves and beg you to at least stay the night. In the morning the snowploughs would come and it would be safe to drive. Just tonight. You wrenched the gloves from my hands and walked out the door.

I followed you onto the porch in an unbuttoned coat and dusty sandals (for some reason they were still closest to the door). My face froze and the snot and the tears cracked and pulled against my skin. But I had taken too long to dress against the cold.

You were already halfway to the truck. I called your name and it escaped in a frozen white puff of air. You didn't turn around. I slid down the path you'd made on the porch stairs, losing a sandal in the process. I stood on one leg, wool sock hovering above the snow, and stared after you.

For a brief instant, I wanted to do something ridiculous. I wanted to stick out my tongue and bug out my eyes and make you laugh and make everything less serious. One time at the beach, we both stood on one foot and waited to see who could stay up the longest before getting knocked down by the waves. I made faces at you, trying to break your concentration. You laughed and remained standing. It didn't matter who won. In the end, I jumped into the waves and made you come rescue me. Standing on one foot in the snow, I didn't pull faces or dive into a snow bank. I just waited.

When you reached the truck, you turned around. You said something. Your cold white breath floated in front of your face. But I couldn't hear you and the mist obscured your features. Your words tumbled from your lips and fell frozen onto the cold blue snow. I called out, but the word did not reach you. At last you climbed into the truck. You had to slam the door twice before it would stay closed. The engine started and the truck forced its way down the unploughed driveway. The snow glowed faintly red beneath the blinking turn signal.

The path back up the stairs was already softened by the falling snow. I walked back into the house, took off my coat and socks and went upstairs.

Lying in bed, I tried to think of you lying with me. Just lying – your limbs relaxed, my limbs curled and bent to fit. Instead, I remembered the time I pulled you up the stairs and into the room. We both lost our shirts along the way. You sat on the edge of the bed and I straddled you. I told you to fuck me and you paused for a moment and stared straight up at me until I felt naked. Was naked. Then you flipped me onto the bed and I laughed. Then you told me that you were going to make love to me. I wish that's what I'd said to begin with.

The next day, the snow was no longer blue, but white under the cloudless sky. It always feels colder when the sky is blue. I had hoped that the snow would bury your tracks, but I could still see the shallow groove where your truck had been. I hoped you would call, but I knew you wouldn't.

Two days later I ran into you at the grocery store. You were terse, polite, apologetic. Now I had so many words and I let them out. How sorry I was and how you should come over and oh how sorry I was. I asked you to call me and I hoped you would, convinced myself that you would. You nodded, you agreed, you put your tomatoes in the cart and walked away.

I don't know why I thought you would call. You never spoke unless you had something to say and sometimes not even then. You were always quiet arms around me and murmurs in my hair and I loved that, I loved it. But you were also hurt looks that made me apologize when I said something to upset you. And sometimes I wouldn't

apologize because I knew you would let it go, but I wondered why you couldn't trust me with your anger. You never said anything until everything exploded over the thermostat and your voice was distorted by tears as you pulled on your coat. I wondered about those words that fell frozen to the snow, your last words to me.

I stopped waiting for you to call. I watched movies and went to work and donated the books you bought me for Christmas to the library because I didn't want to read them anymore. I ate foods you don't like for supper. Outside the snow fell, but it was never quite as blue. Sometimes I cried at soup and icicles and other things that had no connection to you. Sometimes I watched your favourite movie and didn't cry at all.

The next time I saw you, you smiled at me, but your eyes were too...bright? Too intent? They watched me too much. After we talked about things I couldn't focus on, you said we should go to that café on the corner sometime. The one with the red door and daily lunch specials. You said I should let you know and you were light pink and I saw the effort it took for you to say those lines, to keep your voice casual. You are not the casual conversation type. I thought about those quiet arms after you left me that day, but I never let you know.

Spring came and the melting snow began to reveal what had been buried underneath. A sandal, one of your gloves. I put the glove in the closet with the other winter clothes, even though I don't need one spare glove. I found the words that had fallen frozen from your lips. They were all jumbled and out of order. I read the words and wondered whose heart had broken more. I wondered, if I had known about these words, if

I would have tried to talk things out rather than attack your arguments. I wondered if I would have called you and if we would have gone to that café.

But it doesn't matter. I found the one word that I called that night. It is only a name. The snow is gone, you are gone, and there is no clean slate unless you count the mud waiting for the grass to hide it. It's time to move on.

Conversations with Talking Animals

The light left over from the sunset was all that lit the field as Emma started home after a meandering walk to nowhere. At the shadowy edge of the fence line, Emma saw the wolf. She stopped walking, but her entire body vibrated despite her attempts to keep it still. She was aware of the animal breathing and imagined she could feel its breath, even though she couldn't.

“J'ai besoin d'aide,” said the wolf.

“You can talk!” Emma choked out. She cleared her throat and tried again: “You can talk?”

“J'ai besoin d'aide,” the wolf repeated.

“Do you speak English?” Emma asked. In the storybooks and animated movies from her little-girl days, the animals always spoke the same language as the hero. The wolf blinked its yellow eyes.

“Je suis seul,” the wolf pressed on. “Je pense que je perds mon coeur.”

“Mon français est terrible,” Emma said. The wolf cocked its head to one side. Emma didn't know if it understood her or if it was confused by her terrible accent.

“Je n'ai pas parler français...um...since...l'école secondaire,” she apologized. “No French for a long time,” she said and stretched her arms wide, showing how far grade nine French class was from this field.

The wolf blinked, sighed, then lay down next to the nearest fencepost. Its nose crossed the line to Emma's side of the field.

“Je pense que je perds mon coeur. J'ai peur que je serai un loup toujours. Peut-etre tu peut aider moi,” the wolf said slowly. It watched Emma as though trying to gage whether or not she understood.

Emma sank slowly to her knees, touched her heart gently. She recognized *coeur*, heart. She recognized *toujours*, always. Was this a spell she could break? A fairytale at the edge of her field?

“Pourquoi est-ce que tu me regarder avec les yeux grands? Ce n'est pas un roman d'amour pour les adolescentes. J'ai une femme!”

“I don't know what you're saying, but I can help you,” Emma leaned forward, sure of herself. She could have the sort of pure heart that saved lives. Illuminated storybook pages turned in her mind.

The wolf jumped back, letting out a startled growl. Emma saw teeth and leaped to her feet.

“Attends!” The wolf said and took a step toward her.

Emma turned and started running across the field.

“Attends! Je suis désolé! Ce n'est pas ma voix – ce n'est pas ma voix!”

But Emma was gone and the wolf remained a wolf. There was nothing more she could do for him. People rarely share encounters with talking animals for fear of sounding

crazy. The wolf sighed and continued along the fence line, looking for someone who knew how to break spells without kisses or at least spoke a little more than grade nine French.

Casting Call

Behind the fourth wall, they drift among the shadows of the inevitably haunted theatre. If you are going to be dead, you may as well be entertained. They whisper together in lilting accents, waiting for the auditions to begin. This is their play after all. They know all the words, know the whole story. The stage is set. An empty, vast space with a single spotlight that obliterates any hope of seeing the handful of people sitting in the first few rows. The next one better speak up or yet another voice will be swallowed by this place.

Enter SHARON with a deep breath, tugging the lucky pendant she's had since she was five years old, the one she put on a new chain just for today. SHARON stands in the spotlight circle, reminds herself that anyone can do community theatre. SHARON stares out but cannot see the DIRECTOR, STAGE MANAGER, PLAYWRIGHT, ACTOR sitting in the shadows, waiting to judge her. SHARON does not hear the voices whispering in lilting accents as they move up and down the aisles.

The first ghost laughs. "What's your name?" she whispers, curt and precise. She's heard it a hundred times before. Heard it several times today, in fact.

DIRECTOR: *(curt and precise)* What's your name?

SHARON: Sharon.

DIRECTOR: What part are you reading for?

SHARON doesn't know the answer. The DIRECTOR says that's fine and asks her more questions. SHARON hasn't even started her monologue and is

already blowing the audition. Maybe this was a bad idea. Why did she think she could suddenly take up acting? SHARON has no training, no experience.

“Look at her,” the first ghost whispers, “sweating already. She better not get my part.”

“You never had an eye for potential.” The second ghost shakes his head, rises from his seat.

“Oh, I had an eye.” She knocks the neatly piled headshots onto the floor. Sharon’s résumé slides under the seats of the row ahead.

STAGE MANAGER: *(crawling on the floor)* I’ve got it.

DIRECTOR: Whenever you’re ready.

SHARON: Okay.

SHARON delivers her monologue, trying her best to stay in character.

They make their way to the stage and stand just outside the spotlight. They can feel the floorboards humming, almost picture the sombre set that will rest here. The dark-walled house, the section of fence that represents a field of hard-earned land.

SHARON: and...

SHARON pauses. Sound of shifting from the front rows. SHARON hopes the pause is dramatic, wills it to be dramatic, but she is lost.

“Look at her!” The first ghost crowds into the spotlight.

SHARON feels sweat run down her back.

SHARON: and...

“She will ruin it. This was my hard-earned land, my life. If it is going to be entertainment, at least make it entertaining.”

SHARON resumes her monologue but her voice shakes, her grasp on the character slips. She is only SHARON, reciting lines.

The second ghost remains outside the spotlight circle, watching. “Why do you care? It’s just a play.”

“It’s not just a play. It’s my life. What does she want? A hobby? Some casual community theatre? This is work!”

SHARON squares her shoulders, reminds herself that this is community theatre and she can do it.

“These are my words, my lines. My hard-earned land, my house.”

SHARON’s voice flows off the stage, reaches the very back row.

“They will come to see me.”

SHARON reaches the climax of the monologue, the part she practised most seriously for her mirror, for her dog, for herself. There is no mirror, no dog, no judging self. SHARON sees a dark-walled house, a fence representing a field. SHARON speaks only in character. This is the field her family made work, the house she kept when her husband was taken away.

The second ghost smiles. “And when you are murdered, they will all applaud.”

SHARON falls silent.

The first ghost does not answer. She steps out of the spotlight. “I guess she can play my part.”

DIRECTOR: Thank you.

SHARON stands on the stage, stunned. SHARON’s skin feels like it’s vibrating, she has done it, it’s done.

STAGE MANAGER: We’ll let you know if you get a call back.

SHARON recognizes her cue to leave. SHARON exits the spotlight circle.

They drift back to their seats.

“Do you think she’ll get the part?” The second ghost asks.

“Sure.” The first ghost stares at the ceiling.

“Next!” whispers the second, sharp and authoritative.

DIRECTOR: *(sharp and authoritative)* Next!

Advanced Levitation

The girls sat on their puffy sleeping bags, leaned in towards each other, whispered conspiracies:

“Julie let Nathan see her training bra.”

“Beth doesn’t even have a training bra – she’s still flat as a boy!”

“But Olivia didn’t have a training bra either and then she got double D’s overnight.” The girl telling the story made a loud popping noise, cupped a massive pair of imaginary boobs, and grinned.

The next girl quickly topped that story: “Kayla’s older sister did it in the arena parking lot during the hockey game.”

“You don’t even know what ‘it’ is – they were just making out!”

Scandalous! No, romantic! It was a lie – no, it was true! Tucked inside the backyard tent, they were a safe distance away from parental ears. They could say whatever they liked.

Rachel looked shocked and intrigued at all the right moments, so no one noticed that she hadn’t shared any gossip of her own. Rachel reached inside her sleeping bag and grabbed her teddy bear’s ear. He was hidden away like all the other teddies because they were older now; their teddy bears couldn’t be in plain view.

The conversation lapsed into silence as the girls ran out of stories.

“What are you staring at? Raaaachelll!”

Rachel jumped. “Nothing.”

“She was daydreaming about a boy.”

“No I wasn’t!” Rachel said.

“Who was it?”

“Was it Spencer?”

“Ooooo Speeeencceerrr!”

“No,” Rachel said, as if one word was enough to dissuade the other girls.

The girls plotted against Rachel between bursts of laughter:

“Let’s do a love test on her to find out!”

“I know how to predict your true love with apples.”

“We don’t have any apples.”

“Let’s cast a different spell on her!”

“Let’s raise her off the ground!”

Everyone turned to look at Rachel, waiting for permission to carry out their spell.

Rachel lifted her chin as if ready to deny them all. Then she smiled and agreed to their plan.

“Okay, get in the middle Rachel.”

Rachel stretched herself across the sleeping bags and stared up at the canvas ceiling. The girls arranged themselves around her, each slipping a single finger beneath her body.

“Ready?” the girl at her head asked politely.

“Ready,” Rachel said.

The girls began to chant:

“Light as a feather, stiff as a board, light as a feather, stiff as a board, light as a feather...”

As one the girls began to lift Rachel into the air with just one finger each.

Rachel felt light, airy. Her body remained perfectly straight, even though no one supported her centre. The girls continued their chant. Rachel felt as though the ceiling were closer than the ground. If the chant kept going, she would float all the way to the top of the tent. If they kept chanting perhaps the whole tent would fly away.

The chant continued unbroken, but a look or a collective instinct passed between the girls and they slowly lowered Rachel back to the ground. Rachel felt as though she were falling in slow motion. She wanted to swim herself back up into the air, but kept perfectly still. A sudden movement might break the spell and send her crashing down.

“Light as a feather, stiff as a board, light as a feather. Stiff. As. A. Board.” Rachel was once again stretched across the sleeping bags. The girls laughed and broke their magic circle.

A contented silence lasted as long as it took each girl to squirm back to her own sleeping bag.

“I heard Leah has a crush on Josh.”

“Is that true? I thought you liked him.”

That night Rachel dreamed of a future with big breasts and kisses from Spencer that did not involve tongue. She dreamed of wind and weightlessness and a world where women flew just as well as she had last night. A world that had everything.

Sunlight woke the girls. Too tired to bother with them, they left their teddy bears lying on their pillows. Rachel was the first to crawl through the tent door. She watched a cat carefully stretch its stiff leg while the girls emerged behind her. Together they trudged into the house for pancakes, ordered coffee and received orange juice.

O Human Child

I wake up in the dark. I always wake up when my clock shines 12:34 – one-two-three-four. Time to wake up. Out of bed.

I walk on tiptoes down the hall and into Mommy and Daddy’s room. They don’t know I do this. I touch Mommy’s face really gently. She smiles in her sleep. I pretend it is because I have given her a good dream. I do the same for Daddy.

I pass Jenna’s room as I tiptoe down the hall. But I do not go in to give her a good dream. Jenna doesn’t talk to me very much anymore. She is moody and weird and quiet. She doesn’t play properly anymore either. I don’t know what happened to her. It’s like she changed overnight.

I go out the front door without putting on shoes. I walk down the stairs and onto the lawn. I am scared of the dark but there are stars and a bit of moon left in the sky so it’s okay. And through the trees, I see the fairy lights shining. I told Mommy and Daddy that I come outside to look at them. But they don’t believe me. They said it was a dream.

“At first I thought they were fallen stars,” I told them. “But you can kind of hear them talking and I think they are fairies. And I think if I follow them they will show me their fairy world. I go out and look at them every night. But I’ve never followed them.”

Mommy smiled and poured me some orange juice. Daddy laughed and stole one of my Cheerios.

I waited until after school to tell Jenna about the lights. The school bus drops us off at the corner and we walk home together just the two of us. I told her about the lights and how I might follow them so that I could tell Mommy and Daddy that it wasn't a dream. Jenna grabbed me by the shoulders. She said that Mommy and Daddy didn't need to know about where the lights lead and that they are not fairies and that I should just stay inside and never go out again. I got so mad that I pulled myself loose from her hand and ran all the way home. Jenna doesn't know anything! She doesn't want me to have any fun. She thinks I'm dreaming too.

I got in trouble for running ahead. I said it was Jenna's fault. When Jenna got home a few minutes later, she got in trouble for letting me run. She didn't complain or say it was my fault, even though it sort of was. She didn't say anything.

The lights shine and play in the trees. They say *come here come here*. They want to play. Tonight I will follow them and see where they go. It shouldn't take that long and, when I come back, I can tell Mommy and Daddy all about it. And I won't tell Jenna anything.

The lawn is marshy just before you get to the trees. The bottom of my nightgown is all wet and muddy. The lights laugh and I laugh too. Their little voices whisper to me. Such pretty voices.

I reach the tree line. The branches reach over my head so I can't see much of the sky anymore. I always thought the lights lived at the edge of the woods, but now I see that they are further back in the trees. But it isn't really that much farther. I walk into the woods.

The lights are still ahead of me. Maybe this is part of the game. Maybe I need to catch them. I rip the hem of my nightgown on a fallen branch. Mommy is going to be mad at me. Or maybe she will be so excited when I tell her about the fairy world that she will forget all about it. The lights laugh and dance further into the trees. They shine a little brighter so I can see the way.

The lights are so bright now that my eyes hurt and I have to keep them half-shut. Maybe I am almost there. I push forward through the trees and trip over a root. The lights start to bounce away. I get up and smile to show I am still playing. The lights pause and wait and I walk towards them. I must be almost there.

The lights are so bright now and they are not waiting for me. They never let me catch them and they keep laughing at me. I turn around but everything looks much darker. I take a step backwards and the lights circle around me. Every path has a light at the end and I don't know how to get back. I guess I will keep following them even though I don't like their stupid game. At least I can tell Mommy and Daddy it's real when I get home. The lights laugh again. They dance. I think they are trying to cheer me up. Maybe this is a fun game after all. Their laughter is so pretty.

Something pulls on the back of my nightgown so hard that I fall down. I look up and see Jenna. The lights float around her hair and touch her cheeks. They laugh and Jenna steps around me, towards them. Then she stabs something shiny into a nearby tree. She takes my arm and pulls me backwards across the ground.

“Try it now!” She says, turning back to face the lights. The lights aren't laughing anymore. They creep carefully toward the tree. A sewing needle is stuck in the bark.

“Come on,” Jenna says. She crouches down and offers me a piggy-back. She turns us around and starts walking back through the trees. The lights don’t try to stop us. They are all still by the tree.

“Jenna...” I don’t really know what I want to say to her.

“The needle will trick them. They have to crawl through the eye to get us. And that’s hard, right? You can’t even thread a needle.” Jenna laughs at me.

“Are you going to tell?” I ask.

“No,” Jenna says. Then she says in her most serious voice: “I told you not to follow them.”

“I know.”

“You should trust me.”

“I do.”

We are out of the trees now. Jenna walks across the marshy lawn toward the house. I look back, but I can’t see any lights behind us.

Jenna and I walk home from the bus stop. Jenna is quiet and I wonder about all the things she knows. Then she tags me on the back and we run home. There is a sewing needle sitting on the top step, waiting for us. Jenna doesn’t say anything. She picks it up and pins it to my coat.

At night, the lights are back by the edge of the woods, but I have already told Mommy and Daddy that they were just a dream. I stay inside and go back to sleep.

Mack's House

The blue house on Queen Street will always be "Mack's House." Mack built the front porch. Mack planted the tree that stands in the front yard. Mack painted the house blue in the first place. Do you remember the Halloween Mack lay on his lawn covered in leaves with a tombstone at his head? How he leaped from his "grave" and scared every kid in town? Do you remember the elaborate light displays he put up at Christmas? Everyone has a story about Mack, even kids too young to remember him.

A couple moved into the house after Mack died. They lived there for two years and were always the new people in town. The ones who lived in Mack's House. One day, without warning, they moved away. Their names were soon forgotten.

When Carol moved into Mack's House she dusted and repainted the trim and arranged her furniture. She tried to make the house her own. She planted flowers on the front lawn. Her neighbours said they looked nice.

"Mack never had flowers. But he planted that tree. See how the tree shades the flowers?"

When Carol went to get a library card, she gave her new address to the librarian. The woman's eyes lit up.

"Oh, Mack's House."

Carol wanted to say, "no my house" but it felt too much like she was starting an argument. Instead she nodded and took her books home.

At first, Carol tried to introduce herself as “the woman in the blue house with the flowers,” but people never remembered that. They did remember “the woman who lives in Mack’s House.” So Carol started introducing herself that way. It was just easier.

The man at the grocery store never remembered Carol’s name. When she forgot her milk, he called out, “Hey Mack’s House Lady!”

Carol tried to ignore him, but she needed the milk. She mumbled her name, but the man just smiled and handed her the forgotten bag.

After that, the man’s son started calling Carol “Mack’s Lady.”

Carol kept the windows clean, the porch swept and the flowers in bloom. Everyone said the house looked great. One day, Carol noticed that the porch steps were creaking. “I’ll have to fix that,” she thought.

On Halloween, Carol dressed as a ghost and handed out full-sized chocolate bars. The children didn’t find her scary, but they agreed she had the best candy in town. Word spread child to child: “Mack’s Ghost has the good stuff.” When Halloween was over, Carol wasn’t “Mack’s Ghost” anymore, so the kids just called her Mack.

When morning frost became a daily occurrence, the neighbours asked if the house would be decorated for Christmas.

“Yes. I am thinking lights on the porch and stars in the tree...”

As she put up the lights, she noticed that the paint on the house was fading. She would have to re-paint it in the spring. There were still some old paint tins sitting in the garage.

Do you remember the Halloween Mack dressed as a ghost? Or the Christmas she hung stars in the tree?

Mack dips her brush into the tin.

The blue house on Queen Street will always be “Mack’s House.”

Second Guessing

Everything would have been fine if Alice had made herself a sandwich.

Then I wouldn't have gone out for lunch or maybe I should have just skipped lunch it would only be for today I was ten minutes late getting back and of course this is the day Gary looks for me right after lunch I looked so irresponsible he'll never give me the good assignments now because I am not trustworthy and he'll associate me with being irresponsible...

Alice finished putting on her mascara, reached for the lipstick and tried to reassure herself.

You need to calm down. He said it wasn't your fault the debit machine at the restaurant went down and he said not to worry and I said I was sorry but maybe I apologized too much because he looked a little exasperated when I said it the second time and maybe I should have said sorry I – or maybe I should have just left....

Alice put on her earrings, took one final look in the mirror and went to find her coat.

Alice didn't want to go to the office Christmas Party. She wanted to stay home and watch *It's A Wonderful Life*. Have a nice night in. She didn't want to go to the Christmas Party, but she was going because Rebecca had asked her at lunch. Rebecca said maybe Alice could give her a ride, if Alice was going of course, and that Alice should go because it would be fun. This wasn't one of those boring office parties where people

stood around and talked about work. There was going to be food and a DJ and people always had a good time. Alice didn't want to go, but she couldn't think of a good excuse and now Rebecca was counting on her for a ride so she had no way out.

Why didn't you just say no? "Sorry, I'm not able to go. I already made plans to visit my mom before I knew about the party" "Can't – I have an appointment first thing the next morning" or maybe just "I'm not able to go" but say it with conviction so she assumes I have somewhere to be...

Excuses are easier to make up after the fact. Alice pulled into Rebecca's driveway, gave Rebecca a cheerful hello and drove to the Christmas Party.

Alice's co-workers greeted her with smiles, complimented her dress, and then went back to chatting. Alice could have sat at one of the tables, joined in a conversation. Instead she floated from group to group, standing just outside their circles, receiving acknowledging smiles but never words. What were they supposed to say to her? She wasn't saying anything to them.

"The new Tim Burton one is like that too," Alice chimed in after standing next to a conversation on movies.

"Yeah, Rob said that already." The reply came with a smile, but Alice fell silent and eventually drifted away. They knew more about movies than she did.

Remember when you said you didn't like Stephen King and then Rob said he did like him and you pretty much just insulted Rob but you didn't mean to and why am I thinking about this now it doesn't matter but maybe I could have told Rob...

Alice sat down at a table by herself and grabbed a sugar cookie from a nearby platter. She made small talk with a few people before they moved on to another table. As the snacks dwindled, the DJ switched from playing Christmas Carols to dance music and the floor was filling with tipsy partiers. Alice loved dancing, but she didn't want to dance by herself.

Maybe they'll think you're a good dancer and they will all talk about it at work and say what a great dancer you are and who would have seen that coming in a really flattering way...

Alice stayed seated and watched people dance. She was the new person at work. Everyone else had already known each other for years so they were all better friends with each other than they were with Alice. Alice didn't consider herself anti-social. She had friends, but she had moved away and now only spoke to them sometimes. And she wasn't very good at making new friends and felt awkward when she had to pull her lips into a smile, make small talk and wonder if people thought she was socially inept.

The dancers jumped and laughed and swayed their hips. Alice wanted to go home, wished she could just leave, but Rebecca was still having fun and she couldn't just make her leave. Rebecca was laughing and dancing with a man Alice didn't recognize. He had white-blond hair and was twirling Rebecca in circles.

Should I know everyone in the building by now? There's Rob and Garry and Robyn from accounting but I don't know those guys over there....

A man's voice at her ear made Alice jump. "Having fun?"

The man had taken the chair next to Alice without her noticing. She didn't recognize him. He had pale brown hair and light blue eyes.

"Yes, um..." Alice said. The man did not help her. Only smiled.

Just ask him his name or where he works or how he likes the party or what he thought of Gary's speech or how did he like the cake....

"How did you –" Alice began.

"Get here?" the man finished a question Alice hadn't begun. "I flew in a canoe, parked it in the parking lot. Was that your little Ford by the lamppost?"

Alice laughed nervously. She didn't quite get the joke, but the man spoke in a comfortable tone. As if Alice was already his confidant. As if he were sharing a private, if absurd, story that only she would understand.

"Oh really?" Alice tried to mimic his half-flirtatious tone, to prove that she was part of his inside joke. "And why did you land here?"

"I'm here to dance with a woman," he said.

Alice felt the heat rise in her cheeks. She could not decipher whether his tone was neutral or flattering. 'A woman' could be any woman.

But what if he means me? No ask who he is meeting so that you keep talking and maybe he'll say he's not meeting anyone he's just here to meet you...

The gap between his statement and her reply had grown too long. Alice laughed again as if the silence was part of the joke. The man smiled, then stood up.

Great now he thinks you're too stupid to respond or flirt back or maybe he's just going to go find the woman and you should stop overanalyzing everyth –

“I’m Michael.” The man held out his hand.

“Alice.” Her name caught in her throat, came out as a squeak. The man did not withdraw his hand. Alice took it.

Michael pulled Alice onto the dance floor. Rebecca smiled in her direction. Alice moved her hips in graceful arcs, her arms swayed to the music. Michael danced in front of her, watched her move but did not touch her. Alice stole glances at the other people on the floor.

Are they watching me dance? Do they think I know this guy? Why would they be watching you? Just dance oh look how nice Robyn from accounting looks I wonder if she thinks I dance too provocatively...

“Gone somewhere?” Michael’s voice pulled her eyes back to him.

“No, no.” Alice breathed.

A bead of sweat rolled down Alice’s back. The crowd, the movement, it was so hot. The DJ turned on a slow song, a chance to cool down. Alice stopped moving.

Slow song I guess I should go sit down I’m sure he –

Michael pulled Alice towards him, placed one hand on the small of her back, held her hand with the other. Alice tried not to let her eyes widen. Michael raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Oh my god we're still dancing this guy is hot look at those pale eyes so strange I wonder what will happen when we stop dancing did Rebecca just glance at me I wonder if she is worried about her ride home but I am not that kind of girl he has such nice eyes –

“Gone again?” Michael asked. “You don’t spend much time here. Don’t blame you. These aren’t your type of people are they?”

Do I stand out that much? He thinks I’m antisocial I should have said –

“I didn’t mean to insult you. You are otherworldly, ethereal, different. You’re not in this moment. It’s a good thing. They’re not my type of people either.”

“Well, as long as it’s a good thing,” Alice said. Otherworldly. She liked the idea.

I am otherworldly I look otherworldly now maybe in this dress ethereal that’s a good word too –

Alice realized that Michael was talking to her and she had missed the beginning. No, not talking. Michael was singing to her, but not to the song that was playing:

I have been rowing
On a sea without a shore.
If I fell upon my knees,
Would you take an oar?

Fly away, fly away
In an old canoe
Fly away, fly away

Shall I wait for you?

His song was slow and had a steady rhythm. It drifted in and out of harmony with the song pouring from the speakers. Alice closed her eyes. She felt the firm hand on her back, the calloused hand holding hers. She felt her body moving to two songs at once. She opened her eyes and watched Michael sing. Her mind was filled with music. Nothing more.

The world will disappear
Beneath the night-black pines,
But perhaps I will return
If you promise to be mine.

Fly away, fly away
In an old canoe
Fly away, fly away
Shall I wait for you?

Both songs ended at the same time. A faster song began to play and Alice's co-workers cheered.

*Are we still dancing? Michael isn't moving maybe I should sit down although
Robyn and Rebecca are smiling at me maybe they –*

“Hot in here, isn't it?” Michael said. “I'm going out for fresh air.” He took a step towards the door, then turned to look at her. As if waiting for her to follow. It was hot, there was so much movement. Michael moved away through the crowd.

Should I – but can I leave – stop thinking and go –

Alice followed Michael outside. It had started to snow. Snowflakes drifted down, orange beneath the streetlamp, blue beneath the moon.

Otherworldly...like me...

Michael walked away from the building towards the parking lot. Alice followed. Sitting in the parking lot was an old canoe. Alice stopped, stared at the wooden oars, the snow-dusted seats.

“I told you I came by canoe.” Michael smiled. “This isn’t your party is it? You looked like you wanted to be somewhere else.”

“Yeah,” Alice murmured. “Is this really your canoe?” He must be joking.

This canoe must always be here maybe it belongs to the building I didn’t notice it when I got here but I wasn’t looking for a canoe...

“So, Otherworldly Alice, do you want to fly away? You can fly anywhere. It never stops. You can sail through the sky on and on and never have to stay at boring parties with people you don’t even talk to.” Michael laughed.

Alice grinned. Michael took her hand and helped her into the canoe. She stood awkwardly balanced in front of the centre seat.

“Will you take an oar, my dear Alice?” Michael held out a wooden oar.

“Sure.” Alice took the oar and held it as though she were ready to paddle away.

“Beautiful,” Michael said. “Are you ready to fly away?”

“Yes!” Alice laughed at their inside joke.

Yes fly away I wonder if I should –

A group of people had left the party and were walking across the parking lot towards them. There were seven of them. Alice didn't recognize them from the office. The man Rebecca had danced with, the one with white-blond hair, was with them.

The man looked at Michael. "I see."

Michael turned to Alice. He took her hand and gently guided her down until she was seated in the canoe. He leaned towards her. His hair looked dark brown, his eyes were deep blue.

"Not your party, was it, my dear Alice?" he whispered. His eyes flickered to her forehead, as if he could see the thoughts pulsing beneath. "Always gone somewhere else. Never in the moment. Here's your chance to leave them all, you didn't want to be here anyway. Row until you find another party. One that suits you. Or just keep looking. Ready to fly away?"

"What?" Alice asked.

What is happening I need to leave why can't I stand up why can't I stand up where is he going...

Michael turned around and walked away. The seven others climbed into the canoe and took up the remaining oars. As one they began to paddle. The canoe lurched forward, scraping across the ground. Then it lifted into the air. The wind blew strands of pale hair in Alice's face. Her eyes paled in the moonlight.

I should have said no I shouldn't have danced with him what if I had said –

The song was sung to the creak of wooden oars, sailing through the sky:

Fly away, fly away
In an old canoe...

*What does he mean live in the moment I live in the moment I should have said I
don't need another party these are my people why did I – I should have said...*

Fly away, fly away,
Shall I wait for you?

He's not waiting I am trapped I should have – I'm over thinkin – no wait if I...

The world will disappear...

Alice's arms worked to the steady rhythm of the song. Her mind was filled with music. Nothing more.

Canadian Fever Dream

Rhythmic creak-groan of wind-tossed wood overhead outside the window. Tapping tapping. Tapping tapping. I stir, open eyes wide as twisted wooden hands reach through the glass and pull me out into the blue-ice cold.

A giant. Tall, wooden, carnivorous as the wolves. No polite-nice-to-meet-you-eh. My pocket knife is in my hand and I stab the wooden fingers. They bleed a clear sweet sap and let go.

I fall fall fall from the top of the sky, through green light shifting curtains, through cumulous clouds and through nothing. Fall clean through the V of a goose formation before plunging into these waters. Above the water freezes, wooden sticks smack the surface. Above the water thaws, a burning ship sails on.

But I am still falling, down down down. Pulled by currents. Pulled to the remains of ships lying in pieces side by side by side. Rotten wood, metal hulls explored by serpents, mermaids, fish fish fish and you'll never catch one. And I wait and wait to be washed ashore.

Washed up and left staring up at autumn trees, resilient pines. The world a hot mash of colour as the painter rows away in his canoe. Darkness falls and I feel them watching. These dark somethings that lurk in the woods, calling in high low voices. These skinny somethings that lick their lips at the sight of me. These nightmare somethings reaching toward me. I run I run. Following the dancing lights through the trees through the dark through the marsh. I run.

I run forever under a forever sky. Run where the horizon is everywhere. Outrun the light of a train hurtling through the dark. Outrun a coyote in the golden field. Outrun outrun until I am climbing upwards over rock, past spectral mule deer emerging from the fog. Until my legs stop and I fall toward the earth.

And wake back where I started.

Shorelines

Ankle-deep in the tidal ebb-and-flow, toes lost to the fine-grained mud, she stares outward at the Pacific. Watches the sky dim overhead, watches for dark movement underneath.

In her left hand she thumbs a torn, stained piece of lace found on an Atlantic shoreline. It had been caught between the dark grey stones. They say a would-be-bride in a cursed dress disappeared into the sea. Slipped beneath the surface without another word. More likely it is just a piece of lace from a tourist's skirt, the hem accidentally stepped on and ripped, or the tattered edge of a tablecloth blown off the line and out to sea in a sudden storm. She picked it up and put it in her pocket anyway. It travelled with her, forgotten, until she put on these jeans, slipped her hands into the pockets and brushed the light fabric with her fingertips. The lace is beautiful still, pieces of the flower pattern still in full bloom.

She stares outward and listens to the in-and-out motion of the water. A pair of hands slide around her waist, clasp themselves over her stomach. He doesn't say a word. She leans back into his body. She has a sudden urge to drop the lace, to let it fall and drift away. But there is something too sad about letting it go, letting it sink below the surface to be swallowed up by whatever lurks beneath. She looks at his hands and thinks she could stay here forever. Will stay here forever.

She twists in his arms until she is facing him. Atlantic-soaked lace in her hand, the Pacific at her heels. She opens her eyes after the kiss, looks over his shoulder at the grass

covered slope. She is sick of shorelines. Fingers locked together, they walk up the grassy slope. They walk inland.

They walk home.

Notes on the Stories

They Say

In 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert reported seeing a sea serpent off the east coast (Fowke, *Legends Told in Canada* 11). As his ship began the return journey to England, Gilbert states that “there passed along betweene us and towards the land which we now forsook a very lion to our seeming, in shape, hair and colour, not swimming after the maner of a beast by mooving of his feete, but rather sliding upon the water with his whole body (excepting the legs) in sight...” (Fowke, *Legends Told in Canada* 12). Gilbert goes on to say that the creature “sent forth a horrible voyce roaring or bellowing as doeth a lion, which spectacle we all beheld so farre as we were able to discern the same, as men prone to wonder at every strange thing, as this doubtless was, to see a lion in the Ocean sea, or a fish in the shape of a lion” (Fowke, *Legends Told in Canada* 12).

For more information on Canadian sea monsters, see *Tom*.

What Remains in the Mine

There are many ghost stories related to the Atlas Coal Mine in East Coulee, Alberta. One story involves the sound of massive footsteps being heard by a miner – the ghost of a dinosaur (Smith, *Alberta* 152-153). The Drumheller area is known for its rich dinosaur deposits.

Tom

The Sasquatch is a mysterious woodland creature “most often described as taller than a human...heavily built, and covered in long, thick brown or black hair” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “Sasquatch”). The Sasquatch or Susquash was known by First Nations people on the West Coast and stories of the creature were shared with European explorers (Smith, *British Columbia* 203-204). Many people have searched for proof of the Sasquatch’s existence.

Ogopogo is a sea serpent said to live in Okanagan Lake (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation “Ogopogo”; Smith *British Columbia* 214). Before the creature became famous, it was known as Naitaka or Nha-a-tik by the Salish (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation “Ogopogo”; Smith, *British Columbia* 215). Lake and river monsters exist across Canada including “Manipogo” in Lake Winnipeg (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation “Ogopogo”) and the Mishipeshu of Lake Superior (Colombo, *Mysteries* 99; Matthews and Matthews 321).

In Kwakiutl legend, the Dzonokwa is a giant cannibal woman who lives deep in the forest (Bastian and Mitchell 65).

Stories Told to Sisters

Folklorist Edith Fowke cites tales collected “directly from a folk narrator” as “the most authentic form of folklore” (*Folklore of Canada* 8). I learned this story by hearing it

directly from its creator. It is a story my mother told us on a stormy day when the power had gone out. For some reason it has stuck with me over the years.

Made of Air

Edith Fowke notes that “Canadians have told many stories of the devil and quite a few about witches” (*Legends Told in Canada* 7). There are many superstitions related to evil witches, but witches such John Troyer (“The Witch Doctor of Long Point” – 1753-1842) and Mrs. Barnes (“The Witch of Plum Hollow” – 1800-1888) were seen as “benevolent” (Fowke, *Legends Told in Canada* 53, 61).

I am

Amorak (or Amarok) is a wolf found in Inuit legend. One story states that a woman fished “all of the animals” from a hole she dug in the ground (Hebert and Wearing-Wilde par 1). The last animal was the caribou which multiplied and filled the land. After the hunters killed the biggest, strongest caribou – leaving only the weak –

the woman had to make magic again...she called Amorak, the spirit of the wolf, to winnow out the weak and the sick, so that the herd would once again be strong. The people realized that the caribou and the wolf were one, for although the caribou feeds the wolf, it is the wolf that keeps the caribou strong. (Hebert and Wearing-Wilde par 1)

Though necessary for balance, hunters should still be wary of Amorak for it “is said to be responsible for the deaths of many hunters on the lonely Arctic tundra” (Matthews and Matthews 18).

“I am a sign” refers to the wolf as a totem animal. A totem “is an object, usually an animal, that serves as an emblem for a family or clan. It represents a symbolic relationship between nature and human kin groups” (www.sfu.ca). These animals may be carved on totem poles (a tradition of several First Nations groups of the West Coast). Dr. Martha Black notes that totem poles themselves are not totems, but rather “the images displayed are crest figures, many of which represent supernatural beings, or ancestors who encountered supernatural beings, from whom hereditary rights and privileges were obtained” (1).

Fenir comes from Norse mythology. He is a giant wolf “who will eventually destroy the world” (Matthews and Matthews 178). The gods bound Fenir to a stone which they buried beneath the earth and Fenir has “howled perpetually” ever since (Matthews and Matthews 178-179). The Norse are the “first Europeans known definitely to set foot in Newfoundland” (*Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Web Site Project*, par 1).

Loup-garou is the werewolf of French Canadian legend. The legend “came to Quebec in the 17th century with immigrants from France” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “Loup garou”). The loup-garou “transform[s] because of a curse or as a punishment for not going to mass or confession” (Fowke, *Folktales of French Canada* 79).

Things to Do

A superstition from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia instructs you to “whirl [the] core of [an] apple around until the stem breaks, saying A, B, C, etc. If it breaks at the letter D, for

instance, you must like a boy (or girl) with that initial” (Creighton 186). From personal experience, I know this superstition also existed in Southern Ontario.

Bloody Mary is an example of a superstition that people may be familiar with today and, as with *Stories Told to Sisters*, it is a practise that was passed onto to me orally. If you say “Bloody Mary” three times in front of a mirror, it is said the apparition of Bloody Mary will appear in the glass. In some versions of the superstition you must spin three times, while in other versions simply reciting the name will suffice.

Working the Night Run

There are several stories of ghost trains travelling across the prairies including the ghost train of St. Louis, Saskatchewan (CBC News) and “Medicine Hat’s Phantom Train” (Smith, *Alberta* 156-158). The former story involves the light of the ghost train being seen at night (CBC News). In the story of “Medicine Hat’s Phantom Train”, a train appears to be on a collision course with another approaching train (Smith, *Alberta* 156). However, the second train passes by on “nonexistent tracks” while its crew waves in greeting (Smith, *Alberta* 155-156). The story ends in tragedy when, after two sightings of the ghost train, an actual head-on collision occurs – the warning of the ghost train misunderstood (Smith, *Alberta* 158).

Cold

Paul Bunyan – a folk figure who may have Canadian origins, or at least exists simultaneously in Canadian and American folklore (Fowke, “Forward” vii-viii) – once faced a winter so cold that the snow was blue (Robins 17-26).

Several “tall tales” collected from Alberta describe days so cold that words froze in the air. For example: “A farmer one cold morning in winter went to his back door to holler for his pigs. It was so cold out that as he yelled his words froze in the air. His pigs didn’t come home until his words thawed out in the spring – then the pigs heard it” (Fowke, *Folktales of Canada* 183).

Conversations with Talking Animals

See *I am* for information on the loup-garou.

Casting Call

There are numerous stories of haunted Canadian theatres.

The Donnellys of Lucan, Ontario are infamous for the violent feud that erupted over their land (Colombo, *Mysteries* 138; Smith, *Ontario* 108). Numerous plays have been written about the famous “Black Donnellys.” Though they usually haunt their old home in Lucan, the Donnelly ghosts are said to have attended one such play at the Grand Theatre in London, Ontario (Smith, *Ontario* 75).

Advanced Levitation

See *Things to Do* for information on apple love spells.

Like Bloody Mary, the slumber party game/spell “light as a feather, stiff as a board” is another example of a tradition being passed on via word-of-mouth.

Cats are often associated with witches. There is a belief that if you injure a witch in cat form, the witch will later exhibit the same injuries (Creighton 18, 50).

O Human Child

In Eastern Canada, Will-o-the-Wisps, Jack O’Lanterns or Feux Follets are lights or fires that appear in marshy areas. These supernatural lights are tricksters that frighten people or even lead them to their death (Spray 16). There are several explanations regarding the origins of these lights. For instance, they could be transformed evil sorcerers (Spray 16), spirits sent from heaven to do penance who do evil instead (Fowke, *Folktales of French Canada* 104) or spirits who have made deals with the devil (Fowke, *Folktales of French Canada* 79; Spray 19). Sticking a needle or a knife in a tree could be used to escape as the lights would either be forced to pass through the needle/knife (Fowke, *Folktales of French Canada* 104) or they would disappear, leaving behind a splash of blood (Spray 16).

Mack's House

There are countless stories about haunted places in Canada and numerous collections on the subject have been published. Common motifs include ghosts who remain in their former homes or other areas that were significant to them in life and ghosts who become upset when changes are made to “their” places.

Second Guessing

In French Canadian legend, the Chasse-Galerie is a flying canoe controlled by the Devil. In one tale, a group of lumberjacks decide to fly the Chasse-Galerie to a New Year's party so they can dance with their sweethearts (Fowke, *Folktales of French Canada* 117). They convince the narrator to join them; otherwise they won't have an even number to paddle the canoe (Fowke, *Folktales of French Canada* 118). They sing as they row and must make sure to follow the rules (ex. not speaking God's name), because flying the Chasse-Galerie involves a deal with the Devil (Fowke, *Folktales of French Canada* 116-124)

Canadian Fever Dream

Giants appear in several legends including Paul Bunyon (see information on *Cold*) and the Dzonokwa (see information on *Tom*).

For information on sea monsters, see information on *They Say* and *Tom*.

There are several tales of phantom ships from across the country. Some stories involve sightings of burning ships such as “The Ghost Ship of Beaver Harbour” (Oickle 142)

There have been many shipwrecks in the Great Lakes. Some, such as the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, have inspired songs (Smith, *Ontario* 193).

There are claims that mermaids were seen in Lake Ontario in 1813 (Colombo, *Mysteries* 99).

Tom Thomson, an artist known for his landscape paintings who died in a mysterious drowning incident, is said to haunt Algonquin Provincial Park (Colombo, *Mysteries* 38).

The Windigo are giants who “[roam] the northeastern woods in the dead winter and [devour] any humans they [find]” (Bastian and Mitchell 223). The Dzonokwa, loup-garou (see information on *I am*) and Sasquatch (see information on *Tom*) are also dangerous creatures of the woods.

For Will-o-the-Wisps/Jack O’Lanterns/Feux Follets, see information on *O Human Child*.

For ghost trains, see information on *Working the Night Run*.

Coyote is a trickster found in First Nations folklore.

Shorelines

The deaths of two would-be husbands from West Dublin, Nova Scotia are blamed on the same cursed wedding gown (Oickle 113-116). The second would-be bride was so devastated that she stopped talking and refused to take off the dress (Oickle 116). One day, the woman wandered out of town and disappeared (Oickle 116). Days later, a figure in white was spotted in the ocean by a foreign ship, but when they went to investigate, the

figure disappeared beneath the surface – “all on board insisted that the figure was wearing a white wedding dress” (Oickle 116).

My Own Canadian Fever Dream: Creating *They Say*

Have you heard the one about...

A long time ago...

Once upon a time...

They say...

After months of reading and seeking inspiration, months of writing and rewriting, *They Say* was finally taking shape. I could see the end in sight. After months of moving forward, it was time to look back at everything I had done and put this collection into perspective as a whole. Of course, I had to say something about the folklore. After all, a love of folklore started this whole thing and its influence may be found in the themes, structures and supernatural elements of the seventeen stories that make up *They Say*. The use of folkloric elements also raises interesting questions about genre. While this collection initially seemed to fall into the fantasy genre, the more I thought about it, the more the term “fantasy” became too simplistic, perhaps even inaccurate, when it came to classifying *They Say*. Plot, theme, structure, genre – with folklore influencing so much of this collection, of course I had to talk about it, but where would I begin? After too much time staring at a blank screen and several false starts, I finally decided to start with my own “once upon a time” – I decided to start with “they say.”

They Say and Canadian Folklore

In addition to being the first story I envisioned for this collection, the title *They Say* is meant to acknowledge the “verbal formulas” that Brian Attebery describes in his essay, “Fantasy and the Narrative Transaction.” Often found in folk narratives, these

formulas include sayings such as “once upon a time” and “call attention to [the folk narrative’s] antiquity, conformity with generic conventions and collective origins” (Attebery 18). In other words, the formulas call attention to the traditional structures and plots of a given folktale, allowing the listeners to anticipate and/or accept what happens in the story. Attebery goes on to state that

such formulas inform listeners that what they are hearing, however unlikely or counter to everyday experience, is authorized by the group. It is considered either true, in the case of myth and legend, or proper to the world of the story, the kind of thing that is expected to appear in wonder tales, with well-established properties, limits and meanings. (18)

In *They Say*, the use of such verbal formulas and other folktale elements serves two purposes. The first purpose contradicts Attebery’s definition of the use of verbal formulas. The aim of *They Say* is to defy the “limits” of what readers expect by blending fantastic, folkloric elements and realism in brand new stories (i.e. stories not “authorized by the group”) and thus challenge the relationship between imagination and reality. Familiar elements are presented so that they can be stretched and altered into something new. This first purpose will be discussed in greater detail later on. The second purpose is to acknowledge the origins behind the stories in *They Say*. While my stories deviate from tradition, I still wanted to incorporate traditional elements in order to create a balance between the familiar (or old) and the unfamiliar (or new), as well as to pay homage to Canada’s fascinating folkloric traditions. “They Say” – as story, as collection and as

“once upon a time” – invites the reader into a strange world infused with Canadian folklore.

Every story in *They Say* was inspired by Canadian folklore.¹ So many books and films draw on European mythology and many people in North America are familiar with incarnations of these “old world” stories. While I am certainly a fan of European mythologies, I wanted to use folklore that comes from my own country to explore the reality/imagination relationship. Canada is home to a rich and diverse set of folktales and traditions. First Nations folklore is perhaps readily accepted as specific to the North American continent, but I would suggest that all Canadian folklore is representative of this country. While some English and French language folklore may have European influences, the stories are still unique. Rather than watered-down versions of European folklore, these stories represent Canadian cultures, environments, and events. Folklorist Edith Fowke notes that “old world” inspired folklore “takes on a new form in its new home” and that “there are also quite a few stories, songs, and jokes inspired by Canadian events [and] many customs and sayings reflect the conditions of the new world...” (*Canadian Folklore* 5). Ghosts are found in folklore from around the world, but the Atlas Coal Mine’s prehistoric ghost surely reflects the rich dinosaur deposits specific to that area and stories of the Black Donnellys spring from a specific historical event. Though in an earlier book Fowke states that the Chasse-Galerie is “merely a local version of the many tales of aerial hunts known throughout Europe” (*Folktales of French Canada* 81), I feel the word “merely” does this story an injustice, suggesting that it is a simple rehashing of something that’s already been done. I would suggest that the use of the canoe,

¹ For notes on the inspirations behind individual stories, please refer to Notes on the Stories.

lumberjacks and northern environment transform it into a new, unique and Canadian story.

Reflective of my own background, this collection draws heavily on English- and Irish-Canadian stories. However, it was important to me that other types of folklore appear in this collection, such as those from First Nations and French Canadian traditions. While I do not wish to appropriate voices that are not my own, I feel it is important that their presence be felt as they are part of Canada's rich folklore culture and folklore from one culture tends to influence the folklore of another. Other inspirations include stories particular to certain locations rather than particular groups of people. *They Say* would have to be much longer in order to be an exhaustive representation of the multitude of folklore traditions found in Canada. I hope it at least gestures toward the wide range of folklore that exists in this country.

Using and Breaking Tradition

The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* states that folklore includes “folk songs and folktales...legends, riddles, jokes, proverbs, games, charms, omens, spells and rituals...” (Baldick 132). To this end, I have drawn on a variety of stories and beliefs from across the country and incorporated different styles of prose in order to reflect different aspects of folkloric tradition. Michael sings a rowing song in “Second Guessing,” while spells are cast in “Things to Do” and “Advanced Levitation.” “Casting Call” uses mock-scriptwriting both as a reflection of its theatrical inspiration and to acknowledge the performative aspect of traditional oral folklore. Attebery explains that the “embedded narratives” found throughout J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* “[educate] the

reader in the dynamics of folk transmission” (21). Similarly, “They Say” and “Mack’s House” were designed to imply that the reader belongs to the same community as the narrator, invoking the relationship between oral storyteller and listener.

As previously mentioned, while I wanted to acknowledge their traditional origins, I did not want to follow the traditional plots and conventions of my folkloric inspirations. The very act of *writing* the stories meant I was straying from strict views of folk narratives which state that tales collected “directly from a folk narrator” are the “most authentic form of folklore” (Fowke, *Folklore of Canada* 8). Encouraged by the idea that folklore is “constantly taking new forms” (Fowke, *Canadian Folklore* 114) and that alterations can arise in the retelling (Atwood xiv, Baldick 132), I chose to re-tell, re-imagine and create-from-scratch stories inspired by Canadian folklore. I wanted readers to be exposed to Canadian folklore and completely new literature simultaneously. I should note that I have pushed the idea of alteration much further than Baldick’s definition of the folktale allows. For Baldick, folktales are only “partly modified by successive re-tellings” (132). Margaret Atwood states that “mythic material was originally oral, and also local [and] a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another” (*Penelopiad* xiv). She uses this idea to justify her reimagining of Homer’s *The Odyssey* in her novel, *The Penelopiad*. I have used the idea of re-telling and re-imagining as a starting point and as a way of interacting with traditional folklore without simply re-writing pre-existing stories. Earlier, I defended the Chasse-Galerie as being its own unique story while still drawing on European traditions. I similarly want the stories in *They Say* to stand on their own while drawing on Canadian traditions. Most of the stories in *They Say* incorporate folkloric elements into brand new stories. Others –

such as “Second Guessing” and “Working the Night Run” – may be viewed as re-imaginings of existing stories, but their contemporary settings and altered endings transform them into something new. And thus, while certain structural elements *reflect* oral traditions, they ultimately serve to create a unique *literary* experience.

In addition to moving away from the original folktale plots, I also wanted to avoid a stereotypical figure often associated with folklore and fairytales: the dependent, victimized woman. For example, in the well-known folktale “Little Red Riding Hood,” the title character faces the dangers of the outside world (i.e. the wolf – sometimes linked to a seductive man [Bettelheim 172]) and relies on a man to rescue her (i.e. the wood cutter or huntsman – the reliable father figure [172]). Both the dangers experienced and lessons learned by Little Red Riding Hood relate directly to negative stereotypes associated with the female gender (ex. the danger faced by Little Red Riding Hood can be interpreted as “her [own] budding sexuality” [Bettelheim 173], suggesting that female sexuality is dangerous). While many of the women in *They Say* face the dangers of the outside world, they are not in danger *because* they are women, but simply because the world – and especially a supernatural world – can be a mysterious and dangerous place for anyone. Instead of featuring an everyman, a common figure in folktales who stands in for the average person, most of the stories in *They Say* feature an “everywoman” – a figure who stands in for human experience in general, but who happens to be a woman. Instead of waiting to be rescued, the women in *They Say* often solve problems on their own or are aided by other women (ex. the narrator in “Cold” overcomes her breakup alone while the narrator in “O Human Child” is saved by her sister). While some characters do fall prey to supernatural dangers, such as Alice in “Second Guessing,” these

moments represent a *human* failing and not necessarily a female one. In other words, the dangers of the supernatural world are meant to reflect the dangers that threaten us all.

Isolation and Connection

Though the plots and structures are new, the stories in *They Say* retain themes inspired by my exploration of Canadian folklore. In her 1972 discussion on Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood states that “the central symbol for Canada...is undoubtedly survival” (32) and that this “central idea is one which generates...an almost intolerable anxiety” (33). The idea of survival and its accompanying anxiety is, unsurprisingly, present in much of our folklore as well. Reading through numerous folktales, it appeared to me that many of them dealt with fear or curiosity about the unknown. Ghosts – both animal and human – haunt the buildings, streets and homes of almost every city and town. Our vast and intimidating wilderness also produces feelings of wonder and anxiety. A variety of mysterious creatures and spirits inhabit every other lake and forest. And of course, when it is cold in Canada, it is very, very cold. Accordingly, many of the characters in *They Say* find themselves in dangerous or uncertain positions in relation to the folkloric elements of the stories. With a mysterious fog threatening a pair of sisters in “Stories Told to Sisters”, an impending train crash in “Working the Night Run” and even simple audition anxiety in “Casting Call”, the need to survive the present situation appears in most of the stories in *They Say*. The notion of survival and its accompanying anxiety help produce the tension in these stories.

Early on in my readings, I came across an observation from Edith Fowke which suggested that “isolation fosters the preservation and creation of folklore” (*Canadian*

Folklore 5). While she was referring to the abundance of folklore that has been preserved in Quebec and Newfoundland (presumably because a lack of outside influence helps to keep it intact), it made me think of how it would be both frightening and extraordinary to face the haunted towns, dangerous forests and extreme cold alone. The isolated protagonist became the ideal candidate for many of the stories in this collection. Aunt Sarah wanders off in “They Say” while the narrator of “Cold” is left alone. Tom isolates himself to pursue his obsession in “Tom” and Rachel stands out as the only named character in “Advanced Levitation.” In each case, individual desires and anxieties are tied to the folkloric elements of the stories and these desires/anxieties must be confronted in order to determine whether or not the protagonist will remain isolated.

It seemed to me that the heightened emotions produced by encounters with the unknown or the strange would cause many people to reach out. So, alongside isolation, the opposing idea of connection became an equally important theme in this collection. Where there is a failure to connect, isolation and anxiety are heightened. Emma and the wolf attempt to cross language barriers in “Conversations with Talking Animals” only to part ways unsatisfied. In “Tom,” both Tom and the narrator are connected by mutual obsession/affection, but continuously stay out of each other’s reach. When connection occurs, characters are often able to overcome their fears. In “Casting Call,” Sharon connects with her character only after the ghosts connect with her and the power of sisterly bonds allows Jenna to save her sister in “O Human Child.” Traditional oral folklore is a communal experience and so the need for connection – whether that connection is made or not – is present throughout *They Say*.

Creating a Consistent Reality and *They Say*'s Elusive Genre

The idea of reaching out and making connections in part influenced the idea of having the stories in *They Say* overlap. Throughout the collection, imagery, ideas and sometimes even characters appear in multiple stories. Seemingly isolated characters suddenly share their experiences with characters from other stories. The narrators of “Cold” and “Canadian Fever Dream” and Alice from “Second Guessing” all observe blue snow. The wolves of “I am” – or perhaps their relatives – appear in “Conversations with Talking Animals” and “Canadian Fever Dream.” “Shorelines” mirrors some of the imagery and phrasing of “They Say”, connecting two stories that take place on opposite coasts. These overlaps serve to create an overall sense of community among the stories and, more importantly, place the stories within a consistent version of reality. Flying canoes and sea monsters exist in the same world as ultrasounds and mine tours. Establishing a shared textual universe for this collection makes it more difficult to judge which stories may be deemed “realistic” and which are “fantasy.” In her discussion on the magical realism genre, Maggie Ann Bowers states that “magical realism...relies upon realism but only so that it can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits” (22). Though classifying this collection as magical realism is questionable, Bowers statement nevertheless resonates with *They Say*, which relies on its shared textual universe to challenge the reader and “stretch” their interpretations of what is “real.”

Pinpointing *They Say*'s specific genre has proven elusive. The term “magical realism” is often applied to a South and Central American art/literary genre and while some people expand the term to include English language works (Baldick 194), others are

hesitant to do so since Latin American views of magic differ from Anglo-Saxon ones (Mendlesohn 106-107). According to Farah Mendlesohn's definitions, some stories in *They Say* may be classed as liminal fantasy. Liminal fantasy clearly takes place in "our world" and so "when the fantastic appears, it *should* be intrusive, disruptive of expectation; instead, while the events themselves may be noteworthy and/or disruptive, their magical origins barely raise an eyebrow" (Mendlesohn xxiii). However, while this definition could describe some of the stories in *They Say* – "Cold" springs to mind with its casual acceptance of frozen words – it also highlights the impossibility of using one term to define the entire collection. "Things to Do" could be considered a realistic, non-fantasy story, while the surreal setting of "Stories Told to Sisters" almost suggests a departure from our own recognizable world. The shared universe of *They Say* further complicates the genres of even individual stories.

In "Made of Air," Samantha imagines she's a witch in what appears to be a realistic story. However, given that she exists in the same universe as Sasquatches and dinosaur ghosts, does she really just imagine it? Is the later appearance of a cat with a sore leg in "Advanced Levitation" a coincidence or does it suggest that Samantha has a familiar that has travelled to another witchcraft story? Similarly, does Carol/Mack of "Mack's House" conform to community pressure or has she in some way become Mack? Conversely, are the fantastic stories in *They Say* questionable because they exist next to stories that take place in a "realistic" world? Can we trust what Sam heard in "What Remains in the Mine"? Does stress get the better of Alice in "Second Guessing"? The truth is that none of these questions have clear answers, nor should they. Instead, I argue that in this regard, *They Say* reflects the definition of the fantastic. The fantastic is "a

mode of fiction in which the possible and the impossible are confounded so as to leave the reader (and often the narrator and/or central character) with no consistent explanation for the story's strange events" (Baldick 125). Here there is tension between reality and imagination. Tzvetan Todorov, who developed the definition of this genre, states that a person who experiences the fantastic

must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us...the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. (25)

The fantastic exists when the reader is not given a straight answer; that is they are not told whether a given event is uncanny (i.e. the supernatural is the product of a dream or some other rational explanation [Baldick 345-346]) or marvellous (i.e. the supernatural explanation is true [Baldick 125]). Liminal fantasy, which builds off Todorov's notion of the fantastic, similarly "creates possible readings" (Mendlesohn 183). As previously illustrated, these definitions cannot define everything in the collection – "Casting Call" and "Working the Night Run" explicitly embrace supernatural explanations, limiting possible readings. However, liminal fantasy and the fantastic may offer a way to approach *They Say* as a whole. By refusing to work in a single genre and by placing these stories side by side in a shared textual universe, *They Say* challenges the reader's perceptions of, and blurs the line between, reality and imagination.

Final Thoughts: Standing in Helen Creighton's Writing Space

On a sunny afternoon, I visited Evergreen House in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Nestled in a corner, surrounded by windows, was Helen Creighton's writing space. A folklorist, Helen Creighton collected countless stories, songs, spells and beliefs from Nova Scotia. My own work does not accurately report Canadian folklore, but plays with it, twisting it into something new and hopefully complicating the lines between reality and fantasy. Whatever it has managed to accomplish, *They Say* would not have been possible without the work of Dr. Creighton and other hardworking folklorists and storytellers who have collected stories from across the country, ensuring that they will not be forgotten. I hope my readers enjoy this collection and, if they haven't heard the background stories before, that it opens their eyes to the amazing tales that exist in our own backyards. And maybe it will make those backyards seem just a little more fantastic.



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