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Editorial

This issue of *Rampike* focuses on contemporary fiction. Herein, we have assembled a cadre of preeminent authors arranged in several cluster groups. The first cluster features Indigenous authors including both interview and fiction from the internationally celebrated, Gerald Vizenor, as well as Anishinaabe writer/publisher Kateri-Akiwenzie Damm, plus fiction from Lesley Belleau. The second cluster features noted Canadian specialists in fictional form including Nicole Brossard, Cyril Dabydeen, Terry Griggs, Robert Kroetsch, and Alistair MacLeod. The third cluster includes a range of writers from the FC2 (Fiction Collective Two) group, coordinated by Lance Olsen who has served as our Associate Editor for this issue. The FC2 group was inspired by the first Fiction Collective Group out of New York which featured authors such as Raymond Federman and Ronald Sukenick who have appeared in earlier issues of *Rampike*. Members of the current generation of FC2 authors in this issue include Lance Olsen, Steve Tomasula, Lucy Corin, Hal Jaffe, Diane Williams, Cris Mazza, Rob Stephenson, and Matthew Roberson. In addition, we present an assortment of fresh innovators including Gus Morin, Daniel King, Kate Hargreaves, Lisa Young, Beverly Ackerman, Rodge Glass, Joshua Rapp Learn, Roger Knox, and Jason Camlot, as well as an interview with Alexander MacLeod. Our cover image for this issue, titled “Sling,” is by critically acclaimed Toronto photographer, Claudette Abrams who includes two additional photographs within these pages. Claudette Abrams’ photo works are available at artnet.com and http://www.saatchionline.com/claudetteabrams and are archived at: http://www.claudetteabrams.com/. We trust you’ll enjoy this collection of contemporary texts and images, and we hope that you’ll find them engaging and stimulating!

– Karl Jirgens, Editor
Excerpt from: Fences in Breathing

Nicole Brossard

Translation: Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood

Every fly has its shadow.

− Châteaubriand

A light at the end of the hallway is I realize quite clearly in the other language a light bulb a thing deep in the eyes that encroaches on words like a symphony in a park on a beautiful July afternoon with traffic noises in the distance and fragments of silence strewn here and there in my life I’ve been told I should repeat the same words often and not be afraid of burning like money in your pocket and that nobody would complain because the more we are able to catch new expressions in another language the more it becomes legible and beautiful with new sounds so I am going directly to invent the horizon and be careful of my mother’s bare feet on the bathroom tiles while my brother waits for me in the kitchen making holes in the hard oak with a knife like he has done ever since he started chasing after words I often caught sight of him naked he was indeed holding his knife in front of him and opening an armoire to retrieve a sketchbook or a message in a white envelope I know I watched him get on tiptoes and he was talking to the armoire singing a tune our mother loved before her death she who all her life wanted to live at the bottom of the lake there to sing while blowing bubbles unable to get to the end of the lyrics while I spread the tablecloth to the vast confines of the universe where reindeer reign as do polar bears always very white when running at the foot of the mountains on the turquoise ice of the glaciers great mirror this I know at the core of my soul although I often remain trapped in the image and the impasse of the violence of glaciers when they start to crack like ice floes I know you have to run and breathe deeply nobody is guilty of breathing well nor of breathing loudly like at the movies or like Charles when he is making his holes in the wooden floor with nails like mouths round and dark awaiting a straw a little pea or a marble or eyes that can see from the inside and that pierce my soul the floor is also a coffin my mother often went dancing there on days when a friend brought cake recipes and Charles ate all the apples yelling Adam Adam it’s mine what are we going to devour today the tree or the living wood of the forest while looking at the château in the distance and a lot of words that would love to penetrate me I am not afraid I am not afraid to go where it is necessary to translate the names of sponges and shells birdsongs and the law book that injures if it falls on my fingers are we today going to sponge my mother’s large back caress her silences or let them drop into the bathwater while watching the foamy little waves around her thighs and the delicate shadow on her back naturally scrub the spine the nurse had said for there under the skin is a living world I listen to it while scrubbing always a bit harder yet I must finish this report I would like to write what I was told to write without leaving any traces I also think the opposite while caressing my mother’s hair as I help her to get up it’s as if there were fences in our breathing and this helps me to draw sketches in the morning when I get up and breathing is difficult the sketch is filled with lines and nasty black nails that fall hard on the page if the wind passes through my lungs like I want it to shaking the Damask roses in the garden then I no longer see the fences and can more easily get closer to summer by looking at the lake I love separating the colours and caresses of June and of Kim that estrange me from my soul it’s as if I were behind a hedge of thorns when I look at them and I tell myself I must breathe everywhere with my body because I need all of my breath and I also need nails to stash in the armoire for later next to the unstamped white envelope that contains my inventions.

I have secrets that’s normal it’s true about me as it is about others when I run through my own secrets it’s like crossing barbed-wire fences that soil my shirt and make bloodstains on my hands and my knees down to the heels not at all in the
morning when there is too much mystery in my crazy canopy bed that I built like a large armoire I pretend I’m breathing or walking while moving away from myself and making sure to scream mysterious syllables that sometimes produce a list of beautiful fruits and vegetables that I put in my jacket pocket then I thrust my hand into the list it’s easy to follow with my finger to understand and draw better fences in the end it’s true I am on the verge of tears but in a state of fatigue not at all.

People think badly of us because we live in a village with a château vineyards and a post office as landscape and because we hide behind the windows in an armoire in the far reaches of our hearts not at all not at all often I say it’s nothing let’s give it a good soaking dunk the loofah glove in the water and let’s go back to square one to the great cry of dawn let out at birth and then let’s dive once again into the tenderness of mothers and let’s suckle their breath their breast their life let’s suckle great cry of dawn let out at birth and then let’s dive into the water and let’s go back to square one to the hearts not at all not at all.

In the garden I hear Tatiana’s voice repeating beware this beauty is dangerous beware the faces of people who are beautiful heartbreakers beware the holes in darkness that we enjoy photographing believing we are speaking the truth or something important yet it’s quite easy to understand that words yield at the slightest opportunity amid bird songs and clever manoeuvres that do not explain the misery of living beings and the buzzing of flies in ears attentive to the language of humans petals vines and -brambles that you wind tightly round stones the shadows of stones and words here I am caught in the trap of words that do not drown out suffering so many cleft words and worried embraces that I no longer know how to make use or hope of so evil and mean has the world become that the day before yesterday church bells started ringing again with a hellish noise that threatens any shaky belief they cover the buzzing of flies the other sounds make no echo in the shade of the lovely afternoon I wait for June’s hand to lift my sweater very close to us I hear the steps of a small animal in autumn’s new foliage a sound like the rustling of a crumpling page I wait I watch my face still looks for light in the holes of my mother’s night the foreign tongue is now in my head daily it crowds me with its words and burns me pressures me with verb tenses that wrap around me searing ribbons sticky tape then it erases me regardless I listen with my muscles and when it’s too much I stroke and I strike lather and lather erase whole pages of the book of law while eating my salad.

People think badly of us because I sleep with myself in a canopy bed they’re right the bed is ridiculous with its pink silk and apple green which is not a true colour come siesta time it’s obvious that beds are full of stories full of murders and blood it’s as obvious as scanning the pages of civilization with bonnets turbans bicornes tiaras top hats and baseball caps while always doing whatever
runs through your head and a lot of money of course I’m careful I always move forward stealthily and allow myself to roll around in the heat changing my image at every page and every hour I can now rid myself of my own presence change the colour of the night in me change languages to get closer to the secrets on the reverse side of the real oh! how I love to clean the universe with this soft oil behind the characters’ backs but we must beware because things stroke things scratch things whistle and hiss immoderately when comes the hour of the bells.

Since this morning I’ve been wandering through my memory like in a theatre I open and close the curtains I have learned the text by heart I haven’t yet had time to think about my makeup when the bells won’t stop ringing like wild women they make my text inaudible illegible so then I prefer somebody to play the piano behind my back this way I can hide my feelings I never pretend to be somebody who is wounded like my brother when he shows me his sketchbook my brother I don’t know why has left for town with fruit in his jacket pocket why in his hunting pouch he put sketches with my name and June’s on them when he shows me his sketchbook my brother I be somebody who is wounded like my brother this way I can hide my feelings I never pretend to pretend so well that it’s necessary to understand everything I don’t exist for nothing my sketchbook is proof of this and I never cry except evenings when I absolutely have to sleep in a park so I don’t disturb anyone and because it helps me concentrate on the laughter bursting from all over town women laugh in such ways that we can’t see the fences in their breathing and thus I can often touch their fur before going to sleep this morning when I woke up I was myself again I don’t understand why I am myself without warning as though since I have been sleeping at the château living in the foreign language has crushed my identity this morning when I got up this morning I truly felt I had reintegrated my movements my breathing my worries authentic and ancient autumn is coming that’s how it is coming for sure I am going to be cold and mix up my characters between the lines the number of sketches the naughty pleasures fear and the people I often call us I will have to learn to remain in suspense over my sketches to shut my eyes before diving into the blackness when black occurs great big marker of night among the planets I can plainly see that night constantly changes the shade of its jet black and that this is conducive to fear and to the swirling around of words in my mouth when someone talks to me with sincerity in the first person I have trouble breathing as if there were a fine dust of silence and cosmos pouring into me a cannibal force capable of swallowing my own dreams my fictional eyes that so often ache will tell me if it’s good or ridiculous to get so carried away into the universe with one’s sorrows and one’s armoires somebody has spread the rumour that my armoires are empty and I will be worried due to my good intentions all of this soils my head and damages my
sight I so often imagine us heading toward the night.

The world is a huge horse leaning on his shadow with letters all around helping him stand up in the garden or in a child’s room the horse carries the child north of the silhouette of the Far North where nobody can see us and where everyone will wait for us in vain just once in my life I pulled out my sketchbook to see if the horse could gallop between the village and the lake I drew close-ups of his eyes before felling an oak tree in the forest behind June’s shop and I made holes and made holes until all shadows had been exhausted then the horse appeared I hugged him close sweat running down my back on my eyelids nobody was afraid of me nor of the horse anymore nobody was really afraid of anything because for once I had made proper holes in the wood without building an armoire.

Talking to oneself doesn’t hurt a soul and many people in hotels do it quite naturally talking to oneself is not pretending to talk to someone who is on one’s mind or to whom one must repeat insults and sweet nothings like in childhood and the seasons it takes a lot of freedom to talk to oneself about the world we live in freedom is buried I cannot distinguish it under the thousands of pages of law that have come into being since the steel of guns has been firing here and there at the frontiers of the real no one law can be changed without another law authorizing it I enjoy talking alone in front of large mirrors in hotel rooms it helps me juggle the various facets of my body and the objects that decorate the room I am someone who readily acts out of fear that’s how it is when I walk three times by the same window that shows close-ups of people’s real lives it’s as if I were talking out loud to the invisible part of myself so as to not be afraid and so that it gives me joy I rearranged my armoires differently now I can count them there are ten I count only those from after those from before are in the forest scattered among the ferns the slugs and the logs of dead wood the others have little bars similar to crab-fishing cages they are smaller and each one has a white envelope in its centre inside which I do not leave a message this scares me too much like when Kim used to fill spoons with little white mounds and put flour in her nostrils so that her eyes took on these rare reflections that I then had to cross out with strokes in my sketchbook like this ||||||||||||||| taking care not to pierce the paper now for sure I’m worried about staying alive next to my sketches it’s out of the question to sell my armoires so that strangers can deposit their money and the turquoise blue of their dreamed lives in them.

Stay alive says the voice also applies to all girls whoever you are stay alive because of the smooth wind through the roses and through your raptures stay alive show yourself with your syllables and your images don’t be afraid to touch your melancholy stay alive despite the flies and the burns the little decorations everyone’s closed armoires stay alive arms open like pages of a dictionary breathe high and loud between the signs the mirrors the little sketches don’t forget your grisgris and Latin grammar stay alive despite your mother in her bathtub terrorists and liars stay alive in the moon’s axis and touch go ahead touch your mirrors in the right places before watching yourself leave stay alive like somebody who is not you.

What is it in my head that makes me think I am someone else who cannot truly resemble me or maybe the opposite it is frightening this carpet of words the scroll of images and nothing to explain if we are here if we are pretending to be here if we are with someone inside ourselves whom we love or who splits our head in two so that our thoughts scatter deep into the cosmos and that at last we may cry fully emptied of our breathing.

Sometimes I question my mother mere mortal though somehow she shouldn’t be using words allowed in the foreign language and not at all necessary in mine where does this taste for immortality come from which always becomes more complicated once one’s mother is dead once one has scrubbed and scrubbed her closely with sweet oils and voluptuous silences that always open onto the same landscape with a lake in the middle whose depth is so inconceivable that we need to keep repeating this is no dream to keep reminding ourselves we truly are of woman born and will need to take our time to comprehend all of this and no longer think about fences in breathing.

I always carry with me the clipping from an Oslo newspaper that I have kept since a long-ago March twelve black plastic bags lying side by side on the cement each one containing a human shape stuck to each bag is a rectangular piece of white paper and looking at the limp plastic one sort of gets the idea of garbage needing to be moved if we turn the photograph slightly the twelve black body bags become twelve women wearing niqabs I never talk about death I only know that in life there are fears that simplify meaning and prolong heavy silence.

Today the lizards came out because of the heat their tails glitter like the sharp dazzle of stones soon Kim will be at the seventy-eighth parallel in the land of extreme darkness and of radical whiteness that make the present too vague too vast.

The letters we have traced with the shadows of our arms in order to love somebody need always to be reread I reread I would so like to tell somebody to come visit me even though it’s cold in my workshop or in the hotel room where I sometimes go and where there are sofas and large
in the azure skies a lion dashing at full speed a
the next moment we say that each plane is a wound
once in a while a warplane flies over the fields in
fields under the still-scorching sun of early autumn
life goes it is hot in the middle of the sunflower
from one village to another one life comes another
the solitude of infinite silence several roads lead
have the feeling of being nothing of being infinitely
fear emptiness while staring into the deep water so
close to people they will explain to me how not to
that roams the streets of Longyearbyen I will get

matters of the other language and of non-sense swirl through the air though I strive to
put certain words in parallel I’m unable to make
them touch in the right place sometimes a
vagueness a slight gap sweeps the sentence away
all at once and everything needs doing all over
again I’m afraid to run out of words the same way
one fears shortages of water gas or food I don’t
know how to make use of myself in the foreign
language I struggle with this and the contour of
mountains the pain is more mysterious than ever
when I gaze at fields of sunflowers and reeds.

In the lake my mother holds me with arms
out-stretched like an offering to the gods I am three
years old I can allow myself to be brushed by the
soft wind or prepare to fly away by caressing her
cheeks and stretching my arms out in front of me
like laser beams if I keep doing this a while longer I
will swallow a little water and from underneath
contemplate a hedge of roses and my mother’s face
when water penetrates her mouth and nostrils and
her breathing seeps away with some red for I dig
my fingers too deeply into her waist to hold her
close so this is the question who becomes aware of
what when we talk about everything and nothing
like when I go to the post office or when I hear a
fighter plane flying over the village or when I hold
an innocuous pebble in my hand I am sad too many
shapes are repeated in the unexplained matter that
resists me with its shadow its fleeting energy real
and illegible I embrace the horse’s shadow and this
is not good for me I cry only when I embrace the
horse’s shadow and nobody can see me

love there is no love we settle into it it’s that simple we
ignite the conversation or not we take a look around we observe a little now I am pretending to
turn my head toward the white bridge to see if
somebody is coming Laure goes by wearing a black
suit and carrying an enormous briefcase she is
walking toward boulevard Long it’s easy to
describe maybe her mother is dead I say this
because of her clothing I timidly nod she doesn’t
see me I don’t feel like following her any farther
someone is already following her I will never get
used to time’s fluidity in the foreign language it’s
as if I were in an eternal present filled with cross-
strokes and big fat letters in colours that are almost
images there is little free time for oneself in a
foreign language I always feel confined even
though I am well aware that it is as vast as the
imagination of someone who is afraid of sudden
death it is however a language where one need not
be concerned about who is truly speaking only
about the verbs the generic nouns nothing specific
for example to talk about trees and seasons but
hundreds of words to get closer to the stars and so
everybody goes travelling at any time of the year or
they wish to stay in a hotel like the one where
Laure and Charles stay as consolation for living in a
village and probably other things like fences in
breathing that I do not wish to discuss presently one
life comes another life goes it’s that simple there up
north I will have room to put my hands everywhere
in the landscape shove them right into the daily
gestures of everyone’s life I will speak the language
doers of polar bears of reindeer and maybe even
that strange code spoken by the ugly hairless fox
that roams the streets of Longyearbyen I will get
close to people they will explain to me how not to
fear emptiness while staring into the deep water so
clear so cold they will explain how not to die I will
have the feeling of being nothing of being infinitely
the solitude of infinite silence several roads lead
from one village to another one life comes another
life goes it is hot in the middle of the sunflower
fields under the still-scorching sun of early autumn
once in a while a warplane flies over the fields in
the next moment we say that each plane is a wound
in the azure skies a lion dashing at full speed a
pebble thrown with fury.

A great horse with his shadow reappears
every time I go to the post office the other day I
asked June if she would film my animal and give
him life with her digital camera I said she needed to
film in fast-forward around the horse while I pulled
it in the opposite direction with a thick rope thus we
would get a sense of movement the horse would
certainly fall but at least we would sense that it was
alive June would have to get a close-up of the eyes
when I said this my hand was trembling June did
not notice but a woman did notice and I felt dizzy
with a pain in my chest I did not have the courage
to meet the woman’s gaze while June was filming
my horse I stared at the ground the lizards had not
yet left us.

I had to go to the city centre where the
wolves are whom I used to spend time with before
knowing June wolves that make holes in their skin
their nostrils and their brains the travel agency
faces the lake next to the casino I don’t know
anyone here I would like to not be here I must buy
People cry easily when tired you just need to look closely to see tears slowly forming then people turn their heads slightly as if to ward off fate I see that their nostrils their chins their foreheads are well and truly alive people act as if nothing is happening and I pretend not to see them getting exhausted from holding back their tears then with a dry and suspicious eye they look straight ahead as if to warn about a coming disaster it’s like Tatiana’s gold watches sparkling in the great glass armoire in the living room on days when this happens I no longer know if time is a light source or a misfortune and I say I must rest everywhere there are power and holes I’m right the power of stars wears me out for example when I lift my head even if it’s far it doesn’t take much before I feel the heat radiating in my hands troubling black hole this is what I see coming we can’t there are things we can’t do they happen it is frightening in my head the number of sights that make me want armoires all the more inside which I have to shut a lot of blackness all the blackness I am capable of the purest black ever seen an otherworldly black that attracts like light does by performing very quick magical somersaults something resembling happiness but in the other language this compares to nothing so I go walking alone on the mountain the happiness continues I talk to myself everything is out of focus around what I call the great happiness I must think only of ordinary things because images and words go fast like animals in the forest when they are escaping harm I get excited thinking about everything in life that flees in the name of life.

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HTTP://WWW.CHBOOKS.COM/CATALOGUE/FENCES-BREATHING
Being Verbal: Talking with Alistair MacLeod

“When I write a story, when I’m halfway through, I write the last sentence, I think of it as a lighthouse.” – Alistair MacLeod

Interview with Karl Jirgens

Alistair MacLeod is the author of No Great Mischief, (1999) which has been translated into 15 languages, including Japanese. He is an Emeritus of English and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor. His books include three collections of short stories, The Last Salt Gift of Blood (1976), As Birds Bring Forth the Sun (1986), and Island (2000), which collects in a single volume one new story and all of his previously published short stories. Island: The Complete Stories presents 16 stories in chronological order allowing readers to follow MacLeod’s progress as an author. No Great Mischief has won many honours, including The Trillium Award for Fiction, two Libris Awards, one for Fiction Book of the Year, and the other for Author of the Year, and the Thomas Head Raddall Award (2000), as well as the Lannan Foundation Award in 2003 [If interested, go to: http://media.lannan.org/podcasts/alistair-macleod-040211.mp3 for a podcast reading as well as an interview with radio journalist, Shelagh Rogers]. In 2001, No Great Mischief won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the world's richest literary prize for a single work of fiction. In 2009, Alistair MacLeod and Amy Hempel (USA) were co-winners of the PEN/Malamud Award, administered by the PEN/Faulkner Foundation in Washington. Alistair MacLeod is a member of the Royal Society, a recipient of the Queens Jubilee Medal and holds eleven Honorary Doctorate degrees. His popularity continues to grow. When Alistair MacLeod read his story “The Closing Down of Summer” at St. Mary's University (Halifax), this past year, the fire marshal had to be summoned to deal with the overflowing crowd that exceeded 600 people. Alistair MacLeod returns each summer to Cape Breton where he continues to write from a cliff-top cabin facing west towards Prince Edward Island. Rampike is delighted to present this interview with Alistair MacLeod, conducted at the University of Windsor, in Dec. 2010 by Rampike editor, Karl Jirgens.

KJ: Joining other authors such as John Updike, Saul Bellow and Alice Munro, along with Amy Hempel, you were recently honoured with the PEN/Malamud Award for short fiction. Has life changed much for since winning this award?

AM: No, this hasn’t changed my life. I go on living the life that I live, but it’s very nice to have received that award, and it was about a year ago from the time we’re speaking. I think it was Dec. 6th, 2009, in Washington. It was a very nice experience. Bernard Malamud’s family was there. His son and daughter participated in the ceremony and there were other people from the literary community. It was wonderful to receive that award. Four or five years ago, I won the Lannan Award, in New Mexico from the Lannan Foundation, and I think what’s nice about these awards is they mean international recognition, as did the IMPAC. Sometimes when you’re in Canada, it’s small world, but it’s a good world. But it’s nice when you’re recognized by juries in Ireland, or New Mexico, or Washington, because it means that the work that you do travels in spite of whatever regional boundaries there may be.

KJ: It’s known that you travel back each year to Cape Breton to work on your writing. I wonder if it’s more than a coincidence, that plots in your fictions feature characters who are always departing and returning?

AM: That may be. Cape Breton is the landscape where I grew up, and I have a house there and the house that I have there is the house of my great grandfather. So, I’ve been there for a long time. I have a graveyard or graveyards full of people who have been there fore a long time. And my wife is from the same community. And two of our children were born there. I’m very interested in geography. I think that landscape has a big effect on the way that people live their lives. I mean physical landscape, or religious landscape, or political landscape, but I think we’re all born into certain landscapes, and sometimes we leave them. I think of Cape Breton, I suppose, the way that one might think of one’s mother, or something like that. I keep returning there. Maybe I should leave my mother and go to Los Angeles more, but I still feel that Cape Breton is the landscape that speaks to me most strongly, and so I keep returning to it. Michael Ignatieff said
somewhere that “home is where the graves are.” I don’t know if I totally agree with that, but in answer to your question, I’d say my home is where my graves are.

**KJ:** Can you say something about any similarities or differences in the way you compose short fiction as opposed to the way you compose a novel?

**AM:** Well, a novel is a lot longer (laughs). The novel has a lot of ideas in it, or should have, and a lot of characters and so on. Whereas a short story is maybe twenty pages long, although some of mine are maybe forty pages long. In a short story, you only have room for so many ideas, and you only have room for so many characters. I think of a short story as a trip in a Volkswagen. And I think of a novel as a trip in a bus. It’s a long journey, and you have a lot of people on the bus, and you should take a lunch because it’s going to be a long journey.

**KJ:** While your stories are arguably realist in their depictions, they also feature a remarkable flow of thought that often leaps through time and space from location to location, as the narrator’s mind moves from one topic to another. Could you say something about how you arrange the flow of perception or thought in your writing?

**AM:** I appreciate what you say about the flow. One wants to have flow, and I read my work aloud when I’m writing it, because I’m interested in sound. I believe that story-telling is older than literacy. There were story tellers before people could read or write. I like to pretend that I am a short story teller, rather than a short story writer. Obviously, it’s a kind of false conceit because you can’t say I’m going to tell you a story now and it’s going to last 350 pages. But, I like to think that I’m talking to my readership the way I’d talk to an audience in a class, or sitting around the proverbial campfire. I think that if you’re going to talk to people around the campfire as our ancient forbears did, then you have to have something to say and it has to be interesting. Or, otherwise people will go and brush their teeth or something. So, I think that I should have something to say, and that I should say it well. I think that saying it well means that you should use language that is pleasing. I hesitate to say “beautiful” because that sounds so “prissy,” but I wouldn’t like to be just giving information, like from the back of a soup can. So, I would like to say “something” but I want to say it in a certain way that is attractive. I don’t know how many components there are to writing, but there are at least two that I’m interested in. First you have to have something to say, and second, how are you going to say what you have to say? So, one is the statement, and the other is style.

**KJ:** There is a very clear connection between statement and style, or form and subject-matter in your fictions. For example, in “The Closing Down of Summer,” I noticed that there are a lot of spatio-temporal leaps in the mind-flow of the narrator/protagonist, with a narrative that chops up or ruptures time. In a sense, the ruptured pattern of the narrative parallels the psychic rupture of the narrator/protagonist, because he’s conflicted about what he’s doing. So, there is a direct integration between what is said, and how it is said.

**AM:** Sure. That’s intended.

**KJ:** It must be challenging to get a good idea and then determine a form that will work with that idea.

**AM:** Yes. I wanted to make him a thoughtful man, someone who goes to university, someone who reads things. But he doesn’t talk to his wife about his situation. He hardly talks to anybody except his friends, his crew, but they’re very much like him. People who go out and play for the Toronto Argonauts football team know what they have to do, but they don’t talk much. They’re 280 pound men who can run fast in four seconds and smash into the opposing players. They get the ball and run down the field. Everybody might like to do that, but could everybody do that? No. But that’s what they do, for a while. That’s part of a physical kind of life. Some things you can do forever. You can teach, or you can read, or you can write, or you can play the piano, or you can swim. But, you can’t play professional football forever. There’s a small window of opportunity if your career is based on your body, and then it changes and you can’t do that anymore. So, the character in that story is a thoughtful man who makes his living using his body but he is very aware of how small that window of opportunity really is.
KJ: In many ways, memory itself seems to be the subject of your stories and that’s part of the narrative flow. Could you say something about the editing and selection process of recall, as it informs your fiction with reference to memory function?

AM: Yes, I think of a lot of my characters are influenced by memory. I include memory that doesn’t have to be your own memory but can be somebody else’s memory, in the way that people who are children or grandchildren are affected by war, or children or grandchildren are affected by the holocaust. You may be affected by historical events that did not happen directly to you, but they are part of your make-up because of your parentage or because of what has happened to whoever you may be historically. I don’t think that many of us are “instant” North Americans, or that history began with my birth, because history is a lot longer than any individual. I know there are a lot of people who perhaps do believe that history began with their birth because they’re not interested in that old stuff, and they’re in a kind of denial. I think memory has an effect upon you in that when you see certain things it may remind you of things in your past, and a lot of these memories are very personal. They may have happened to you, or they may have happened to twenty other people. Or, perhaps they just happened to you alone. Or, you may remember certain things that other people do not remember. So, I think we’re all living and that I’m living in a kind of continuum. One could say, “Here I am today, and that’s all that matters,” but it’s not all that matters because one is influenced by what happened yesterday and last year and twenty years ago and a hundred years ago.

KJ: It’s often been said that our sense of self is actually a construct that is a kind of fiction, and that we edit and select what we choose to remember.

AM: And sometimes you remember things that you’re surprised by. I don’t mean big events such as the birth of a child. But sometimes you may go to, say, New York City and you say “This is what I’m going to remember about New York City forever – my visit to the Museum of Art.” But five years later, what you may remember about New York City is people getting on the bus or something. You may not remember big things because the big things, in terms of history, may come second to seeing someone get their purse snatched, or something like that, and then you say to yourself, “That’s what I remember about New York. There are lots of other things I should remember, but this is what I remember. I should remember the Statue of Liberty and climbing up that, but I don’t. Instead, I remember this woman getting her purse snatched when she was getting off the bus.” So, this is a memory that is kind of personal, not as opposed to, but in conjunction with seeing the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty.

KJ: That sense of memory is also connected to the notion of time itself, and your writing includes direct references to time. For example, “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” speaks of a “future flowing river” from a perspective that one might say looks both forward and backward simultaneously. It reminds me of the river in Margaret Laurence’s novel The Diviners which seems to flow both ways. I think both of you are looking at a very broad and continuous sense of time. How would you say perceptions of time affect your approach to narrative?

AM: I think that image of the river is a very good image. In Nova Scotia, there are some places with very big tides. The rivers flow out to the sea and when the tide comes in, the ocean pushes the river back, so the river does flow both ways, depending on the tide. I think it’s a nice image for people who sometimes think they are going forward but are actually going backward. In “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood” there’s a young man who thinks he’s doing one thing and he kind of does do it, and the metaphor is collecting, so, he thinks he’s collecting one thing, but later he realizes he’s collecting something else, because he doesn’t realize the nature of his collecting. This comes to him only through time. As a young man he sets out to do one thing, and seems to get along ok, and maybe he exploits other people in getting what he wants. Then later he may realizes that what he got is not what he really wants now. Although, it was what he wanted then.

KJ: That makes sense. A lot of your stories are dialogical because there is some open-ended debate. Often this debate is unresolved. For example, in “The Closing Down of Summer” there’s an inner tension involving the narrator/protagonist who doesn’t seem sure as to whether he’s doing the right thing by going back to work in distant mining operations, and so that leaves an open-endedness. Is there a reason for the open-endedness?

AM: I think a lot of my stories are open-ended. I construct them that way. My son, Alexander MacLeod, just had a short story collection come out [Light Lifting, Ed.] and I don’t know if he’s very much influenced by me, but this is one of the points that people make about his work. They say things like, “Well, what happened at the end?” Because I don’t think he believes in closure in that traditional sense, and I don’t think that I do either,
because sometimes you’re doing things and you don’t know how they’re going to end. I think that life is full of uncertainty. People take marriage vows and they think “This is going to last forever,” and maybe it doesn’t last forever. But that doesn’t mean that at the time they didn’t think it was going to last forever. Or you make investments. You do all kinds of things. You take jobs. And you say, “Now, this is going to be my job forever, or this is going to be my wife forever, or this is how I’m going to make 28% interest.” And it doesn’t turn out that way. So, what do you do? You don’t throw yourself over a cliff or anything. But a lot of life is, I think, open-ended. And I think in “The Closing Down of Summer,” one of the things that is interesting about those men is that they are doing very dangerous work and it’s work that might kill them, or it will kill them maybe because of rock dust on their lungs, or, they may get hit by a falling rock. I think when you go forward to that kind of work, you say, “Ok, I’m going now. I’m going into a dangerous kind of work. And, I’m going to be down in the dark, alone. And I’m going to be in Africa, which is miles and miles and miles away.” That’s different than going to work as an accountant, or a university professor, or a radio announcer, where the work that you do is unlikely to kill you. It may bore you (laughs), but you’re not going to smash your head in. So, I see that man as a smart man, and when he goes away, he doesn’t really know if he’s ever coming back, and each time he comes back, he’s changed, and the people that he leaves behind change. The wife that he leaves behind changes, the children grow up, and he may think he’s the same, but he’s not the same either. So, he’s in a world of change doing the same kind of thing, over and over. He mines in Indonesia, he mines in Africa, he mines in the Yukon. And everything seems the same, but everything is different and he deteriorates. He grows old, he grows weak, and so on. So, I thought that was an interesting idea. People do things sometimes that maybe they don’t want to do. For example, he goes to university but finds it boring. He goes to do mining work instead. He could have done something else before, but he can’t do much else now.

**KJ:** I found it interesting that in “The Closing Down of Summer” the narrator/protagonist is aware of and worried about his own mortality. He’s worried about being washed away with the waves of time. He appears to have an anxiety that any trace of memory of him will eventually disappear just as his footprints or body-marks left on the sandy beach are washed away by the incoming tide; “The waves are higher now and are breaking and cresting and rolling farther in. They have obliterated the outlines of our bodies in the sand…” Yet, there is a kind of immortality that comes to him because his story is told.

**AM:** Yes, that’s quite right and it’s one of the points of the story. Because they’re lying on the beach and doing whatever they’re doing, and then the tide comes, and fall comes, and the rain comes, and when they leave, it’s as if they were never there, “...our footprints of brief moments before already have been washed away.” I think those are the words that I used. I was interested in the idea of who gets memorialized, and what we leave behind. So, that’s what he leaves behind, “These are my thoughts as I go forth.”

**KJ:** That makes sense. T.S. Eliot sometimes talked about cycles of return where one keeps coming back to a place but it has changed, and it’s a little bit different, and so is the person who returns. I see these cycles of coming and going in your stories, but also cycles of nature and cycles of life, all integrated. You’ve done physical work. You’ve done logging and mining and so on, so, you’re quite in touch with natural cycles.

**AM:** Yes, I’ve done those things. A lot of my stories take place outside in the out-of-doors. And I think if you live your life working out of doors, then you’re very much aware of the cycles of the season, the cycles of the day, the weather, and so on. Now it’s going to rain, now it’s time to bring the crops in, now it’s going to snow, and we have to get our winter tires, things like that. I think people who live in the out-of-doors are more aware of the natural world and its cycles, unlike someone who works in an office where it’s always 70 degrees Fahrenheit. For example, I think that if you live in Canada, you’re very aware of winter.

**KJ:** Your stories and your novel are embedded not only with historical references, but refer to a fairly wide range of world cultures. Could you say something about the reason for including diverse world cultures in your fiction?

**AM:** One of the things about history is who gets to tell it. People who tell the historical stories are nearly always the ones who win. And they’re also the ones who have language and leisure, leisure meaning that they can sit at a chair with the time to write things down. And lots of people never get to say their side of history. Nobody knows what was going through the mind of Sitting Bull, or North American Indians who were slaughtered. The people who slaughtered them are always describing them as “savages.” And so, those who were slaughtered never had a chance to tell their stories, partly because they didn’t have a means to language, and this is the case with lots of people.
who were exterminated, or dispossessed of their lands, because the people who dispossessed them, thought of them as lesser, and they didn’t have language, and they didn’t have leisure. And there was slavery in the United States, for example, but those people could not write great novels because they didn’t have language or leisure. Great novels were written by people like Harriet Beecher Stowe. So that’s one thing, I think about history. Who gets to tell it. And now, in 2010 or 2011, there’s lots of revisionist history. We’re going to tell history from a female point of view, or from the point of view of the Irish, or the point of view of the Armenians, or points of view of other people who didn’t fare so well historically. So, I’m interested in that aspect of history. The other thing that I’m interested in historically is that some people are influenced by their history if they did certain things. Say, if you were the Gurkhas, or someone like that, then, this is what you did for generations, cut the throats of other people while employed by the British, and your grandfather did this and your father did this, and you do this, and you say, “Well, this is what we do. We are soldiers who are mercenaries. We all fight.” Or, you might say, “We all go to sea,” or, “We’re all masons,” or, “We all work with brick and mortar, and this is our history,” or, “This is what we do, we’re all watchmakers,” or “We’re all truck drivers,” or something like that. And this is what we do, and this is our family history. “We’re all cooks.” But then you may say, well, that is my family history, but I don’t want that to be my history. And then you go do something else, like become a professor, instead of say, driving truck, and it’s great. But then, sometimes your grandfather or your father says, “Oh, you should have stayed. You would’ve had your own trucking company by now, instead of teaching about verbs or something.” So, I think that there’s a personal history, and there’s an ethnic history, when people say things like, “Black people do this, but they don’t become great swimmers.” And you might ask, “Why not?” And they say, “Well, they just don’t.” Well, maybe they never had a chance. Maybe they never had a swimming pool. Or, they might say, Italians make great cooks. But you never think of Scotsmen or Irishmen as being great cooks. You’ve probably never seen a Scottish restaurant. But, I think the great thing about North America is that you don’t have to do any of these things. You can say, “We’ve been bakers forever, but I’m going to be an astronaut.” So, personal history or ethnic history may have held people back. In certain countries depending on your background, you better not try for that job, because you will not get it, if you’re the wrong kind of person. You might ask, “Why am I the wrong kind of person?” The answer is, “Historically, we don’t trust Lutherans, or we don’t trust Catholics, or we don’t trust Muslims, or we don’t trust somebody, or we don’t trust Jewish people, or we don’t trust Baptists, because.” And you might say, “Why not?” And the answer is, “Oh, because of their history, and our history.” – So, I’m interested in cultural history. I don’t think any of us are born out of the forehead of Athena or anything like that. There are people today in 2010, December, who do see themselves as “instant people” and who will say, “Well, I have no past.” And they’re people to think about too, because they’re really there. But, people will look at pictures and people will look at history with different perspectives and they’ll say, “This is my history because of such and such.” And other people will say, “Well, I have no history.” I don’t mean to say there’s necessarily any right or wrong with that. But there are people who carry traditions.

KJ: In connection to ethnic history, your fiction often features references to ancient myth. Figures such as the Gaelic cross, or heroes like Cuchulain, as rise as do others. Can you comment about how you inter-weave, fiction, non-fiction and mythology in your writing?

AM: Some people are influenced by myth, and myth is a kind of belief. Sometimes it’s related to what you know and what you experience in terms of tradition. Some people are very influenced by myth and some people are not, in the same way that they’re influenced by religion, or they’re not. I think of religion as a belief, and I think of mythology as a kind of belief as well. Sometimes they meet and people are influenced by certain myths, and by certain beliefs. I was talking to the Writer in Residence here [U Windsor Writer in Residence: 2010 – 2011, Rosemary Nixon, Ed.] and she was talking about how in Africa people act in certain ways, because of myths and because of beliefs, and some may say that these things are not true. Some people may believe in Voodoo or something like that. Some people, if they see someone sticking pins in a doll, believe they will die. I don’t think you or I would die if we saw someone sticking pins in a doll, but we’re just not sure. So, I’m interested in what people believe inside a circle of belief. So, you can say, “In here, everyone believes certain things. – This is Judaism. Or, this is Islamism in the circle.” And they believe that you should pray so many times a day, and they believe that this is what they should do at weddings, and this is what they wear, and this is what men do, and this is what women do. And, if you’re outside of the circle of belief, and you might look in at them, and you might say, “That’s strange. They eat this, but they won’t eat that, or they all wear black or they wear burkas, or they don’t, or something like that.” But inside the circle of belief, maybe people don’t think they’re strange at all.
They’re just living their lives. Some people say that those without religion still live in a world of superstition. You might say, “Oh, I don’t believe that.” But my little example is people who read their horoscopes in the newspaper everyday. What’s that? Is that superstition? Or, is that belief? People look at their Zodiac sign in the morning before they begin their day. And it might say, “Not a good day for financial decisions.” And they’re there thinking, “Should I buy a pair of boots or not?” And then they might think after, “I shouldn’t have bought those boots, because then I wouldn’t have been short-changed.” Or, it might say, “Not a good day for romance,” so then, what am I doing calling you up? – I’m interested in whatever that body of belief may be because that’s the way people live their lives. So, if you encounter someone who is very different from you in their belief system, then, that means something. Those people might never spit over their left shoulder, or walk under a ladder or something like that. So, I think when you encounter someone who says something like, “Well, I believe that on the third Friday, something’s going to happen…” then, you might think to yourself “Garbage.” So, in that story, “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun,” there are those who are influenced by certain beliefs. And we know that out there are men who believe that the earth is flat, and that the birds bring forth the sun. And even if we don’t believe that, it doesn’t mean that they don’t believe that.

KJ: It’s hard to differentiate between what we believe and what we think is true. We tend to think that truth can be empirically proven. Yet, as you just said about history, the past is usually re-told by those who win wars, and not as much by those who lose. So the “truth” of that past is provisional. But with myth you can often distil it down to a basic idea or a principle, that doesn’t have to be proven for people to believe in it. So, we could say, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” or “All you need is love,” or, “Give peace a chance.” But those ideas don’t have to be proven to be believed.

AM: Yes, but some of those are pretty general. It would be hard to find anybody who would say, “I don’t believe in peace.” There aren’t many people running around saying, “Give hate a chance,” or, “Love is evil.” But there are big conflicts in the world today, and then people say, “My idea of peace is, I should have this much, and you should have that much.” So, everybody agrees that peace is good and love is good, but sometimes when you get down to specifics, they might say, “Yeah, kind of.”

KJ: In your novel and in some of your stories such as “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,” silence carries a meaning. There are different kinds of silences including that of a woman during a moment of recognition, or, an uncomfortable silence after a song, or the silence of a checker game, or the almost ritualistic silence just prior to drinking over-proof rum, and so on. Characters sometimes find themselves “locked for words”. Are you consciously working with ellipsis, and silences, or that which is unsaid, and if so, do you have a particular purpose in mind?

AM: I think that people are silent for different reasons. In drawing a character and setting up situations, I hope that I realize what is going on in the character’s minds. Some people are just shy and don’t speak very much. Some people are silent because of their occupation and never talk when they work. In the area from which I come, there are people who fish. There are people who are in the boat all day fishing, and then there are their brothers who work the line, where they process the fish. The people who are in the boat, never talk to one another because of the slop of the waves. It’s very noisy. But the people who work inside on the fish lines who are processing the fish, talk all day. They gossip, and they know everything, and they talk about who got a new car and who didn’t get a new car, and who is engaged and who is happy and who is unhappy. So, because of where they stand, literally, they talk an awful lot. And the other people, because of their occupations, don’t talk at all. When they come home, their brothers tell them all the gossip. But it’s interesting. Now, in the situation of the woman in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood”, she does not talk because she is angry, and sometimes angry people refuse talk because of the anger that is within them and they fear that if they talk, they might talk too much, or it might lead to violence, so sometimes silence seems to be the best thing to do, under the circumstances. Sometimes we mistake people who do not talk a lot because I, Alistair MacLeod, and you, Karl Jirgens, we make our living more or less by talking, by talking to students and interchanging ideas and so on. But a lot of people, like the fishermen that I mention, or people who drive trucks, don’t spend their days talking. Sometimes it’s because they have no one to talk to. They’re alone in their truck cab, or they don’t feel that they have very much in common with the people they are with. But, if you are a university professor, or if you are a radio announcer, or if you are a sales person, then your livelihood will depend on being articulate. Sometimes we think people who talk a lot are somehow more clever than people who remain silent, but this is not true, because as someone once said, “Silence is golden.” So, of the people in the story you mention, some of them are just not very articulate, while some of them are so overwhelmed
by the scene in which they find themselves that they are just rendered speechless. And some people do not speak because they are angry, and some people do not speak because they are confused. But if you’re a radio announcer, then it’s your job to talk a lot.

**KJ:** That notion of going away and returning also connects to the tension between inner and outer worlds suggested by speech and silence, which helps define what is inside and outside of an individual. But there is also an accompanying tension between people who somehow feel they are either “inside” or “outside” of a community. This happens in your story “The Closing Down of Summer.” Is this tension a point of interest for you?

**AM:** Years ago, there was a sports announcer named Howard Cosell. And he used to interview athletes. I remember basketball players and he would ask them questions like, “What’s going through your mind when you’re dunking the basketball?” And these men would look at themselves on the video playback and they’d be flying through the air doing a ballet-like move, but they would say things like, “I just shoot the ball.” My idea was with those men and with Howard Cosell. On the one hand, you had completely physical men, and on the other hand, a completely verbal man. He’d say, well, “You feinted to the left and then you turned and jumped,” and so on. So, the basketball players were living a life of the body, and he was living a verbal life. So, I became interested in the idea that some people can do wonderful things, but they don’t talk about what they do. Or they choose not to, or they can’t. But other people live verbal lives. So, that’s what I was interested in, in terms of that man in “The Closing Down of Summer.” If you don’t talk, it’s maybe because you choose not to talk, like Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*, or maybe your tongue is cut out, but maybe you just don’t want to talk because being verbal is not everything there is in life.

**KJ:** Do you have any new projects you’re working on right now?

**AM:** Well, I’m going to try to write some more short stories. I have to think of good ideas, because I think that all of my stories have ideas behind them. I don’t like to write just anything. So, then I think maybe I’ll say this, or maybe I’ll say that. So, that’s what I’m thinking about now. You know, Philip Roth, the American writer, who has written quite a bit more than most authors? [See: *Portnoy’s Complaint, The Plot Against America, Nemesis*, etc. Ed.] Well, I saw him in an interview the other day and one question was, “Are you going to write more?” And he said, “Well, I’m looking for a big idea.” – So, I’m looking for a good idea, because I have to have something to say. And the other thing, in terms of what you said about love or peace, or something, is that some ideas are transcendent. Some ideas endure beyond time and beyond country, as do some of Shakespeare’s ideas, and so forth. So, there are ideas like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s idea of “let’s abolish slavery.” You couldn’t do that today in 2010 or 2011. And you can no longer write about how some day man may go into outer space. Spy novels were popular during the Cold War (well, they may be coming back). And there are some very good spy novels with the idea that the “evil Russians” are here. John le Carré is still doing that, and a lot of those novels are very good. But in 2010 or 2011, I find, I can’t say that.

**KJ:** Yes, I see. For example, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* talks about a different kind of slavery.

**AM:** Yes. That’s a great novel. And so, you might think maybe I’ll write a novel about the environment, or somebody will, but then, the ozone layer may not be as gripping an idea to some, as it is to others. You have to find something that appeals to you and you say, well, this is worth dealing with, so I’m going to tackle this and I’ll write about it. I’ve told this to my students, “Whatever you care strongly about, write about.” So, if it’s how much you hate your ex-boyfriend, then that might be your subject. You might say, “Perhaps you shouldn’t write about your ex-boyfriend, when you could write about global warming.” And, then they might reply, “But, my hatred for my ex-boyfriend is greater than my fear for global warming.” So, you say, “Well, then do the hatred thing.” – The other thing that I’m interested in is who gets to tell the story. It’s connected to what I said about history. So, you may have a story with a conflict between a mother and a daughter, and say, the daughter is seventeen and the mother is forty-seven or something, and they have a tension between them. Well, who gets to tell that story and who gets all the good lines? So, if the story is told from the point of view of the daughter, then she might complain, “My mother is an old witch who doesn’t understand the modern world.” And the mother might say something like, “Oh my God. You stay out until three a.m. when you should be studying chemistry, and nothing good is ever going to happen because of that boyfriend you have.” So, that’s a conflict story between the mother and the daughter. But who you give the lines to, or who gets the microphone, is important to the outcome of the story. So, I’m interested in that. Who does the talking?
Based on true historical revelations and fragments of the author’s family history, *Underground* features tragic love, a forgotten place, and an invisible war while exploring the narrow range of options open to men and women in desperate situations as history collides with personal desires and private lives. Published by Thomas Allen, Canada, March 2011.

Antanas Sileika is the author of *Dinner at the End of the World*, and *Buying on Time*, which was nominated for both the Toronto Book Award and the Stephen Leacock Award for Humour. *Buying on Time* was serialized on CBC Radio’s *Between the Covers*. Occasional freelance broadcaster and journalist, Antanas Sileika is the winner of a National Magazine Award, and continues to serve as the Artistic Director of the Humber School for Writers.
Open Talk

Robert Kroetsch

During a recent visit to the University of Windsor, Robert Kroetsch spoke on his approaches to writing. In this open talk, he addresses matters such as the role of questioning, literary influences, autobiography and the importance of locale, among other issues. Rampike is delighted to offer these candid observations by one of Canada’s premiere authors. Robert Kroetsch is a Governor General’s Award winning novelist and poet. In addition, and along with William V. Spanos, he was the co-founding editor of Boundary 2, the highly influential journal of Postmodern Literature, published out of Binghamton, N.Y. [Photo of Robert Kroetsch by Karl Jirgens].

On asking Questions: I think questions are much more important than answers. Answers are always wrong. Questions are always right. So I like to ask questions and my “10 questions from David Thompson” is part of that attitude. And then we speculate, then we learn to speculate, debate, argue, reason, and feel emotion.

On the literary influence of the Beats: I wasn’t terribly influenced by Kerouac, but I was influenced by Ginsberg. I use to teach “Howl” when I was teaching in upstate New York. I had a great admiration for Ginsberg. Still do. He was an amazing man, an amazing poet.

On quotidian topics for poetry: It was a bitter cold day in Winnipeg and I was scraping my windows and I said, god-dammit this is awful! So I wrote a poem involving a windshield scraper. The poem is always a trade-off between some version of reality and some version of language. I have a series of such poems. There’s a poem about my red winter jacket and a few other things. I have a view that at best we’re archeologists, we’re just digging up little traces of our pasts. I like to take those little artifacts and explore them. You can base a whole kind of anthropological argument on a windshield scraper couldn’t you? And more on the kind of world that would use one. So we have these little clues that we have to work with. What intrigues me quite often is how to work from a clue to a narrative reality, to a story.

On using lists in writing: Lists resist grammar. Lists are not grammatically organized are they? You have that pre-grammatical situation where before you organize, you have these objects and there’s the list of things. We like things. I’m very much influenced by Williams Carlos Williams who says “no ideas but in things.” I’m against the transcendental. I want to work from the bottom up. From the little details to something. So that’s why I end up being fascinated by evolution for instance, how we get from bacteria to the University. I assume it’s moving upward, isn’t it?

On pissing in buckets: This really happened. Two men were digging a well and they asked me to go get them a pail of water. It struck me as ironic that I had to go get them a pail of water from another well. I was a little upset, so I peed in the water, just a bit, and when I took it back to them I said: “I peed in the water,” and they said, “You did not”. And I said, “Really! I peed in the water!” “No way, you did not.” And they drank the water. And I said to myself, why are men so impervious to truth? It’s one of those moments when you become a poet, I guess.

On autobiography: I just don’t think you can tell a story of your life. It’s a lie. I mean generally you make yourself very good or nowadays you make yourself very bad – that’s what sells novels, making it about what a terrible creature you were. Which probably isn’t the truth in any case, and it’s an
imposition on the narrative when it doesn’t fit. So I’m against autobiography, partly because I also want to keep my own life secret, I suppose. But memoirs are so popular now aren’t they? There might be a little more flexibility in a memoir.

On representations of self in writing: This is always a difficult question. I should ask Alistair Macleod. What is “myself” is a good question, and the question I am asking in several poems is, “What is myself?” I’m not sure I know. We change so much. We keep changing. What does not change is the will to change. So, I’m skeptical about anybody’s ability to capture self including one’s own self. But I try it a lot. Sometimes, instead of using a persona I use myself as the speaker. It’s a difficult question for a writer. Nowadays, the thing you do is put in traces of yourself. Then people get excited about that. “He must have had that affair,” and so on.

On the importance of sketches: I just realized last night thinking about the first poem from this booklet which is called The Lost Narrative. The narrative that I am telling is lost. One of my books is called Completed Field Notes. Well, “field notes” are just tentative sketches you make while you’re on the spot. So “sketch” is a very important word to me. It’s the best we can do, in my mind. A novel depends on a coherent narrative of some sort. In a poem you can get away with less coherence, I suppose.

On the value of lying: If we didn’t lie to ourselves we’d all go mad. We have to have a coherent story about our lives. And one of the things you do as a writer is you get to construct a story of your life. And, it’s important to know that it’s a fiction. That’s what Wallace Stevens calls a “necessary” fiction or the “necessary angel.” That’s what it is. We’re stuck with making necessary fictions. But don’t forget it’s a fiction. And don’t forget it’s necessary.

On masculine and feminine viewpoints: I wrote erotic things about masculinity quite often. The quest is so often male, for instance, that I write lots of quest stories. Even David Thompson out there, on what was a heroic life was busy killing animals. It was all about beaver skins wasn’t it? It’s kind of weird.. that kind of male, isn’t it? Well I like Charlotte Small [n.b.; Charlotte Small was the wife of David Thompson – Ed.]. I must say I’m kind of in love with her a little bit myself. She gives me liberty and she was very independent. These white guys from Europe often married native women because the native women knew how to live in the wilderness. And they could speak the native languages. It was a great economic advantage to the white guy to marry the native woman. But I started to think about how they remained so silent. They never had a chance to speak their stories. I guess if I were a woman I’d be a feminist, but I don’t know what you call a male feminist. It’s obsolete anyhow. There are whole new things coming in, such as the notion of “post-human” species.

On cities and writing: I like cities that are a little bit rough around the edges, such as Binghamton, New York, where I lived for a long time. It hit its peak in the Civil War, during the 19th century. While I was there, it was run down around the edges. It had been based on the shoe economy for a while and then it collapsed. The shoe economy was moving south. A place like Windsor intrigues me. Because of the kind of pain it has to endure as it gets shabby around the edges. Winnipeg is that kind of city, very much a working class city. I like that kind of city. And Winnipeg intrigues me as I lived there long enough that you try to map it in a sense. I’m always trying to map things. Each of us has a separate map of a city. How do you communicate that map to another person? Most of the streets in Winnipeg I never laid eyes on; just a few streets really. How does one write about that ignorance? And Winnipeg has got an interesting history too, of course. It was a little “Chicago of the west” at one time. It has very interesting architecture and I am interested in architecture as the way we remember. How does a city remember itself? By old buildings is one of the ways. Memorials, statues, stuff like that makes story.
“Dragonfly” – Photo by Claudette Abrams (Toronto)
Survivance: Talking with Gerald Vizenor

Interview with Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm

Gerald Vizenor is the Distinguished Professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, and Professor Emeritus of American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He is a citizen of the White Earth Nation in Minnesota. Gerald Vizenor is the author of more than thirty books on Native histories, critical studies, and literature, including The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories, and Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance. He won the American Book Award for his novel Griever: An American Monkey King in China, and received a Distinguished Achievement Award from the Western Literature Association. His most recent books include Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence, and three novels, Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57, Father Meme, and Shrouds of White Earth. Native Liberty, a selection of recent essays, and Native Storiers, an anthology of Native literature, as well as Survivance were published last year. Gerald Vizenor is a series editor with Diane Glancy for Native Storiers at the University of Nebraska Press, and series editor with Deborah Madsen of Native Traces at the State University of New York Press. Rampike magazine is delighted to present Gerald Vizenor in interview with author, activist, and publisher of Kegedonce Press, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm. [Photos of Gerald Vizenor by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm].

KAD: You talk about the idea of “Survivance” in your book. Is that concept a reaction to colonial impulses, or does it have its origins in Indigenous imagination?

GV: Well, I think both concepts are true. I had to find a word in the English language, a word that comes from somewhere else but its meanings are relevant. I needed a word that could be expanded for meaning. What I was looking for, and I’ve done this with a lot of other words, was to find a word that could specify native experience of presence. The word “survival” was not enough. Survival might be an appropriate response and we know what it means but survival is a reference to a specific situation. I wanted a word like this, “survivance,” that would naturally critique and controvert the sentiments of victimry. What I mean by that is that victimry creates an absence. Historians go after native history and the context often of victimry and create an absence. I am a native presence, and you are a native presence. I wanted a word that speaks for that sense of native presence, and survivance, and not for historical absence. There are enough words in the world about absence and victimry.

KAD: And it seems there’s also a sense of enduring.

GV: Yes, oh yes, that too. Now the word had a little bit of relevance to all of this. It’s not a word that’s in the American English Dictionary but it is in the large Oxford Dictionary and it probably has been obscured. It hasn’t been used properly for two or three hundred years but it was borrowed from French and it’s hardly even used in French, but its meaning is to appreciate an inheritance of some kind. It’s used in complex situations of say, legal inheritance. So it has a good possibility and it’s a right of inheritance or inheritability - that’s good. And I can expand that and
the nuance of it, the condition of it, and it has a good sound and it matches its sound, pleasantly to the word dominance and it’s really working. I believe it’s working because we all needed a word like this to confront the absence, confront victimry with our own stories of presence.

KAD: I remember working on an international indigenous arts conference and it was called “Beyond Survival.” Probably because we hadn’t yet caught on to the “Survivance” word yet; you’re right, there was a need for that kind of a word.

GV: Yes, we need something beyond just “survival.” This is the condition. It’s not an ideology but the sentiment and the emotive sense of a resistance and a presence.

KAD: In your book, Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence, you wrote, I’m going to quote you here, “concurrent native literary nationalists construct an apparent rarefied nostalgia for the sentiments and structures of tradition and the inventions of culture by a reductive reading of creative literature.” I’m wondering if that still reflects your stance on indigenous literary nationalism and if you can give me what your thoughts are on that.

GV: Well, literary nationalism is really difficult to understand because no one has really defined that. It’s been a reference. I’m arguing that creative literature can’t be reduced to a single idea, certainly not in the material sense of culture. Now, I have a different perspective here because I don’t appreciate material culture as much as I appreciate the active imagination. And I privilege the ideas of native storiers over the material cultural expressions. But I can extend my argument even to the material culture in that the creators of material objects didn’t create objects for mere reduction in stories, they created objects to have a sense of presence, and to naturally disappear. Stories are not forever, we must continue to create stories, new stories with the traces of tradition, but not the terminal notions of traditions. And the conditions under which we create stories, and create material culture, change, they must change. There is no absolute tradition. There is the continued creation of the idea of our presence as natives. We’re not in some state where we can discover the absolute originary of our traditions. Am I making any sense?

KAD: Well, if I’m understanding you then” tradition” is really a concept that we create in the present, to a certain extent.

GV: I don’t mind the word “tradition” as long as it doesn’t mean a past reference or a reduction, something that we owe an allegiance to because of its originary nature. There is no moment of originary nature, unless of course you’re talking genome theory.

KAD: And it shouldn’t be a static thing in any case, because that’s part of what has been used to stereotype us and causes so much other damage arising from the notion that there was this pure kind of state that we were in at one time.

GV: And we’ve all departed from this perfection.

KAD: We’ve sort of fallen away from that. It’s really got a lot of tones of that Biblical fall from grace kind of thing.

GV: The sources are monotheistic. The metaphors I think that give meaning to this idea of a single creation and permanence. The notions of perfect traditions are monotheistic, an originary creation and liturgy. Natives appreciate more dynamic creation stories, actually, multiple creation stories. In fact it’s more complicated than that. Creation only takes place in the telling, not in the staged liturgy. There are referential inspirations of tradition in certain ceremonial objects but not only because of the object but because of what we do with the object – singing, dancing, telling stories. The sacred is because we use it as an expression in creation stories. The sense of the sacred is not an isolated object or story. Or, if the sacred is in creation stories, then the sacred is understood by how we use it in stories. The sacred is not a shelved object. Otherwise museums would have all the sacred.

KAD: Exactly. This is a little bit of a tangent maybe, but I understand you have written a constitution for the White Earth Nation. Do you see that as a kind of nationalist undertaking?

GV: Yes, and that’s a very good question. It makes me something of a nationalist, doesn’t it? Or, at least, I certainly pass the test of nationalism, wouldn’t you think?
KAD: Well, yes, and I’m wondering how that relates to your work as a writer and critic doing that, writing that constitution.

GV: Well I did not seek the responsibility. I didn’t even expect it. I was a sworn delegate to the White Earth Constitutional Convention but I had no idea that I would be more than a voice among forty delegates, at four separate weekend Constitutional Conventions of the past two years. The actual ratification of the proposed Constitution of the White Earth Nation took place at the fourth and last Convention. I was just another sworn delegate and during the end of the third Constitutional Convention the chief asked me to be the principal writer. I am a writer. How could I resist the rare responsibility of writing a proposed constitution? I am old enough to be a bit impervious to the political complications of working on a proposed constitution, because people don’t always agree over everything. And I have enough experience to understand where it comes from, by my age if not by other reasons, or other experiences. So it seemed that it would be relatively painless politically, because I know how some of the arguments developed over the years. I do not disrespect different political views, but I do not always agree with them, especially the notion of federal blood quantum. You know, that’s a big one, but there were others. And, how some more romantic notions of what is tradition can’t work in a constitution, that isn’t what a constitution is about. A constitution enables people to protect certain processes of equitable governance and cultural ideals and ideas, a sense of liberty, and a sense of historical presence. The Constitution of the White Earth Nation was ratified on April 4, 2009. This new constitution, unlike any other constitution in the history of the world, declares the sentiments of cultural survivance in the Preamble. The Constitution contains words that suggest presence, not absence, in the context of liberty. The Constitution is very clear and dramatic about liberty of creative art and literary expression. There is no native constitution that so clearly protects the rights of artists. Actually there is no democratic constitution like that, that specifically names these things. I thought this was critical because native artistic expression is very complicated, and sometimes artists confront or antagonize cultural and traditional interests. And that liberty has to be protected because that’s where native art and literature create the new stories of survivance. And frequently these new and original literary and artistic expressions are ironic. The best native stories were ironic, but many traditionalists are very conservative, and pretend to protect the absolute truth of native culture. Again, our survivance is directly connected to our ability to be imaginative and innovative. If we just hold on to the security of some definition of what’s tradition, we disappear. We have to keep imagining it differently every time, even critique it, so that we know how to explain it and discuss it. So, so there are 118 articles and 30 chapters in the Constitution of the White Earth Nation. How did I go about this? The forty sworn delegates were divided into five groups at different tables. And for two days of each of the four Constitutional Conventions we discussed points that offered to consider how people wanted to build some kind of language for a new constitution. And, so all those ideas were recorded and then generalized into specific points, values, and positions. I had the benefit of all that material, the collective ideas of forty delegates. My idea was to write a constitution that revealed the sentiments of the delegates, and that would embrace and include everything that would have been in the federally created constitution for the tribe and what also is present in the best traditions of a constitutional democracy. So, the sentiments of survivance, communal representation, and the basic divisions of political power were critical. I considered, of course, the protection of habeas corpus from the early legal traditions of the British, the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights. And the most helpful, however, was one of the most recent democratic constitutions in the world, and that was the Constitution of Japan. Yes, a modern constitution that was written by Americans during the Allied Occupation of Japan at the end of the war. It declares the highest ideals of any constitution in the world, and provides for the protection of suffrage, property ownership, and family values. Fairly long, but written simply. The Constitution of Japan was structured in clear categories, by chapters, and then by specific descriptive articles. The categories or chapters were straightforward, categories of political power, authority, family rights, and human rights, and the articles clearly defined the specific rights and subjects of governance. So all of that, including the existing federal constitution became part of my considerations in writing the new constitution. The existing federal constitution is politically complicated, because the White Earth Reservation is in a common constitution called Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. It’s not exactly a federation, or a federal republic, but it’s something like that. The federal constitution was imposed on six independent treaty reservations. In other words, these six reservations were tied together under a single constitution by the federal government. The constitution is heavy on executive powers, and hardly mentions anything about judiciary or legislative process. Over the years the tribes have established their own governmental administrative practices, and legislative councils, and elected reservation representatives. But the individual reservations do not have independent constitutional governance authority. The various elected representatives from each reservation form an executive council with governance procedures. So this is an equitable constitution. The six reservations are not the same, not in the same area, and have different populations, natural resources, and political interests. Erma Vizenor, the elected chief, or chairwoman, was recently elected to a second term, and she promised to protect the rights and resources of the White Earth Reservation by creating an independent Constitution.
of the White Earth Nation. The Constitution has been ratified, and now it must be presented as a referendum and adopted by the citizens of the White Earth Nation. I don’t see any problem in the citizens passing the Constitution. But we also have to work out this political problem of separating from the other five reservations. And two other reservations are talking about the same thing, a new constitution.

**KAD:** So, as part of the conventions or as part of the work that you are doing in writing it, was there a lot of push and pull in terms of how do we use this forum, and constitution, and have it reflect Anishinaabe values and concepts?

**GV:** Not really, the objects were clearly understood and the delegate discussions were thoughtful. I can’t say it was easy but it wasn’t contentious. The point was trying to get the right language for the proposed constitution. Some people were rather romantic about their assertions so we had to be fairly sensitive in discussing the notions and sentiments that were not constitutional. What most delegates wanted was a constitution that created an effective government that protects the rights of the people, rather than declaring it as a tradition or something because it may not be everybody’s tradition and it may change. Jill Doerfler, who is a young assistant professor at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, was dedicated to the process and provided points of discussion, and made recommendations to the delegates in each group. I was delighted to work with her on the proposal of the constitution. Jill wrote her dissertation on the subject of federal blood quantum and family descent in the early leadership of the tribal government. That is, she studied the views of citizenship by elder leaders before the federal constitution for the six reservations. And she was the first native scholar, or any scholar, to have access to the early council minutes before it became a federal constitutional executive government. This would be something of a traditional council of the elders. Jill discovered in the minutes that the elders declared a consistent and strong statement of family descent. Family not federal blood quantum has always been the presiding view of the elders. The point, of course, is that family had to be descended from the original families of the reservation treaty. So, she had just finished her dissertation and she wrote some articles in general terms for the tribal newspaper, the *Anishinaabeg Today*. During the time we’re meeting, some people are reading the article in the newspaper, and Jill also presented the subject of her research to the delegates. So it was really beautiful, although that part didn’t influence the blood quantum people to yield much, but it certainly did strengthen the ideas of the delegates who supported family descent as the basis of citizenship. So, it was a nice connection, Jill’s outstanding research and the discussions of family descent as a definition in the proposed constitution. And what a gift to have her dissertation at the right moment for discussion.

**KAD:** And so I can see from what you’ve been saying, I start out asking you how did it relate to the work that you do as a writer and critic but that ongoing idea of “Survivance,” it’s kind of being enacted in the work that you do.

**GV:** Well, yes, as a writer and also having been a journalist. I had a lot of experience as a writer so I could clearly create a cogent language of the proposed constitution. So it takes some careful thought and use of specific metaphors. And also the language had to anticipate how some people might challenge the constitution. But understand, I have a lot of experience as a reader, writer, and teacher, and I read even much more widely in preparation to discuss and write a new constitution. I’d have to stress again the value of the actual documents, and the Constitution of Japan. I served in Japan, in the Army, and was stationed first at Camp Chitose on Hokkaido, and later in Sendia, a few hours by train north of Tokyo. How did I know I would ever make use of this in that way? I mean literature, yes, I knew I would make use of my introduction to imagistic literature in Japan, but constitutional politics was quite another thing.

**KAD:** People say you have a Zen aesthetic in your literature. How do you react to that?

**GV:** Yes, I think so, and if I do, it’s also in native stories. I try to get at it through native stories of natural reason. I mean a story that shows some experience with nature. I don’t mean just season changes but animal practices and behavior. And I’m not, again, talking about anthropomorphism where animal behavior is used to interpret, and usually negatively, human behavior. I mean, observing how life has its own survivance. Two things have removed most people from that experience. One is monotheism because of its dominance and the separation of humans from animals. Animals have no spirit in Christian theology. And also urban experience and hunting practices have separated people from most natural life experiences. But you can do this in the city. You can watch an ant work rather than kill it. You can watch the intricate memory of a spider building a web rather than being afraid of spiders. So I’m saying you can do this anywhere. You can get past the separation of human and animal creation in monotheism. Why is this important? The natural world is the primary source of experience and reason in very early native stories. Simply, animals and birds were not separate in native stories, they were part of life experiences. Animals have character and power and personality and they also provided knowledge. Animals, birds, and fish were totemic. That does not mean natives imitated animals or birds, but rather an association by natural reason with the practices of animals. The Anishinaabeg honored the crane, a fantastic creature, the Sandhill crane, by associations of dance and songs. The association was oratorical. And Bear, and all the totems that were added since then, added to the original five totems of the
Anishinaabeg. These are not imitations but they are associations of natural reason. So, is that Zen like? Yes. But I’d say it came long before Zen Buddhism. And, is there natural reason in Zen Buddhism? Yes, and images of totemic associations. I think the sources might have been simultaneous or similar. The experiences can be shamanic. I mean, entering a time and place that is not familiar in ordinary reality and we can do this by imagination, concentration, and meditation in literature. And we can certainly teach young people how to observe totemic associations and survivance. Who could not be overwhelmed by the incredible sensitivity of ordinary ants and spiders in their daily constructions, in their scent of food, in the way they protect themselves and their families and how the first thing they do in an emergency is carry away their dead. Natural reason is an imaginative change of the play, change of stories, irony, and contradictions of life. Stories of natural reason may surprise the listener because the listeners expect something. Stories of natural reason are the sentiments of survivance. Good natural reason. So, is that Zen? Maybe so. Zen might be native.

KAD: You were talking earlier about how we critique our literature and I’m wondering, I know you’ve been a teacher, a professor for a long time, and undoubtedly worked with both native, non-native students and so on. So how should people approach indigenous literatures? What is it that you think that they need to know? What do you tell your students?

GV: For the first time in native history we can clearly discuss two broad categories of literature, commercial and literary art. We know what that means, successful native authors who write to a commercial market. They find responsive agents and editors in the publishing industry. Most of them are really good at it. And several native authors make a living as writers. This is incredible. And that’s one kind of literature, and the other kind, in my broad categories, is literary art. Native literary art is innovative, experimental, and it is often difficult to find a publisher for literary art. Editors and publishers are concerned about publishing familiar stories for a large audience. Many readers resist innovation. Native literary artists are lucky that there were enthusiastic editors at small presses and university presses to publish innovative styles and stories. I proposed the first native literature series, Native American literature and Critical Studies in 1990 at the University of Oklahoma Press. I was editor of that series for seventeen years and published fifty-eight books. Almost all of the books in the series were by native authors. The books represented a wide range of critical studies and literary art. Then, about four years ago Diane Glancy and I started a series called Native Storiers: A Series of American Narratives at the University of Nebraska Press. The series is dedicated to the publication of innovative narratives by native authors. Seven novels have been published in the series. I edited and published an anthology of selections from the first five novels in the series. My introduction to the anthology emphasized the significance of native innovative literary art. So that’s where we are at the moment, a fantastic time for commercial writers and native literary artists. It’s fantastic. So if you’re a young native writer you have at least two choices, commercial literature or the pleasure of innovative literary art, and there are eager publishers. Many native writers try to make it commercially, and there are significant distinctions in the subject and style of literary art. The sentiments and scenes of survivance over victimry show the huge distinction, and probably the most obvious distinction between commercial novels and native literary art. Commercial native literature depends too much on stories of victimry. Some natives create visions in their stories, a distinct expression of natural associations and reality. And some literary artists are innovative in genre, point of view, the use of pronouns, and visionary transformations. The innovative practices of native authors are closer to the practices of oral native storiers, the oral story, than anything in commercial literature. And, unfortunately the commercial narratives are more about victimry than the innovative visions of survivance. Glancy and I would not recommend a manuscript for publication that played to victimry. We want to create a sense of presence in a creative story, not an absence or victimry. The innovative stories or narratives should not be easy to define, or describe. The stories must be difficult to most readers. Creative innovative stories should not be easily accessible to ordinary readers, because innovative native stories may be transformational, a tease of visionary consciousness, and associations with animals, but not the familiar similes that merely compare animals to humans. The animals should have character in native literary art. And shifts in pronouns, shifts in time and place, and, of course, above all, the creation of a sense of presence in stories. I like that energy in native literature, the idea of taking chances, resisting certain traditions, to showing a larger visionary and philosophical presence of natives in the world. Terrific native literary art, rather than delivering dubious representational traditions, or representational political conflicts of absence and victimry, or things that can be more easily understood in the structural relationships of institutions and the invention of the “Indian.”

KAD: Your writing style has been called “postmodern.” What do you think about that? I know that you have used the term “postindian” and maybe you could talk a bit about that in relation to how people have applied that postmodern label to some of your work?

GV: For me, the theories of postmodernism and poststructuralism arrived about forty years ago mostly from France. I was one of a few native writers and scholars influenced by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and many others from France. The idea was really attractive at the time. It was fundamentally the
idea that there is no “master narrative.” National histories and institutions did not have the only story. History is constructed politically. That has been a form of dominance. For me, and for many natives, the theories that disputed and countered the dominance of institutions was an exciting gift. Do you want to call me postmodern? I am not a postmodern by native manner, but the theories and conditions of the postmodern have been necessary to advance a more original critique of colonialism and dominance. That was thirty and forty years ago. I realized the theories immediately, and what made it so exciting for me, was that the so-called postmodern and poststructural actually described what natives have always done in their stories. The best native storiers never repeated a liturgy of dominance, or a master narrative. Even sacred and native creation stories were never told the same way. The audience and situational consciousness influenced the subtle turns, metaphors, and irony of native stories. Yes, of course there are exceptions. The native listeners were familiar with the story, so there was no need to repeat a memorized story. The creation took place in the telling of an original story, not in the mere repletion of a creation story. But, overall, the best native storiers break up any master narrative, and this has always done, a resistance to evil forces and dominance. The best storiers have to be original or nobody will listen to them. So there you had the native postmodern consciousness of stories before it was even thought about in France. So, with that insight, I was naturally comfortable with the notions of the postmodern. I liked it. I liked making connections to it but I am not a postmodern writer, nobody is. I am aware of the postmodern condition and create scenes in my stories that would be considered a postmodern practice. The postmodern is practice, a condition, an irony, but not a source of identity. How could anyone be a postmodern writer? Only some critics create postmodern writers. I was truly intrigued by the brilliance of Jacques Derrida and the complexity of his philosophy of the oral and written, and the deferred meaning of language. He was brilliant, and a natural at irony. This was a gift to me. A gift of philosophical insight and it opened up the imaginative process of writing much more. But natives stories had created a difference in meaning, and the language had already been opened to irony by good native storiers. You see, these are the ideas that influenced me to carry out the literary practices of native survivance over victimry. Stories of survivance are stories of resistance and a creative sense of presence. The commercial stories of native absence and victimry perpetuate dominance.

**KAD:** You use several new words in your writing, and you use them in original ways, such as survivance. So, what about “postindian,” how did you start using that term?

**GV:** I resisted the word *indian* in my early stories and essays, and that would be forty years ago, because it has no referent or direct meaning. The word *indian* is ironic, a vague cultural lubricant that represents nothing more than a mistake in navigation. The word does not represent natives, unless, of course, someone decided to fulfill the historical absence of the meaning and become a commercial *indian*, or even *panindian* which is a double irony. And the word should be printed in italics, and not with a capital letter. So, I have avoided the word for obvious reasons. I used “native” in my early essays, and *indian* only in the context of the invention of natives. I used specific tribal references to avoid any misunderstanding of the actual tribal names, such as native Anishinaabe. You see, the word *Indian* is not the only invention in native names. Readers must learn that Navajo is a word from the Spanish, and Sioux a word derived from the French. Many native cultural names are inaccurate or imposed by others. For instance, what would it mean to say, I am a Blackfoot Indian? Imagine a native child standing up a classroom and declaring, I am proud to be an American Indian Sioux. The words have no native cultural reference or meaning. I must, in every instance as a writer, confront these inventions, simulations or stereotypes, and then create a new language, and stories with new words. I obviously needed some theory to do that and Jean Baudrillard provided the means to critique simulations, especially in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. That was great critical contribution to postmodern ideas, and he was French. One could easily assume that he created his theories for the critique of the word and cultural inventions of the *indian* in English. Although he never critiqued the word *indian* he approached other simulations of cultures and experience. So the theory of simulations was perfect for deconstructing imposed names and invented cultures. Simulations are a form of dominance. The theory was also academic and that provided a more serious discussion about the subject of simulations. I had a theory to show how it works. And that made it respectable in an academic context. I was not just railing against an imposed name. I really had to get rid of this word *indian*. I couldn’t just avoid it. It was too difficult because it appears in every context, in ordinary discussions and public references. Histories are written about the *indians*, as if the word had a native referent in the world. I decided one day to add the prefix *post* to the word *indian*, and declared that most natives were *postindians*. The word was a natural because, of course, we exist after the invention of the *indian*, a mistake in navigation, and who does not know that the mistake was made by Christopher Columbus? We go on using the word *indian* in an uninformed way, and without a native historical referent, and yet is there someone in the world who does not know that the word *indian* is a perfect simulation? So, the prefix *post* gives the word *indian* a new and general meaning. We are *postindians* because we know the word *indian* is a simulation, and now we can get on with our lives as natives. The
cultural and linguistic dominance of the word Indian has become ironic as postindian. And the word postindian eliminates the capitalization of the word Indian. I am liberated by the traces of resistance in the word postindian. I may ask you, are you a native postindian?

**KAD:** So, do you see the same urgency to combat falsifying images of Indigenous people, that have been fostered by the dominant society, that you did twenty years ago or do you think that the work that’s being done by writers and artists and thinkers from Indigenous nations have done what they needed to do to arrest the simulations of dominance?

**GV:** I think in some situations effective changes have been made. For instance, in tribal names, but the changes in the social sciences are much slower, as in the academic fields of archeology and ethnography. Most people who have any sensibility about natives know the importance of names. In general terms, as natives are changing their cultural names, at the same time some institutions are supportive of the resistance to simulations. Many people have been embarrassed by the centuries of cultural fabrications by the social sciences, and by the commercial simulations of natives in the world. So we think of the names, Navajo, Dené, Chippewa, Anishinaabe, and people are really quite generous about supporting the change of native names. They want to get it right, after so many centuries of domination and corruption. So, that much is clearly a change for the better. But, in other areas, especially in history, and social sciences, practically everything published by the American Bureau of Ethnology, still has to be engaged, and the resistance must be academic and consistent. This resistance, and demands to change the research methods that have dominated natives for centuries, must be the responsibility of every writer, and especially native academics and authors. So, in other words, the resistance never ends, and it is our duty and responsibility, as natives, to critique the absence, the historical absence that hangs with us, and create a sense of survivance and native presence in the world. I assume these duties of resistance in my literary art and in my essays by always creating specific references to natives in certain situations and in associations with the natural world. Some people think this is only poetic, or nature as poetry. Well, native associations with nature are much more than that. The narratives of survivance are based on natural reason and I draw upon that inspiration to create scenes in stories, to explain critical situations, and even to develop native survivance theory. For instance, the Anishinaabe word agawaatese, one of the words for shadow, or to cast a shadow, creates a sense of native presence as a shadow. The idea that a shadow has presence, and that a shadow, the flight of a shadow, is not dependent on the source, is truly visionary. Native literary artists would create scenes that show the association and presence of animals and birds, and the presence of shadows. More often than not commercial literature presents only the simile comparisons of animals to humans, the superficial presence of animals and birds. The commercial reductions of nature are not the sentiment of native survivance, but rather the perpetuation of monotheistic separation of humans and animals.

**KAD:** It’s very Anishinaabe. One thing that struck me was the concept of stones being alive and having a kind of spirit. But, because I’m not a speaker of Anishinaabemowin I just know bits and pieces, and I’ve been trying to learn, but when I first understood that and learned that, it had such a huge impact on me, because it resonated with me, maybe tribal memory. And when you say that about shadows, then it’s articulating something that you “already know.”

**GV:** Yes, you say it is a basic native philosophical understanding of the natural world. Another thing about the stones is the way the trickster stories create the actual presence of stories. Naanabozho’s brother was a stone, and he couldn’t travel because he was a stone, so Naanabozho heated him up in a fire until his brother the stone burst in millions of pieces. Those hot pieces of stone, the very brother of the trickster, now covers the earth. And so, every stone you see and touch is a story, and is also a piece of the trickster’s brother.
Captain Eighty

Gerald Vizenor

Quiver reminded me that she feigned and folded, a natural strategy of the game, but she never lost a hand of poker in more than fifty years. My clever grandmother won by instinct and wary tactics, not by meditation, or a mindset, and she nurtured children in the same way.

She easily beguiled the newcomers, teachers and tourists, the steadfast outsiders, federal agents, and then in her seventies she taught native students how to tease, feign, fold, and to sidetrack players at the university, and in any other games of chance.

Quiver married a native storiér who roamed in the bush, a curious trickster of grace and mercy. That man, my grandfather, lived by natural reason, by the circle of intimate memories, a nickname, and always with an innate sense of the seasons. He imagined the traces of ancient stone, dragonflies at sunrise, shadows of geese over the headwaters, elusive flight of cedar waxwings, herons in the shallows, the shimmer and break of autumn leaves, chase of beaver, the brush of sumac in the snow, scent of moccasin flowers, the intricate motion of spider webs, and musk on a summer night. The seasons were the natural source of his sense of presence, reason, and memory.

The trickster would envision a bobcat by cautious manner, a raven by avian visions, and the necessity of natural flight, a cricket song at dusk, the heave of black bears in the rain, and yet that early spring by more than natural reason, memory, and the imagic motion of the seasons, he vowed and then built a marvelous nuptial paddle wheel houseboat on Lake Itasca, Minnesota.

Anishinaabe tricksters are seldom sailors but my grandfather launched that matrimonial houseboat, constructed of timber waste, scrap lumber, rusted oil drums, and a manual makeshift paddle wheel from the metal blades of a windmill, just outside the treaty boundary to escape the capricious authority of federal agents and sleazy reservation politicians.

Federal agents were notorious abusers of natural reason, the ordinary rights of animals and birds, hereditary right and motion, treaty citizens, and measured the continental liberty of our native ancestors by declarations of civil war, and then the cruel calculations of birth, blood rights, and cultural termination. The stories of our genealogies, family traces, visions, and natural currents, were turned to cold blood and racial fractions by federal separatists.

The Red Lust, decorated with bright plumage, sailed in the summers on Lake Itasca. The hearty crew of children sold carved masks and birch bark scrolls to tourists at the headwaters of the Mississippi River. My grandmother convened poker games on the houseboat at anchor near the resort docks. Eager visitors waited on the shoreline, in all weathers, to board the exotic houseboat for a game of chance with a native gamester.

The houseboat was beached during the winter under the giant red pines near the headwaters. The crew matured on trickster stories in a wigwam and in the heated cabin of the houseboat. This was the seasonal migration of a remarkable native family.

Quiver Beaulieu was only sixteen years old at the time of the buoyant spring ceremony, and the trickster captain, my grandfather, was in his seventies. Naturally, the ravens were radiant and raucous on that maiden voyage of the Red Lust. The mongrels bounced and barked on the deck of the houseboat.

Captain Eighty smiled for the first time, according to his two dour sisters, when he married my grandmother, and he continued to smile night and day until his death nineteen years later. Eighty even grinned in a cold spring rain, at wakes and funerals, of course, and truly he died with a wide smile at the rickety helm of the Red Lust. His nickname was derived from the atomic number for mercury.

Quiver and Eighty conceived and nurtured five extraordinary children. Three girls, Two Pairs, Straight, and Full House, and two boys, Flush, and High Card, under paddle and sail on the rough wooden deck and in the cabin of the houseboat. The cabin was sealed and secured for winter, and with a wood stove. Flush, my father, was the eldest, and he was the first to be named for a poker hand. Poker nicknames initiated epochs of memorable stories, and the chance of futurity. My father learned how to read poker hands and how to operate the manual paddle wheel, and every nautical child since then, over two generations, has inherited paddle wheel duty.

Quiver praised, teased, and coaxed the children, the mongrels, and most relatives to smile, so it was much easier to believe at the time that she could tame a wild native of the bush, and a trickster, to build
a huge houseboat, and to beam at the helm in every season of their marriage.

Eighty was a teaser and testy natural healer. He could shy an animal with a steady gaze, and yet the trickster of mercy rescued and protected abused, maimed, deformed animals, wounded birds, and, of course, many abandoned reservation mongrels. His secure gaze was visionary, a natural scrutiny, close attention of heart, bone, flight, and the motion of nature that precedes the words. Eighty told stories in the presence of visionary memories.

I was the first nautical grandchild on the houseboat and clearly remember the many mongrels that sailed with my grandfather. Pope Pius, Moby Jean, Monte, Big Wig, Tender, Mustard, and Appetizer were devoted mariners every summer during my early years on the Red Lust. Moby Jean was a huge white mongrel, and she was always close to my grandfather at the helm of the houseboat. Appetizer, a miniature sleeve dog, had been abandoned near a resort at the end of the tourist season. She barked at the houseboat for three days, and then, once aboard, circled the deck, nosed the other mongrels, and never barked again. Monte, one of my favorite maritime mongrels, had two red feathery tails. Truly, two tails, and the tails wagged in the same direction. Eighty described how he had rescued the abandoned mongrel with two tails near the headwaters of the Mississippi River. Monte, in fact, swam out to the houseboat. Since then only three native mongrels have been born with two tails. Monte, the feathered mongrel, was named for the Monte Cassino Monastery established by Saint Benedict in Italy.

Captain Eighty told me, and every one of his grandchildren, about the Benedictine monks who raised a strain of mongrels with two tails in the fifteenth century at the headwaters of the Mississippi River. The account of the mongrels with two tails was never the same, but his stories about the monks were consistent. The Red Lust sailed every summer with these wondrous stories.

I was the firstborn of the grandchildren and heard the stories of the monks and feathered mongrels many times. My father confirmed later that he was told variations of the very same stories on the Red Lust. Eighty revealed that the monks had built a monastery about six hundred years ago, raised many mongrels with two tails, and created a manuscript about descriptive erotic pleasures with animals.

The Manabosho Curiosa is an arcane manuscript of sensual stories about Benedictine monks, uncertain about their celibacy, and woodland animals, rabbits, river otter, beaver, bobcats, skunks, and other creatures of the northern woodland. The most erotic and curious stories were about sex with snowshoe hares and whitetail deer. Captain Eighty revealed that the mongrels with two tails were steady sensual partners of the many monks. Recent scientific studies have corroborated that the actual parchment of the manuscript, and the particular style of calligraphy, could have been created in the fifteenth century. I was convinced by the report that ancient pollen from the headwaters was found on the manuscript.

Fleury sur Gichizibi, the name of the first monastery at the headwaters, has not survived, however, an amateur archaeologist found ancient coins, clasps, nails, and other metal objects in native burial sites near the headwaters of the Mississippi River.

Eighty learned to tease children with trickster creation stories and with his ironic memories. He convinced me that the mongrel with two tails was an original trickster creation that was stolen by the monks of Saint Benedict. The trickster mongrels, he told me, were once born with two tails, but one tail had receded by the time of the early fur trade. The French fur traders and their lusty songs about the double plumage scared the mongrels to hide their tails for protection, but only one of the tails receded by sentiment, evolution, and, of course, by the speedy nature of punctuated equilibrium.

Eighty was an elusive healer. He practiced natural herbal and imagic, mental medicine, and he taught my grandmother how to project a wily wheeze, and with the practice of that deceptive breath, and a slight quiver of a finger, or an eye flutter, she became a natural at poker games.

“Who would not quiver to death around that nasty old man of the brush?” The federal agent who said that had removed natives from reservation lakeshores and leased the properties to outsiders. The agent was cursed by the ordinary and never fully recovered from a mysterious disease, a blotchy pigmentation that he blamed on shamans and my grandfather.

The winter stories on the houseboat were the most ironic and memorable. Yes, ironic, because a severe winter cannot be endured without original tricky stories. Captain Eighty, truly a natural healer, aroused the entire family with his trickster stories. Quiver teased the storier, and his sense of survivance, in the winter houseboat, and the stories were enhanced and catchy by the devoted play. Naturally, we survived the winters in health and humor. Our laughter heated our bodies and the cabin of the houseboat.

Quiver never truly listened to the federal agents, but she teased them to smile and at the same time beat them at poker. The agents and reservation teachers forever lost to my grandmother, and their losses supported our houseboat family.

Quiver envisioned a great fleet of houseboats, a native navy of wild poker games, a prophetic scheme some fifty years before casinos were launched on treaty reservations. She regularly played poker with tourists in the summer, natives and fisherman in fish houses in the winter, and with the most predictable losers, federal agents, and teachers, on the reservation in any season.

The Red Lust was steady with only a narrow wheel in a severe thunderstorm. Full House, my aunt,
drowned in the heavy waves. She was seven years old and the last born on the houseboat, a gentle, lanky, quiet child who sat next to her mother for more than three years at reservation poker games with teachers and federal agents. The games were her only school. Her puffy body washed ashore three days later on August 6, 1945, on the very day the atomic bomb destroyed the city of Hiroshima, Japan.

Quiver created a native touchstone of memory by virtue of chance and fortuity, by the traces of seasons, ordinary numbers, and by precise dates, although she never used a calendar. She conceived and inspired a native sense of presence, patterns of perception, and by a clever tease of visual stories, memory, and liberty. Hiroshima, August 6, 1945, for instance, became an epoch signature of houseboat memories, survivance stories, native perception, testaments, and our ironic tributes.

The houseboat children were educated by natural reason, by the course of the wind and seasons, by native epochs, and no one in the family ever graduated from any school. The family of mariners was considered marginal by federal agents, and outside the pale of the reservation, uncounted, a reversal of civilization, and buoyed forever on a creaky houseboat.

Flush, my father, was a student at the mission school for seven years, but he could not reconcile the actual lively native sense of presence with that monstrous absence of virtual monotheism and archival history. So, at age thirteen, my father decided to become a wood carver and a sculptor. He carved native masks from living trees in such a way that the scar on the tree was healed by the ceremonial memory of the mask. Flush first envisioned the masks, and then carved the images by meditation, and a native tradition was created with a precise crack at the very moment the mask was cut free from the tree. The masks were painted with natural pigments to convey the spiritual power of nature and natives. Trickster Healer, one of his early masks, was included in an exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.

Captain Shammer and Dogroy Beaulieu, my closest cousins, are the only grandchildren who have carried out that sense of presence and survivance in native stories, and the patterns of epoch memory. Shammer, an academic teaser and poseur, is the eldest son of Two Pairs. Shammer earned the maritime nickname of captain because he was eager to share the helm of the houseboat with our grandfather Captain Eighty.

Dogroy, a distinguished abstract painter, is the son of High Card. Actually, he is an abstract baroque painter who was banished from the reservation because of his exaggerated portrayals of casino gamblers and politicians.

Captain Eighty never assumed a surname, and he refused to acknowledge the summons by federal agents to choose a formal surname for acceptance and reservation certification. Clearly he was more appreciated by a nickname, several nicknames, and each familiar moniker created a sense or native presence, an epoch of memories because the actual native namers were never separated from the tease and stories of the nickname.

Quiver was the only child of native fur traders at the end of a great continental adventure in the northern boreal forest. She was nurtured in a canoe on portages in the boundary waters and at summer encampments on Mountain Lake. My grandmother was about two years old when her mother died at seventeen in an epidemic. Peter Beaulieu, her native father, carried on the customs and hearty nostalgia of the fur trade, and always with his daughter. The fur trade economy and the beaver were almost extinct at the time, but they lived by the seasons of animal peltry and wintered at Grand Portage.

My grandmother learned to speak the languages of the fur trade, Anishinaabe, Métis French, and English. Peter Beaulieu had assumed the first and surname of a fur trader, a trade name, to be recognized at the fur posts. French fur traders were hurried, curious, but arrogant, and not accustomed to native nicknames. Many natives who were active in the fur trade assumed trade names to be recognized by the English and French. Naturally, some of these names became surnames on reservations.

Quiver was a reader, not a storier, and encouraged by her father to read in French. She read about the culture, romance, and politics of the fur trade, and she honored her father and his associations with the fur trade by reading novels mostly in French.

Captain Eighty reversed the sentiments of literature, he was a mighty storier, not a reader, but even so he would have remarked that written words create a sense of absence, an utter nihilism, and not a native visionary perception of natural reason, survivance, or the mercy of irony.

Dogroy Beaulieu was born near the mission church in the township named Beaulieu. That place name has become his source of visual stories and artistic creation. He never studied art, but he alone roused the aesthetic networks of the cosmoprimitive, a new cachet of native art practice and theory, and the Cavalier Rouge.

Dogroy was inspired by the painter Marc Chagall, by the movement of the Blue Riders, and initiated the native Red Rider or Cavalier Rouge at the Gallery of Irony Dogs.

Chagall was born in Vitebsk on the Pale of Settlement. Dogroy adopted that sense of political restriction and referred to his home and studio in Beaulieu township as the Pale of the Reservation.

The Beaulieu studio was located on a natural mound near the Wild Rice River, a notorious haven of lonesome and abused women. Chance, one of the many Women of the Creature Arts, as they were known on the reservation, lived near the studio and trained mongrels to sense the absence of irony. Yes, she could train a mongrel in only a few months to dance and bark in the presence of people who have no sense of irony.
Chance was born in the presence of marvelous mongrels. Her first memories and stories were about the perception, acuity, and loyalty of incredible reservation mongrels. Some mongrels were shamanic and could sense human diseases, the wicked presence of the wiindigoo, and other monsters that teased and tormented the spirit of natives.

Chance, abandoned at four by her mother to taunt and misery, lived with a strange healer and his mongrels. Animosh, a wry and ironic nickname that means “dog” in Anishinaabe, trained mongrels to sense diseases of the spirit and body. Animosh tutored his nosey shamanic mongrels at the entrance to the public health hospital on the reservation. The nurses dismissed his practices as a nuisance, a throwback to the stories of wicked shamans. The doctors, however, considered the sense and perception of the mongrels as the primary diagnoses of certain diseases, such as diabetes, cancers, unnatural fright, and dreams of monsters. The mongrels barked, bayed, licked, and nosed the sick and scared at the entrance to the hospital.

Chance trained mongrels to bay over deadly sincerity.

Norway, Austria, Vatican City, and North Dakota, were states with serious deprivations of irony. Chance would not allow anyone to abuse the irony dogs in these states. The dogs would have barked day and night over the absence of irony. Those constant barkers, she warned, may convey a serious irony deficiency. Recently, she named the crèche, several global corporations, municipal, state, and federal agencies, cemeteries, cultural fetes, social service centers, and pride of place parades, as extreme situations for the ordinary expression and detection of unintended irony.

The irony dogs were certified once they danced and barked in specific situations. The dogs were trained to dance in the presence of civil servants and bureaucrats, priests and bean counters, and then to bark at selected sentimental Hallmark Cards. Lévi-Strauss, Turnip, Nixon, and several other irony dogs, were naturals at the detection of incongruity, virtuosos of the absence of irony games. Lévi-Strauss, for some obscure reason, barked and licked peep toe shoes. Chance explained that some irony dogs sense the absence of irony long before humans perceive the manner. Lévi-Strauss was one of those dogs with a singular sense of unintended or coincidental irony, and he clearly bayed to announce the distinctions and patterns of fortuitous irony, and the manifest absence of irony.

The graduation ceremony of the irony dog was a walk and bark past government centers and federal buildings to detect the most obvious absence of irony. Lévi-Strauss and the other irony dogs in advanced graduate training were paraded past the simulated scent and sight of the Pentagon, United Nations, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Internal Revenue Service, and the United States Department of State, a virtual Supreme Court of the Absence of Irony.

Chance entrusted me with one of the later mongrel graduates of the irony school. Lévi-Strauss was not a natural name for an irony graduate. So, several years later his name was changed to Derrida, in honor of the philosopher Jacques Derrida of France. He was a rangy white mongrel with four black paws. Derrida bayed once a week at the Lawrence Welk Show, a musical variety show on television, and later at the tired, tremulous radio voice of Garrison Keillor, the Lawrence Welk of regional poetry and Lake Wobegon. The absence of irony was the absence of natives in his curious, clean, and wholesome fictional town of virtuous Caucasians.

Captain Shammer was appointed by default, and without the customary academic review, the chairman of the Department of Native American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota. The six previous academic chairmen, each a distinguished native scholar, had failed at departmental governance. The dean, as a measure of desperation and unintended trickster consciousness, at last hired the least qualified of the final candidates. The notion that the ordinary, most unremarkable, and the least entitled for the position, could not be worse than the most experienced candidates, such as the six previous failures, was not exactly the native practice of natural reason, but, in this situation of academic desperation, an ironic appointment was considered at the time to be worth the chance.

Captain Shammer in six months time would became the most original, inspired, admired, and productive chairman in the history of the department, and he demonstrated his capacity with only the slightest academic qualifications. He had avoided an institutional education and never graduated from any school, a tradition of the houseboat descendants. That absence of eligibility, however, became an uncommon entitlement and was never used against him because my cousin created a sensational prominence and sense of presence by entrepreneurial association of native irony, not shame, and never by victimry, in the governance of the department.
She Tries Her Hand

Terry Griggs

His first gift to her was wrapped in human hair. The hair was a medium brown with highlights and was straight except at the ends where it curled sharply and hooked onto the edges of the package. These barbed ends held the hair cleverly in place (hair spray may also have been involved). As well, he had drawn a wide satin ribbon around the gift and tied it up in a lavish, floppy bow. The ribbon was Alice blue—his idea of wit. (A hair band would have lowered the wit to some other, less mysterious, level.) Still, she was grateful that the ribbon wasn’t a visceral colour, flesh or clot red, or that the present hadn’t been secured with a length of thin, vein-blue, rubber tubing.

She sat with it on her lap, observing it for some time. She stroked it lightly as one might one’s own hair, smoothing a minor eruption of frizz in one corner. She noted a single white hair streaking through it and resisted the temptation to pluck it out. The outside of this gift was so extraordinary that she couldn’t imagine what she might find inside that would be more so. A face?

Where would the surprise be in a gift that flaunted surprise, even mocked surprise, on its exterior? She decided that he had simply reversed the way of it and she would find within only gift wrap, tape, and a card with her name inscribed on it. – This emboldened her to open it.

She tugged at the bow and it came undone with slick ease, no resistance whatsoever. Another tug and the ribbon slid away with a faint whisper. The hair tumbled into her lap. Loosened, it was thicker than she had expected and disconcerting in its disarray. The strands were also unexpectedly long. She was suddenly bathed in hair. It got on her pants, her sweater, clung to the chair, slid to the floor. This was annoying but she persevered.

What she now held in her hands was a plain wooden box, balsa, so insubstantial wood-wise that she could easily crush it. It was the size of a cigar box and had the same sort of hinged lid. She took a deep breath before raising the lid, and once she had done so, held that breath, momentarily drawing it further into herself.

The box contained chocolates, but chocolates so dark that they were black. Black as beetles, black as tar. There were seven in all and they were shaped like little coffins. She stared at them, fascinated. They looked moist, sticky . . . warm. They were repulsive, but she couldn’t resist. She raised her hand, hesitated only briefly, then reached down to touch one. As soon as she did, placing a finger lightly on the odd one out, the seventh, she regretted it. She felt a slight tug, a suction, as though she’d put her finger in a tiny needy mouth. Instantly she pulled her hand back. She saw that she had left a mark on the chocolate, a perfectly etched fingerprint, her particular identifying whorls, her personal miniature labyrinth. Her fingertip, where it had touched the chocolate, was white and smooth, all lines erased.

She’d been tricked, but there was nothing she could do, no choice. She had touched the vile thing and it was hers. Rules are rules.

Now she would have to eat it.

Illustration by Alexander Griggs-Burr
How the Ozone Layer Got its Hole

Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm

Buzz stopped what he was doing, exhaled loudly, and wiped his brow.
Chickee pretended not to notice.

Sure would like an ice cream cone right about now, Buzz thought, as he chewed on another handful of trail mix.

Is it hot in here, he said, or is it just me?
Damn right it’s hot in here, said Chickee, sealing another batch of homemade sauerkraut.

Yeah, well I don’t care what you say, said Buzz. I think waving a birchbark fan in front of a bucket of cold water is just not the same as air conditioning.

Chickee stopped. Hey, do you know how the ozone layer got its hole? she asked.

Duh, of course, replied Buzz. It’s complicated, eh. ‘Cause of all them ChloroFluoroCarbons. And methane. That’s what scientists call cow farts...

It was The White Man! Chickee interrupted. The White Man’s magic put that hole in the ozone!

Waaaa... White men ain’t got no magic! YES, they do! Chickee said. They got plenty of magic. Tons of it. Heaps. They got as much magic as anyone. Yeah, riight.

They do! They got as much magic as anyone, them White people. Trouble is most of them don’t know how to use it anymore. Those ones’re zapping things all over the place, making a mess and blaming it on everyone else. Like depleted fish stocks in the Great Lakes, for example. But that’s another story...

Oh, I can hardly wait, said Buzz, another story!

That’s the thing about Buzz. He’s sarcastic. But he loves stories.

Just tell the ozone story for now. Geez.

Anyways, they do! Chickee continued, unfazed. White people got as much magic as anyone.

Aw, c’mon Chickee. They got about as much magic as my ass!

Maybe your ass can put holes in the ozone layer too, I dunno, Chickee said. I don’t doubt it. But them White people, they got magic as strong as anyone’s and they did it. They put the hole in the ozone layer.

Buzz tilted his head and chewed more slowly.

See, this is how the story goes, hey. Long time ago, no one is sure when, this band of White people got tired of being White. They’d been White for a long time, eh, like since time immemorial, eh, and they were bored with it. That’s the thing with a lotta those White people, they get bored. It’s a funny thing, this whole being bored thing. I mean, who has the time?

Anyways, it started to get to them. Got under their skin, so to speak. ‘White...’ they started thinking, ‘it’s so... so colourless.’ So they start looking at each other and thinking ‘Geez, same old white. White, off white, lily white, ultra white. We’re tired of white!’ So a few of them start traveling around finding people of other colours, just for a change of scenery. Plus they wanted the gold, and furs and land and stuff them other people had. They could be called the world’s first tourists.

Holay Chickee, get real, said Buzz. They were not. Indigenous people all over the world were visiting other lands long before any of that. Well, you got that right. Still, there’s a big difference between being a visitor and a tourist. But I digress. So, anyways...

“Oh boy!” some of them White guys say when they reach those other lands, “Check out the scenery here!”

“Oh,” some of them say, poking each other in the ribs with their elbows and making cow eyes at the women of colour, “sure would love to get me some of that scenery!”

But The People look at them and they scream or they laugh. They think those White fellas are ghosts or something like ghosts, but way more hairy.

“Oh hell,” them disgruntled-with-being-White White guys say. “Why did we have to get stuck being White.”

“Yes, it’s so unfair!” a bunch echo. Oh they grumbled and complained like crazy. Those ones could really complain when they set their minds to it.

“Excuse me,” says one guy, “I’ve got an idea.”

“Oh no,” the others say. “We don’t want to hear one more word about how boys want to kill their dads and sleep with their moms or how girls want to have penises...”

“Yeah, don’t start that crap again!” some others say. “It’s creepy.”

“All right, all right,” that guy goes. “I was going to say that we could use a little reverse psychology on them...”
“Reverse sigh what?!” a bunch of them muttered, looking at each other.
“Oh,” the guy says, “sometimes I forget us Aquarians are so far ahead of our time.”
“What?” the others said.
“We tell them the opposite of what we really think so that we can keep it secret and have control!”
“Brilliant!” they exclaim.
“Especially that keeping it secret part,” some of them add.
“Oh no, it’s the control,” argue a bunch of others, “that’s what’s so great about it.”
“No, no,” say some others who liked to take charge.
“It’s both. That’s the beauty of it! Secrets AND control!”
I think those ones might have been Virgos and Librans but I’m not sure.
“And…” continues the guy, “here’s the reverse part. They think they’re rebelling against authority and meanwhile, they’re doing exactly what we want!”
“Hurrah!” disgruntled ones of all astrological signs yell. “Let’s have a drink while the lawyers draw up the papers!”
Well, a great big bunch of White guys (and women too) they don’t agree with all that.
“We’re all human beings,” these ones say. “Being White isn’t about skin colour. It’s a state of mind. We don’t have to look upon our skin colour and be dissatisfied. In fact, we don’t have to look at skin colour as a measure of worth at all.”
But those others wouldn’t listen. So the ones who weren’t dissatisfied with who they were, well, they take off and a bunch of them become painters and poets, home renovators, garbage collectors, trackers and guides, nursery school teachers, organic farmers, carvers, tree planters, burlesque dancers and anti-racism activists.
They live with the People, in respect and harmony and have children in all shades and sizes.
Meanwhile those other guys put their plan into place.
“Being White is the best!” they say - and they say it like they really mean it, eh. “White people RULE!!”
Well, that gets a few of them killed.
“Hmmm…” these guys say. “How do we make them listen to us? This might take some time.”
“White people rule!” says one guy, grinning. “It’s so stupid. I can’t even say it without laughing!”
They tell him to get lost - so he does. He goes off and forms a comedy troupe in New York City.
“Hey, we just have to be more convincing,” says another guy. “Act like we own the place, like we’re better and stronger and smarter than everyone else.”
“What about when it comes to the NBA?” says one BigMouth. “Or any other sport… well, except figure skating, what about that? What about innovations in digital technology. Or the pyramids and the Taj Mahal? Or living in balance with the land? Or wholesome healing? Or guerilla warfare? Or democracy? What about sheer numbers and…”
“Yes… go on,” the others say, glaring at BigMouth, daring him not to shut him up.
“It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy!” says the Be-More-Convincing guy, ignoring BigMouth.
“What?!”
“What the hell are you talking about?!” a few of the others yell out.
“We fake it and wait for them to call our bluff,” he says, all proud of himself.
“And when they do,” another guy says, really getting into it, “we blast them with our rifles.”
“And we give them grog…” says another.
“…And infectious diseases!!”
“Oh yes,” them guys say. “This will be wonderful!
Let’s form a committee. Let’s all have a drink!”
So next thing you know, committee members are going all over the world talking about how great they are, shooting people they call “terrorists” or “communists” or “primitive,” spreading disease, and instituting racially biased foreign policies all over the place. A few even start having kids with these other people, the ones with pigment. And they think that’s pretty smart too, eh. For a while some of those ones are pretty damn proud of themselves. ‘Cause they’re also creating all kinds of shades in their families. It’s all so much more interesting, so much more scenic and exciting.
Now some of them committee members and their crew, they hold secret meetings to strategize.
“Oh, okay,” they say, “this is going great.”
Too great. Soon there’re all kinds of factions and everyone has something to say. No one is listening to anyone else. They’re all doing their own thing but a lotta them are still sticking to the plan in their own ways.
But oh-oh. Next thing you know: Hitler.
“White People Are THE BEST!!” he says. “WHITE PEOPLE RULE!!!!"
“Ha ha,” they say, “good one Hitler, old chap. Very convincing. But dial it down a notch.”
“MASTER RACE!” Hitler yells, “HEIL ME!”
“Heil?” A bunch of them looked at each other, raised their palms and shrugged. “Uh, quite, quite,” they say.
“Indeed. Somewhat over the top, but good effort Adolf. Now give it a rest, okay?”
Oh, but that Hitler, he was just getting started, eh.
Next thing you know he’s got armies invading all over the place.
“Uh, Adolf…” the committee members say, squirming, “you made your point, but you can stop now. Seriously.”

*But he won’t listen, that one.*

“Wow,” they say. “Have you ever seen anyone so desperate to have skin pigment?!?”

He even targets other pigmentation-challenged people he thinks aren’t good enough.

“Man, what a loser!” a great big bunch of them say.

“Let’s get out of here!”

And they go off to form a resistance, find his bunker, and start safe houses for reformed skinheads.

“Let’s get rid of Hitler,” some of the others say. “He’s a liability.”

“Yes,” others agree. “He’s such a big jerk, he’s ruining everything. He’s a freak.”

So that’s what they do.

Hey, says Buzz, that’s not funny!

What?

Hitler and all that. It’s not a joke.

I know, ever sick, eh? That’s why it’s part of the story.

But you’re making a… a mockery of it!

A mockery? I didn’t come up with that ‘Master Race’ stuff. It didn’t appear outta thin air either.

“Genocide” was not my idea – but it’s happened all over the world. It’s still happening. I’m telling a story about things that people oughta think about, including what Hitler did, ‘cause it’s all connected.

Oh. Buzz looked skeptical. Well… I mean, your story skimmed through the Holocaust…

Well, I had to mention it but it’s only one part of this story.

Is this satire? Buzz wondered. Or some sorta magic realism? Maybe with an edge of post-modern deconstructionism and a problematizing of colonial structures? His head hurt.

Do you wanna hear the rest of the story?

Buzz was torn. He felt offended and wasn’t sure he wanted to hear this story. But he did want to know what any of it had to do with the ozone layer. He knew that words and story have power. He knew that history was a story too and that some people’s stories had been silenced. But this story was so fragmented. He didn’t know what to think. So, he thought about all of that for a long while as Chickee watched the planets spin around their heads.

Okay, he said, I guess so.

Well, said Chickee, it goes okay for a while, but then some of them people start to notice that instead of all them White people getting darker, the others are getting lighter!

“Oh no!” they say. “Pretty soon everybody will be White then what?! Everywhere we look, everyone we see will be White, plain old White. And then there’s that whole Hitler fiasco too. That was a disaster how he ran amok like that. Disgusting.”

They didn’t want that to happen again. And they sure didn’t want everyone to be White.

So they start to panic, eh. I don’t know for sure how White people panic. But I think they set up a commission and a bunch of committees and they started conducting studies and writing reports left, right, and centre.

Yep, the reports say - in about a thousand different ways - the plan isn’t working. Pretty soon, everyone will be White, have the same light brown hair, the same light brown eyes, same shape head and be the same height, talk the same talk, eat the same food, tell the same stories and have the same size brain.

“Soon,” one weirdo cried out, “everyone will look like a cross between Prince Charles and Hillary Clinton!”

There was nearly a riot!

“I don’t want my great-great-great-great grandchildren to have big ears and a weak chin,” them White people wailed.

I heard that grown men and women were rolling on the floor, weeping. Going crazy.

Even the so-called Aboriginal Industry critics were running around like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off wondering what kinda lives they’d have if they couldn’t convince themselves that other cultures were inferior.

None of them people wanted everyone to be the same – they just wanted those others to be more like they were – except slightly darker, way more exotic, and with more flaws. In a last ditch effort to turn things around some of them started desegregating schools and trading with China and supporting First Nations language programs and doing all kinds of stuff they never would have done before they were briefed on the executive summaries of those reports.

Then one guy says, “hey, we could just go out in the sun and get a sun tan.”

There was a huge GASP! from the crowd. Remember, they’d spent all of that time in the past wearing sun bonnets and gloves and writing sonnets about lily-white skin. If it was good enough for Grampa, it was damn well good enough for them! Go out in the sun?!

“Listen,” says the guy. “It’s perfect, we can control it.

That got their attention all right!

“Control?” those ones say.

“Yep, the more sun, the more colour.”

“Excellent!” some of them said. “Gramps was a bit of a nut case anyways.”

The next weekend they were all standing around outside with their pants rolled up and their collars unbuttoned. A few daring ones put on their togas and went for a swim.

“Hey,” said the others, “great idea! This standing around in the sun is boring! Plus these clothes leave embarrassing tan lines.”

“Let’s go to the beach!” they yelled. “Hurray!”

Rampike 20.1
Beer? – “HURRAY!!!”
Soon the beaches were jampacked with sunbathers. Then cottages started springing up on waterfront properties. And bathing suit makers couldn’t keep up with the demand and the changing fashions.

JUST A DAMN MINUTE! Buzz was really worked up.

C’mon now. That’s just stupid. Cottages were around before Hitler! You’re all mixed up! If you’re gonna tell the story, tell it right. Sheesh.

Hey, said Chickee, must you be so linear in your thinking? Time is like a spiral that curls back in on itself.

Huhn?
I’m telling it in a three dimensional spiraling circle, not a linear sequence.

Buzz shook his head. Bullshit, he mumbled under his breath.

And try not to be so literal, said Chickie. Geez. You’ll miss the whole point.

All right, all right. Just get to the point.

So, anyways...

“More skin!” the sunbathers cried. “We need to expose more skin!”

Then, winter hit.

“Oh-oh,” they said. “We’re turning White again! Soon we won’t be able to see each other when it’s snowing!

A few more studies, more research. The real smart ones among them met in top-secret meetings.

“Go south!” they announced. “During winter go to places where it’s sunny and warm.”

It was brilliant, they thought. Of course! All they needed to do was chase the sun and they’d never have to worry about being White again!

“Hurray!” they yelled. “Let’s go!”

Well, it was great for a while, for some of them. A whole industry sprang up to help them find warm sun-filled beaches to lie around on during the cold winter months. Plus they discovered all sorts of interesting juices to add to their drinks. Someone even got the great idea of putting a little umbrella in those drinks - as a little in-joke for the Sunchasers.

But pretty soon the grumbling started. Some of them couldn’t go south every winter. Some couldn’t afford the prices. Some were too old or too sick to travel.

“What about us?!” a few of the Wannabe Sunchasers cried. “Hath we not eyes to see our White skin? If you ask us, do we not also want a tan?”

A few objected to pushing other people off their land so that international hotel chains could serve fruity drinks poolside, on the best beaches.

“Aloha,” those ones said.

Then, they took off. I don’t know what happened to them because I think they don’t get out much.

Again the most brilliant among the ones left met to put on their thinking caps and find a solution to this problem before it destroyed them! After all, they were a minority of a minority of a minority - they had their very survival to consider.

After a while, it was done.

“Ta dah!” they said, holding up a plastic container.

“What’s that?” a few asked.

“This,” said the brainy ones, “is the answer to all of the world’s problems.” A hush fell across the assembled masses of their little minority. “This shall bring joy and peace to the land!”

“Ohoh,” said the crowd. “Ahhhh…”

Then an impatient guy in the third row yelled out, “yeah, whatever! Look, I’m turning Whiter by the minute here. What the bloody hell is it?”

“It’s…” they said, pausing dramatically, “…suntanning lotion!”

Yep, a couple of them clever White folks had invented suntanning lotion. That calmed down a bunch of them. Soon that lotion was everywhere. White people couldn’t get enough of it. A Hawaiian vacation in a tube!

“We are magic!” they said. “We really are the best!”

Wait, wait, wait, said Buzz. I heard suntan lotion was invented to protect American soldiers fighting in Japan.

That’s what they want you to believe. It was really so them White folks could tan without getting sunburns. Why would anyone want me to believe that? Buzz wondered.

Hey, he said to Chick, this story is giving me a headache.

Could be sunstroke, said Chick. Or some sort of brain tumour. You should wear a hat. So, anyways..., them White folks just couldn’t get enough of that suntanning lotion. Until their skin started turning that weird orange colour. Oh no! they cried. (You know how some of them are.) *Boom* Next thing you know, more secret research, more reports.

“Ah hah!” they said. “This time we’ve really done it. Tanning beds! All you have to do is lie inside these special beds and they zap you with rays and cook the top layers of skin thereby giving you a tan and TA DAH! presto magic, no more White skin. All you have to do is be careful about cancer and cover your eyes with special glasses so you don’t go blind”

“Amazing!” a few of them exclaimed. “Where do we sign up?”

That satisfied most of them for a while, eh. Between going south for the winter, tanning lotion, tanning beds and a few retroactivist acts of miscegenation, they pretty much had all the bases covered.

But some of the others couldn’t remember the point of any of it. A few others questioned the prudence of exposing themselves to rays that could make a person go blind, just to get a tan.

“What’s wrong with us just the way we are?” they whispered to each other on their way out. “Why are we doing all of this?”
So, those ones took off.

For the rest, the problem was that they couldn’t keep up. The world was getting pretty crowded and it seemed like everywhere they looked there were more and more pigmentally challenged people around stuffing up the beaches and creating waiting lines at the tanning salons. Plus, without realizing it, some of their ideas had become popular with others. Suddenly, their underground alternative lifestyle had become Top 40! All of these jump-on-the-bandwagon types who didn’t know a damn thing were taking over.

“This just won’t do,” they said. “This is nickel and dime stuff. We need to think big. Did thinking small get us to the moon? NO! Did it make the Beatles more popular than Jesus? NO! Think!” they said, tapping their heads. “Think, think, think.”

“I’ve got it!” said one. “We need more sun.”

“Yes!” they cried in unison. “More sun is exactly what we need.”

But how?

“Look,” said one team of brilliant White folks. “We could go out into the universe, find another sun and bring it back to our solar system so that when our own sun was shining in the southern hemisphere, this new one could shine in the north!”

“Splendid idea!” they said. “How are we going to accomplish that?”

“Magic, of course! We’ll just ask the same mythological hero who put the original sun in this solar system to go get another one.”

“Mythological hero?” said one woman. “Maybe SHE was a heroine.”

Then this other guy says, “Why are we arguing about mythology? I thought we all agreed that they’re just superstitious stories that less developed peoples use to explain what they don’t understand.”

That started another argument, and another exodus. Anyway, eventually a few of them got back to the Let’s Get Another Sun idea.

“Let’s do it!” they agreed.

“Hurray!”

“But,” said one sour-faced woman, “won’t those other people catch on and try to stop us?”

Good point.

“I know,” said a rich looking guy, “we’ll just say it was a “space mission”. Don’t worry, everyone’ll believe it. We’ve got all the best PR guys and spin doctors on retainer.”

So, while one group tried to work out the logistics of the whole operation, another group set about trying to find out who it was that gave the world its original sun. They spent quite a long time and had researchers working around the clock. The reports were starting to fill warehouses and the basements of abandoned buildings in Detroit.

Finally, an emergency meeting was called.

“Look,” the spokesperson said, “we can’t seem to agree. There are a few potential candidates but even if we could decide which one really did it, we have no idea exactly how to contact said aforementioned hero/heroine/god/goddess. I mean, after all it’s been a while. Besides, even if we knew, can we as a faction-of-a-special-interest-group-of-a-minority-of-a-group-of-a-race-of-people just go running back after all of this time, without a word or a sacrifice or an offering made on our collective behalf since who knows when, and ask for such a big favour?”

“Hmm…” they said.

“We told you!” said some right wing Christian fundamentalists. And Wiccans. And New Agers. “You wouldn’t listen. You NEVER listen!”

And with that a small number of them formed a few of those special interest groups. Others stormed out to go lobby their MPs to bring religious tolerance to schools.

“Haven’t we had enough division?” said one old woman. “Isn’t that what got us in this mess in the first place? Let’s just try to find a solution.”

“Hmmm…” the remaining Disgruntled Ones all said, together.

Which made some of them cry ‘cause they couldn’t remember the last time they’d all said anything together.

“Oh shut up and quit that blubbering, we’ve got work to do!” said one grumpy old guy in plaid shorts, knee socks and white golf shoes. “Besides, I’m sweating like a pig over here – someone turn up the air con for gods’ sakes.”

“We’ve got it!” announced a working group in the corner. “We don’t need another sun, we just need to get more power out of the sun we’ve got!”

“Yes!” added another group. Soon everyone was nodding their heads and chattering about getting more bang out the Big Bang.

“Look,” said some guy in the back. “There’s a layer around the earth that shields us from the sun’s rays. No one really knows why.”

“That’s true,” someone else yelled. “It’s stupid really, isn’t it? I mean, we want more sun and this layer thing is in our way, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s useless. It’s like an appendix or tonsils or catalytic converter. We should just get rid of this layer thing,” a doctor from L.A. pronounced.

“Yeah,” said an auto industry executive. “Then the sun will be more accessible to all of us!”

“And maybe we can find a way to patent the layer!” a pharmaceutical company CEO said, tears welling up in his contact-lens-blue eyes.
"Hurray!" the people cried. "Greater access! Greater control! More money!"
"How will we do it?" someone asked.
"Easy," said one of their best magicians. "Cows."
"Cows?"
"Yep, cows. Well, cows and deforestation. We need lots of cows and lots and lots of trees cut down. Preferably in the rainforest. That'll really speed things up."
"But how could we do that? People like the rainforest. They'll never let us do that!"
"Ah-hah," said the magic maker. "That's where our magic comes in…"

And THAT'S how the Ozone Layer Got Its Hole! said Chickee, triumphantly.

What do you mean, 'that's how the Ozone Layer got its hole?'
said Buzz.

Do I have to spell it out for you?

Spell out what? You went off on a bunch of tangents then ended the story before you told the actual story. Okay, I'll spell it out, said Chickee. B-U-R-G-E-R-S.

Burgers?

Yes, big fat juicy burgers.

What? I don't… Buzz’s brow knit itself into a knot. Burgers wrapped in paper from cattle raised on ranches where used to be rainforest. Cattle farts and belches speeding up global warming…

Burgers? Buzz tried to connect the dots…

Billions served! said Chickee.

That, said Buzz, getting more irate by the millisecond, THAT's the stupidest, most nonsensical, non sequitor story I ever heard! And I've heard a LOT of your stories.

It may be stupid, said Chickee, but it's true.

True? I don't think you even know what the truth is, said Buzz.

Maybe, said Chickee, but you don't see me eating beef, do you?

What does that have to do with it? said Buzz, puffing out his chest.

You never even ate beef until they came along and made it so convenient, said Chickee. You're also lactose intolerant. Then (really) quickly she added, some of us are just more susceptible to this kinda White Man’s magic.

Buzz looked like his head might explode.

It's not your fault you're under their spell, said Chickee in as placating a tone as possible.

Shut up, said Buzz, rubbing his temples

Plus, if you don't even believe they got magic, well… BE QUIET, said Buzz. Geez!

Ever notice how people scared of losing their power or position have no sense of humour ‘bout themselves? Chickee said. People who got no power can laugh at themselves. Do it all the time.

I can so! yelled Buzz.

Yes, said Chickee, noticed. Anyways… That’s How the Ozone Layer Got Its Hole.

Just like that.

THE END

Wait just a damn minute, yelled Buzz from someplace just on the other side of The End.

Sheesh, said Chickee, what now?

So, okay, let’s, for a moment, let’s just say this is true. How do we stop it?

Oh, that, says Chickee. Don’t even worry ‘bout it. Don’t worry? If it’s true, how can I not worry?

Well, you already did one thing - turned off your air conditioner.

Air conditioner? Buzz was hopping around and waving his arms he was so mad. What does THAT have to do with burgers?

Chickee looked at him like he was the kid who ate paste at school.

Everything.

Buzz shook his head. Chickee’s stories used to make him laugh or cry. They’d remind him of where he came from and how to behave. He sighed.

But I’m only one, what about everyone else?

Geez! First you don’t believe they have magic, now you act like they’re the only ones who do. Those White people aren’t the only ones with magic, ya know.

I know!

Well, some of the best magic makers and trick maestros from around the world are working on it.

How?

Ever heard of ‘mad cow disease’? Chickee bent over, laughing. That was a good one!

Really?

Oh yeah. Next, “Hoof and Mouth Disease”. Hoh boy, did we laugh about that one! We almost called it ‘Foot in Mouth Disease.’

Wow, that’s pretty good.

Yeah, said Chickee. Then she giggled.

What?

Oh, it’s just that crazy Nanabush!

What?

(S)he put a rat’s head in a hamburger at one of those big burger joints.

EWWW! Disgusting! Buzz stuck out his tongue. Then he grinned. But...it is sorta funny.

Or maybe even satirical, said Chickee. Hey, quit eating in the lab while you’re dissociating 02 molecules with those UV rays.

Lab? said Buzz, looking towards the horizon.
Excerpt from: *Sweat*

Lesley Belleau

Jolene

It was darker than she thought inside the sweat. Different than she thought. She figured that a sweat was a bunch of tree leaves, branches made into a hut, but what did she know? The sweat lodge was outside of the healing lodge, down below a small hill, a dip in the earth. There were skins and canvass hung and twined into shaven logs that form a rounded hut of sorts. It was beautiful: the skins had a buckskin quality to them and the smell was thick, musky and earthy. There were shoes scattered around the entrance to the sweatlodge and a hole on top where smoke poured out reminding her of Algoma Steel, down by the river, except this looked whiter and cleaner, cottony and soft. The women nodded to her and began to enter the sweatlodge. Some brought in handdrums, some just entered without speaking, some sang softly. Jolene felt nervous and out of place, but she went in anyways to the women’s sweat.

The heat was more intense than she would have thought, than she could have imagined. It was dark, but Elsa grabbed her hand and nudged her down to a soft spot of fur and it was quite comfortable and comfy and she heard Elsa sit down beside her. She leaned over and whispered to Joleen, “Don’t worry, we are all right here. It’s dark, but your eyes adjust and then you’ll start relaxing. Just listen to the music and your instincts and if you want to leave to cool down, feel free.”

“Okay, thanks.” Jolene whispered back.

She sat back and tried to relax, even tried to close her eyes, but she began seeing yellow spots. She opened her eyes and tried to see the shapes of the women inside of the sweat. The darkness was so full, so complete that this was impossible. Jolene let herself drift to soothe the nervousness that she felt.

This was her first time back to the reserve in seventeen years, since she was eleven years old, since her mama left that August. Morning. It was morning then. Beautiful morning, the day after the big rains. She remembers, because the cats didn’t come home. They never did after a rain. They stayed hidden in the shed out back, scared. So, that morning she was calling to her cats.

“If they come in the next five minutes, they can jump in Uncle’s car with us. If not, they belong to the bush.” Jolene’s mother said.

“No, mama, wait for them. They’ll come. They’re just waiting for the rains to dry is all. Let’s peek in the shed.”

“Hurry right back. We’ve gotta go. The big city is waiting for us.” She laughed as Jolene ran in the back to the shed.

The shed was wedged shut, filled with old scraps of furniture, tree branches, metal car parts. She pushed and pulled roughly, scared her mama would run off to Toronto without her and leave her here in the bush, alone.

“Shit on a stick.” She whispered, not wanting anyone to hear her use bad words. “Shit on a stick of bricks.”

The door would not budge.

She heard a cat’s meow. A slight echo of a cat’s call.

“Mittens? Issat you?” She hissed through the crack in the door.

“No.” A voice rang out.

“What the heck?” Jolene spun around.

No one was there. Just the shed, the path to the water, and hordes and hordes of trees.

“Who’s there?” Jolene whispered, frozen to the spot, blood pounding in her ears, a drumbeat, a slow march.

“Relax, girl. Just trying to help you find your kitties.”

“Who are you?” Jolene turned around.

“Where are you?”

“Don’t worry about it. Listen. One of your cats is stuck up that big oak tree to your left. Been there all morning. Too scared to come down.”
Jolene looked up to see that whoever was speaking, was right. There was Mittens mewing up so high in that tree branch, unable to come down.

“But, but where is Milkshake, the baby?” She asked the air, looking around.

“In the shed, too scared to come out without his mama.”

Jolene spoke loudly. “Like you? Too scared to come out, like you?”

There was a long, low laugh. “I am out, sugar.”

“What-the-fuck-ever.” Jolene mocked, then got scared in case it’s one of her momma’s friends, listening to her swear.

“You got quite a mouth on you for a little girl”. The voice laughed.

“Sure do, don’t I? Now come out, come out wherever you are and help me get my cat.” Jolene twirled around.

Her mother called her from the front of the house. “Jolene! Get your butt over here. We’re leaving!”

“Wait Mama, for goodness sakes, wait!” Jolene shrieks.

“Are you sure she wouldn’t leave without you?” The voice asks.

“Of course not. She’s my mama.”

Jolene tried to climb the tree, slips, blood runs down her leg.

“Come on out and help me get this goddamned cat!” She was angry now.

“You really want my help?” The voice asked.

“Yes, dammit, yes.” Jolene shrieks into the dense forest. “Yes, yes. Please.”

The voice replied.

Without warning, a low rumble began. Jolene looked around, terror filling her up. “What in the fuck is that?” She whispered.

The rumbling spread from the back of the trees to the front. Jolene wanted to run, but she couldn’t will her legs to move. The cat meowed and the tree limbs started shaking, shaking, a sound that she’d never heard before a deep sound that she remembered from somewhere, a reverberation that smelled earthy, fulfilled, and sharp, clear as the long, drawn out scream of birth. The cat tried to hold on, its claws flailing in the air, its mouth snapping open and closed. Jolene tasted spring in her mouth, rivers down her throat, and she was no longer afraid, just mesmerized by the scene in front of her, awed by the sight of her cat falling through the air, and landing on her feet in front of her.

The cat looked around, licked his paws and brushed herself against her legs. He meowed and she picked her up. “Mittens, Mittens, you silly cat.”

Jolene looked around. “How the hell did you do that?”

There was no answer. The bush stared back at her. She felt challenged and she liked the feeling. Exhilaration, a bravado that she had never felt before. She placed the mother cat by the shed door and Jolene moved forward, quickly, before she lost her nerve. She moved in and out of the trees where the voice came from looking around for somebody, prepared to see a neighbour, a helpful stranger, a friend of her mother’s lounging, back against a tree, chewing on a fern-stem. Nobody. Twigs cracked, her breath came in short bursts, she twirled around, nervousness returning. She peered up trees, her eyes weaved through the branches, searching helplessly for a face to connect with the voice.

She finally leaned against a tree and screamed in pain at the heat emanating from it. An intense burn saturated her body with a sudden sweat, but she could not move. It was as though hands were holding her against the tree, pushing her against it. She writhed in confusion, wondering who was on the other side of the tree, starting to panic. Until she heard the voice beside her ear, smelled aging birch bark and what she imagined the inside of acorns would smell like.

“Don’t I get a thank you?”

“Thank you, thank you. Now let me go.”

The hold loosened and she ran, not looking back, both cats following her closely. She scurried into the backseat of the car and watched as the cats hopped onto the mats on the floorboards. She locked both doors and watched her mother slide in slowly.

“About time Jolene. I almost left without you.”

They pulled out of the reserve in silence, not speaking, not planning on ever coming back.

But here she was. Jolene closed her eyes in the sweat, nervous, panicky, wanting to push through the women and crawl out and crawl far away where no one would ever see her again.

The Grandmothers

The girl hunched forward with all her might and the Grandmother thought she might topple. Her belly loomed large out the front of her naked body, the writh of a ready child shifting visibly. Her legs had long veins, purpled under her brown flesh. Her breasts were massive, nipples stretched wide and tight over her flesh. Bellybutton shifted back and forth above the baby’s movements. The girl wailed from her gut, pushing her breath out in harsh thrusts, reddening from the neck up, gripping the Grandmother’s arm as hard as she can.

“Leather,” The girl thinks wildly, “Her arm is like leather.”
The Grandmother soothed the girl, so young. The fear in her eyes, the panic that a first birth brings.

“Hush, little one.” The Grandmother sings, half-words, half-music.

The girl falls to her knees, pounding at the ground. clawing at the dirt like a bull, wanting to tear her hair out, screaming life and death at the woman whose hand is entering her body, shifting something clockwise. The pain cannot be comprehended. There must be something wrong. Her insides are twisted together so violently that she is sure of death as the liquid pours out of her. Who is this woman with the beads around her neck, strumming this agony so calmly, trickles of sweat near her low ears, falling into long strands of graying hair? Where did she come from? Who sent her?

The girl smells sage starting to burn. A branch of cedar waving the smoke toward her. The first waft is the best, and the suddenness of it throws off her balance, brings her back to her childhood, her mama’s low guitar outside around the fire, her mama’s voice that she can still catch on a good wind. A fraction of her face, her words when she was eleven and her mother was certain she was sleeping. I love you my girl. I’ll be back for you soon. Her guitar, her stale cigarette smoke seeping out from under her door, her midnight promises, her perfume that the girl still wears, one drop at a time, forgetting her face sometimes without it.

A searing heat opens her wider, the Grandmother moves faster, stretches the girl open gently, using her fingers to enlarge the tissue, pull it wider with patience so the tearing doesn’t come. The girl stands slowly, her breath an animal, panting life in bursts out of her nose, blood over her lips, down her throat, pouring out from her nostrils. Her eyes are fire, burning from the inside out, seeing her lover’s face before ejaculation, turned away from her, teeth bared, spittle forming at the corners of his mouth. His short movements before his low moan, his falling, his head on her chest, his sweat absorbing into her body, her pores, her blood, her histories. She loved him, his soft hair in her mouth as she sucked it, wanting to swallow it, all of him. Her body prayed for his baby, used her fingers to hold his liquid in, raised her hips as she watched his eyelashes against her neck-skin, held him close as she whispered to him.

I love you, I love you, I love you. Gi zah gin.

The Grandmother rises, crying softly, smiling, and prays over a large bowl of water.

“This water is sacred.” She tells the girl.

The fire licks the girl’s thighs, her mind, casts strange lights behind her pupils. The girl sees water rising over the windows of this cabin, she sees trees with faces, some with kind eyes, some laughing maliciously, some crying for her, their barks turning soggy and floating away like paper upstream.

“Push now,” says the Grandmother. “Gentle now, I can see the top of his head. You need to slow down, dear one. You need to look in my eyes. Oskenzhig.”

She does and sees a thousand babies in birth, pink bodies immersed in bloodied crystal streams, faces scrunchified tightly, fists in motion, swimming upstream, rushing over rocks, waterfalls, the lifeblood, toward the beat of their mother’s heart. She bears down, her teeth releasing blood under her lips, the blood over her breasts, smearing into her pores, her histories, a darkness that lay in wait inside of her. Afraid, she is breathless, wonders what the taste of death is, how dank it is, if it is anything at all like the morning her mama left and the months of waiting afterwards, the cold windows that her fingers traced, the woodpile that did not run the winter, the driveway that piled thick with snow with no one to know she lived on behind it. The taste of baked beans and smushed peas and alphagettis mashed into one. The sound of footsteps in the spring to take her to the foster home, a new mother with her green eyes that never left her back since then, that hisses at her from corners, a slow, careful snake, thick with muscle, as long as childhood. The wish, the wish that she had hid from the knocking, fell back from the shadows, her breath still, pretending that she didn’t exist. A long scream sounding like thirst and earth rolling out of her.

The baby’s head emerges. Black hair jutting out of her pink labia, her bloodstained thighs. The Grandmother laughs at the hair, telling the girl that all her children had the same thick, Ojibway hair. This calms the girl, convinces her that she is not birthing a monster, a freak; that this is normal, not an animal or creature edging out of her body. The Grandmother rubs herbs on her legs, massages the girl’s thighs, edges her open slowly and with more love than she knows how to accept, the girl watches the old woman, her old mouth smiling, tears running down her cheeks like springtime.

“Here he comes.” She whispers.

And the girl opens her eyes with the shriek, with her son’s first wail of life.

Jolene

The sweat wraps around her. She is more comfortable now with the heat, the memories, the sensations of history entwining itself to her present, marking her soul. Her shakiness has stopped and the feeling of being an outcast is fading. She is starting to feel as though the darkness is safe, a security enveloping her, keeping her from harm. Strangely comforted, she feels her body relaxing and accepting the solitude, the
deepness like the middle of a dream, or like a thrust of the underwater that a swimmer must feel. Jolene feels called by the past, by voices evading her, twisting her toward them. And again, and always, her mother. A voice like stucco, prickly, soft when broken, turning into chalk onto the fingers. Mothers. Mothers who disappear, their trails ending abruptly, their names nowhere to be found no matter which city you step into. Their scents that follow you through life, taunting you. Can smells be so cruel as to whisper out of other women’s necks and wrists, laughing, laughing, a high pitched witchy cackle that chases itself into your dreams? Jolene has a habit. She collects phonebooks from every city she enters. Some nights, drunk, bored, at a house party, she will search phonebooks, looking for her mother’s name, a clue. Her mother has vanished. She reads headlines, buying newspapers from each city, reserve, village that she passes through. She dreams of finding her mother this way. \textit{Native woman slaughtered, no trace of any living relation}. She dreams of stepping forward to claim her mother’s life, to identify the body. Sometimes this would be easier. She piles these phonebooks in a box in her Aunties shed, wraps them in garbage bags so the rain doesn’t wilt them, the snows don’t destroy them. She keeps them just in case she missed a clue and can return to them.

Drumming cools her body, heats her mind. The sweat is in full fire. She feels the beat of the woman’s hand beside her fall onto her drum. She inhales buckskin, licks her lips to taste salt and smoke. Falls into the music around her, leaning against the soft of the hides behind her. She is okay here. She is free to continue her living dream.

Faces swim around her. Babies she doesn’t recognize, mothers that she somehow distrusts, grandmothers that frighten her with their attempts to embrace, men reaching out to her, their tongues whispering things that she pretends to understand. She leans back, told that their bodies would be closed off from their children, all who will die with the taste of their spirithildren in her memory, a sense of loss so deep that they grow old quickly, ashamed of their motherlessness, staring at the water, searching. Hearing the future collecting itself briskly. Searching. Here, she wonders if life is like a dream? Do you suddenly wake up and laugh at what you’ve been dreaming about? Does everything suddenly fall into place upon waking and you are flooded at relief that it was just a dream? It feels like a dream, these observing each feature at length, trusting no one, offering words to none. Some are beautiful, black hair flowing, lips laughing, eyes settled with peace. She watches as faces swim around her, each one presenting itself, and then falling away as simple as birchbark from a tree, floating up the riveredge in a rapid current. One catches her eye. The face materializes into form, a neck, shoulders, long arms, torso, hips, legs, feet. He is graceful, watchful, intense. He sits alone on a hilltop, waiting, looking downward, chiseling something small in his brown hands.

She knows he is aware of her watching him, but neither of them make a move to connect. She is enthralled by the movements of his hands. Small, quick carving, fingertips flitting back and forth. There is something familiar there, but she is unsure what it could be. She has never seen anyone carve wood before. Little woodchips falling, make her feel like crying. She watches, drifts inside of his unseen creation slowly, until he speaks, not looking up.

“The tree I took this wood from cannot be trusted.”  
“Huh? Jolene looks around, knows that he is speaking to her.

“Yeh. He tricked me, that tree.” The man shakes his head, and Jolene cannot tell if he is old or young. His body appears young, his voice old as the sky.

“The tree tricked you?”

“Yeh.” He laughs, then stops abruptly, looking up.

“Ever been tricked by a tree before?”

“No. Well, not really. Maybe.”

“Not a good feeling, is it? Us people should be smarter than trees, don’t you think?” Jolene shrugs, “I guess so.”

“He made my wife disappear.”

“Your wife?”

“Yeh.” His hands stop moving. A long, thin piece of wood falls on his knees. She sees his face as he turns to her. He is neither young nor old. He makes her feel cold. The longing in his face is familiar, mirror-like. “She was beautiful, my wife. No other woman like her in this world. Or that world, for that matter.”

“I… I’m sorry.” Jolene sputters.

“Well, nothing to be done now. Nothing to be done now.”

“If the tree is so clever, then how did you get the wood?” Jolene asks.

“Well, I saw him sleeping down by that embankment there.” He nudges his chin toward a steep hill overlooking a grassy field. “Don’t look so surprised. Trees sleep too.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“They do a lot of things you probably don’t know about. Boy oh boy…” His sad face laughs and laughs, crinkling his skin, creating small lines around his eyes. The sun blasts hot while he laughs and she shivers in the heat, tingled by his laughter.

“Well, how did you get the wood?”

“Oh, right. I chopped it off while he was sleeping. Just walked up to his sleeping bulk and chopped a limb off and ran. How’s that for sneaky?” He laughs, shoulders shaking, looking young and old and so far, far away.
“What are you making?” Jolene questions, trying to bend in to see.
“Well, I’m not done yet.” He replies.
“Oh, I know, but I just want to know what it is. I can’t see it from here.” Jolene pushes herself forward, tries to see, tries to make out the dark shape in his hands.
She can smell it, musky, alive, can feel it pulsating.
She is drawn back, mesmerized by the power of the wood.
“Like I said, I’m not done. Never let anyone see my carving till it’s done.” He smiles again and Jolene feels life, feels like she is running, tastes grass under her feet, hears the currents’ force at the bottom of rivers, it is powerful, rich and pungent, the core of a seed, raw on her tongue.
“Aww…please.”
“Wait Jolene, just wait.”
“Hey, how did you know my name?” Jolene looks at him, curious.
“Hey, how do you know me?” He asks her.
“But I don’t, I don’t. This is the first time I ever talked to you or saw you, or…” Jolene stops, breathless, as his face is replaced by the taste of her tears, as sudden and abrupt as a punch. They taste hard, seedy, they make her tongue hurt, the painful rub against delicate buds. They enter her throat and she hears herself moan. She feels longing. For a man.
Not the kind of longing she is familiar with. Not for a seed, raw on her tongue.
He takes her hand. She tears apart, she touches the flesh, see the seed, seed, see the whole thing.
“Ah…” He asks her.
Jolene pulls away. “What are you making?”
He is covering the wood with a covering of blood. Blood like yarrow emerges. Summertime yarrow on her tongue, the seeds sprout, take bud and enlarge slightly.
The beats radiate throughout the flesh and bone of her hands. She remembers dreaming of cutting out her heart and holding it and examining it and cutting it open. And it was empty inside—no blood, no blood. Nowhere for the blood to travel, no passageways, no chambers, nothing. She remembers handling the sodden valve of her heart, finding it cold and unresponsive. She remembers the fear. Hard in her throat—remembers trying to suck in a breath. The pain in her chest. Remembers her dream, trying to stuff the dead heart back into her chest—better than nothing, right? Right? Isn’t it?
Her scream woke her auntie, came running out toward her, the back of her slippers making a tap, tap, tap against the floor.
“Auntie!” She screamed, “Auntie!”
“What Jolene, for God’s sake what??” Her auntie looked down at her on the couch in fear.
“She took my real heart with her when she left.” Jolene couldn’t talk through her tears.
“She took it with her.”
Auntie looked around the room. “Who Jolene? Have you been drinking again?”
Jolene sat up on the couch. “Mama took my heart. I can’t breathe without it. I can’t breath right. It is empty inside. Dry against my fingers. Like scraping a bone that’s dried up in the sun, left on a long rock like Agawa.”
Her Auntie felt her forehead and pushed her gently against the couch. “Jolene, you’re burning up. You have a fever. Lay down and I’ll get you a Tylenol. Lay down and relax. You’re burning up.” She knew it was no fever. She knew she was dead, but how she kept walking and breathing and thinking she could not figure out. She knew she was dead. But now, here in The Sweat, she can feel the beating. Can hear it like a drum in her ears. She is suddenly aware of the blood running in her veins and she remembers the bush as a child, how the rocks and dirt felt under her bare feet. Remembers the back of her mothers’ long skirt and how it felt pressed against her face when she hugged her legs. Perfume and cigarettes. She can feel her heart, knows that there is blood filling it up, can feel a warming in her wrists, under the long white scars. Scared that the blood will rip the scars open from the inside. Scared that her flesh will burst open from the inside and her new blood will pour out like a geiser and she will be down on her hands and knees scraping it from the floor, from the dirt of The Sweat and stuffing it back in her mouth, down her throat, swallowing, swallowing. She is hungry for this. Hungry for this.
Longoing under the pounding. The new blood increases the longing and the tears soften on her tongue, the seeds sprout, take bud and enlarge slightly. A taste like yarrow emerges. Summertime yarrow on her back, the tickle of the leaf against her cheek, watching the world take place around her. Jolene remembers laying against the earth near her childhood home on the reserve, her mother searching for her.
Jolene! Jolene! The thrill of hiding on her mother, a satisfaction found from her mother’s worry. She was loved by her mother. Her mother was scared. Fear in her voice. Jolene! Jolene! Her mother wanted her. Wanted to find her. Six years old and laying low in the field behind her house. A glimpse of the waterline behind the pines. Six years old and sensed the yarrow under her cheek. Bent her neck and turning to the yarrow, the heat of the stem on her lips. Sucked the yarrow while her mother screamed and screamed for her. Swallowed the yarrow while her mother wanted her. Wanted her. Yarrow inside of her. Yarrow pulsing while her mothers hands found her. Lifted her. Carried her home with a bellyful of yarrow to warm her and heal her and resting her head on her mother’s shoulder, she tasted it still on her tongue and she loved this day and loved this day forever.
Longing still under the pounding. *How do you know me? How do you know me?* The face and body are still there, smiling and whistling and chiseling the wood. The tears are softer, no longer seedy in her mouth. Liquid tears as she examines him. She doesn’t know how she knows him. But she remembers him. Longing still under the pounding. She leans against the structure of The Sweat. Remembers hands. Hands. Hands. Big hands. Always bigger than hers. Hands outnumbering each other, a quick succession of hands. Men’s hands. Always bigger than hers. *Come with me, little girl.* At her mother’s party. Nine years old and he was leading her into her forest behind her house. *I want to show you something.* He looked like a nice man. Soft smile. Brown eyes, little hairs down the front of his hands. They were tiny blond hairs that looked soft and golden in the sun. At her mother’s party. Her mother went into the house with her Auntie, her mother’s lips were red with wine. It was afternoon and the sun was hot. Her mother wore a white dress with a long stripe of violet slashed through it. Her mother’s lips were stained with red and Jolene thought it looked pretty. He looked like a nice man and he had little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. She went with him. He showed her poison ivy, told her how frogs were so smart that when they hopped in poison ivy they would hop to the plant that would cure poison ivy and rub themselves in it. Jolene laughed. His hands on her hands. Little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. She remembers her back against the tree. How her back scraped against the tree, how her back scraped hard against the tree, how the bark cut into her back when he lifted her. Pressed her against the tree. *Ouch.* He did not speak, just smiled at her with his eyes. Brown eyes, but not as dark as the tree. Little bits of oranges in his eyes. Little dots of oranges in his eyes. She could see herself in his eyes. Long brown hair, wisping out from the heat. Straight and wispy. Flyway, her mother called it. She could see herself in his eyes. His hands lifted her skirt up and tore her underwear off. *Don’t.* He did not speak, just smiled at her with his eyes. He looked like a nice man and he had little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. She went with him. *Please don’t.* He did not speak. His hands were hurting her, trying to put something in her. She could see herself in his eyes and her own eyes looked round and did not blink. She could see little dots of oranges inside of his brown eyes. Her back scraped against the tree. *My mother’s calling me.* He was getting angry. He was trying to put something between her legs. He was getting angry. It couldn’t fit and it was hurting her. He was grunting and he was getting angry. She squirmed. *Please don’t.* She began to fall and her back scraped against the tree. It began to burn between her legs and she squirmed away from him. She fell. She saw him standing there. He was getting angry. His pants were down? How did that happen? When did that happen? His thing was poking up and he was rubbing it staring at her. She ran. He still watched her and rubbed himself. She ran back to the house, her heart pounding. She looked back and still saw his shadow in the bush. Her back hurt where it scraped against the tree. She found her mother in the kitchen drinking a cup of wine. *There you are my girl. Come here.* She crawled on her mothers lap and held on to her, watching the people that filled her house, her heart pounding. *Pounding.* Pounding. Jolene adjusts herself against the wall of The Sweat. Remembering hands. Mens hands against her throat. She met him at a party. In his car after the party, he put his hands around her neck, squeezed. She had tried to kiss him and he put his hands on her throat. She did not want to kiss him anymore. She could not scream anymore. Throat closing and her heart pounding. His fingers around her throat and he just watched her. Watched her choke. He had wrinkles around his eyes too. Green eyes and then he let her go. Watched her stagger out of his car. He laughed. *Stupid drunk Indian bitch.* He laughed. More hands. On her breasts, squeezing. Between her legs. After parties. Men after parties. She thought she loved some of them. Thought some of them loved her back. Kissing these men, waiting for their hands on her. Letting them all have her, letting all of the hands own her. Hands balled up against her cheek. Her nose shattered once. The taste of blood and the pounding of her heart. She thought she loved that one. Lifted her hips against his: *iloveyouiloveyouiloveyou.* His baby in her belly, wanting to let him love the baby with her. *Get out of here, get rid of it. Don’t come back till you get rid of it.* She didn’t come back. Hid at her Auntie’s, growing bigger and bigger. Hands creating her. Hands leaving her. Longing still beneath the pounding. She opens her eyes in The Sweat. The man is still watching her. She smells trees everywhere. Cedar. Oak. The memory of pine against her cheek. Maple branches waving. The dry crunch of leaves under her barefeet. He puts down his wood. *Come here my girl.* He extends his hands as though to hug her. They are brown and have long lines down the palm. She closes her eyes and throws up everywhere, her legs hot with her own vomit. She begins to cry.
Danny’s Odyssey

Cyril Dabydeen

Townspeople are like horse piss. Smelly, noisy and good for absolutely nothing.
— Count Radziwill of Poland (1771)

Danny Durango he calls himself, if only because of his youthful ways, and his being popular with the women at the National Municipal Association—NMA as it’s called across the country, see. And the mantra: “Municipalities are the first order of government,” which Mr Thoms, the CEO, insists that staff repeat to all. “What for?” Danny asks, as women come around at the coffee machine, and titter loudly; and you see, Mr Thoms is becoming suspicious of Danny: as he reflects on the name Durango, then puts a thumb into his mouth because of anxiety – and “Thumbs” the CEO is called behind his back by staff.

Then, “Who does Danny think he is anyway?”

Really Spanish-sounding the name Durango sounds, if Black Irish, no? Ah, Danny’s now telling everyone that his name derives from the time when English sailors defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, and many of the defeated Spanish sailors ended up on the west coast of Ireland and then eventually became Black Irish. “That I am,” he cries.

And does he now really want to travel the world, if just to prove a point? What point? Mr Thoms grates to himself. “And the rest will be history,” Danny chortles. Ah, Thoms wonders what else Danny has up his sleeves? Now imagine Danny picking up the phone and repeating the mantra that municipalities are the first order of government, no?

“Really first order of government?” some yet ask.

Another caller on phone: “Is it true that at Charlottetown, PEI, was where it all began?”

“Not Saint John’s, New Brunswick?”

“Or Quebec City?”

The women staffers, as is to be expected, again giggle. And does Danny really want to travel the world, being the Canadian as he is? Now Thoms summons Danny to his office, and the two men eye each other: Danny, five-feet-four, looking at the upright Thoms, who is over six feet. Danny’s eyes stray across the sprawling oak desk with upholstered chair to the pictures strategically mounted on the walls of recent Canadian prime ministers and heads of state...each emphasizing the first order of government, no? “Is it true,” asks Thoms, “that you...well, you...?” Thoms also looks at the heads of state, with an uncanny feeling that he isn’t getting through to Danny. “I mean, d’you really want to travel the world... as...?”

“Go, Danny-boy,” staffers outside the office cheer.

And Danny thinks the NMA is strategically placed in Ottawa to lobby the federal government; and Thoms figures that before long every mayor across Canada will soon be asking, “Who really is Danny Durango?” Will they really?

Danny makes a dull face. Thoms lifts his neck, his head, up straight. And the staffers are full of excitement, as never before.

“Is he really Black Irish?” asks another caller from PEI.

“Er, not exactly,” replies Thoms. Then he responds to the call from Mayor Vorst of Winnipeg. He will speak to the mayor of another town next, if not to the mayor of Sudbury, Moose Jaw, Lethbridge. “Who..next?” Thoms rasps into the phone.

Danny simply turns his head and looks at more pictures on the wall. Real heads of government, no? The Quebec City mayor is on line next, then the Mayor of Kingston, each insisting on it: “Who is...?”

Danny manages a smile, and Thoms seems determined to put a stop to him. But what for? At the Chateau Laurier Hotel where the Big City Mayors’ Caucus meeting is taking place, it’s the same question: Who’s Danny Durango? “Yippee, it’s me,” Danny chortles, and everyone applauds. Imagine that, eh?

Thoms balks; he must do something. But what? Like pre-emptive action Danny lets out: “It’s time to spread democracy around the world, about the first order of government!” The CEO immediately thinks that his plenipotentiary powers are being put to the test. “Municipal governments will foster sustainable development,” Danny crows to him, like an upstart. Then, “It’s the new world order we must face head on.” “Right-oh,” cackles an obscure mayor from the Northwest Territories.

“Go on, tell them, Danny,” the women staffers chorus, and maybe everyone will soon want the world to be “connected”. Yes, Danny says with a wave of the hand. “Not just Canada being connected from coast to coast, from Nunavut and Whitehorse in the west to James Bay and Labrador in the east, is it?”
Thoms squirms.

“It’s a new world in the making,” Danny sings, a real maverick now. “Yes, a really new world,” agrees the Mayor of Toronto, Bill Abercrombie. And Thoms is almost apoplectic when Danny rings out: “We are really the first order.” Then to Danny, privately, Thoms snorts, “Were just a non-governmental organization, dammit.” He adds that municipal politicians should concern themselves only with snow and garbage removal, levying property tax, parking and pet control…as their first order of government.

Then Thoms figures Danny must be put on a leash. Oh, Danny handing in his resignation letter; and the women now see him being free to start travelling the world as a real Canadian, even surpassing the ways of Pierre Trudeau. Oh?

The shortish figure of Danny going to the Far East. Not go west, young man? Danny is suddenly in every far-flung place in the world, if in Vietnam first: "Hi, my name's Danny Durango, I am a Canadian.” And it doesn’t matter if he isn’t much taller than the natives: he weighs one hundred and thirty pounds, indeed a true Canadian…to everyone he meets in Southeast Asia.

Yippee! Shirley, Sue, Ann-Marie – staffers all watch Danny traipsing around, and they become instant cheerleaders. Thoms’s lips tighten. Yes, Danny is scooting from place to place, if bent on following in the footsteps of his mentor Elsie Wayne, the Mayor of Saint John. Not octogenarian MP Flora MacDonald? See, Danny will become a member of Parliament, and be greeted by MP’s of all stripes when he returns to Ottawa.

“Danny’s our real ambassador of goodwill,” hecters another big-city mayor. But Thoms snarls back, “We must keep him on a permanent leash.”

“What for?” hurled at Thoms.

Imagine Danny talking about the economic impact on poor farmers the world over because of bad governments in the west, as everyone becomes “wired”. Really connected, see. Lester B. Pearson...Pierre Trudeau, Joe Clark, watch out!

Danny is now in the rice fields in Borneo and Myanmar, and visiting poppy-growing farms in Afghanistan, then hobnobbing with bearded Taliban members. Next he’s in northern Thailand; and everywhere he goes he sends back a text message to the NMA in Ottawa, if ‘to the women at the coffee urn only, for their “reading pleasure.”

Thoms discreetly reads each message posted, and frowns. And he remembers the time when he’d travelled to the Caribbean island of Trinidad and studied the species of hummingbirds there with great interest; and when he returned to the MNA, he regaled everyone about the species, see. “Nothing about the natives then?” Danny interjected.

“Natives?”

“Locals?”

Thoms sniff’s back, “The hummingbirds are all.”

But Danny is disappointed; for him people must be connected, which was how the first idea came to him of going round the world to meet real people. And before long he’s in another exotic place, in India...in the Rajasthan desert riding a camel. When he’s robbed by Dacoit women, Danny rationalizes it as no real harm done, to lose a few rupees to the poor! In a brothel in Calcutta, it’s his way to get to know the real natives, if just the caste system in action...and also to know about the HIV/AIDS crisis in the Third World. “Oh, who’s asking?”

River-stench Danny sniff’s as at he cries out, “The Good, the Bad, and the Hooghly.” Yes, tell everyone about the Ganges where dead bodies float downstream, and funeral pyres lining the ghats and ashes of the cremated dear departed. Thoms, with alarm, reads another e-mail from Danny at the coffee corner.

Now, two big-city mayors are asking for more details about Danny’s travels, like a serialized soap opera before them. Real travels?

Danny’s now in Tamil Nadu, then he’s going to Thailand once again where he will encounter a holy man swearing at him for not becoming a Buddhist. Ah, in outback Australia he talks to blustering Aborigines about Crocodile Dundee look-a-likes from America being really “down under”. Kangaroos hop around, though Danny prefers munching on a kangaroo burger, as regales the NMA staff. Yes, everyone being indeed connected.

Thoms’ stiff upper lip trembles. Where’s Danny Durango heading next? And federal government types on Parliament Hill are in on it, some reclining in their upholstered offices.

“Where is he really now? Mr Thoms...doesn’t he know?”

“Er, yes,” Thoms snarls.

“Tell us!”

“Tell you what?”

Christ where is he actually?

“Is Danny Durango now our unsung ambassador promoting the real first order of government?” asks a Deputy Minister in the Department of Foreign Affairs. “Will he promote Joe Clark’s idea of Canada as the first international country?” See, Danny is yet spreading the message to natives everywhere, Thoms moans; and to himself: “Municipalities are no longer the first order of government.” Then he looks at the pictures on the walls of his office, faces that stare back at him, if gargoylike only.

Oh, Danny’s next in a favela in Brazil. Where else?

In small towns across Saskatchewan Reeves and mayors are also travelling with him, vicariously, all leaving their small neighbourhoods for more exotic places. They really do! The
women staffers moan with Thoms, yet, their laughter fills the air.

Eyes turn to Thoms folding and unfolding his arms; and what does he have up his sleeves?

Really what?

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Thoms decides he must stop Danny from going anywhere because Canada’s reputation is now at stake. Hummingbirds flutter, he hears, if flying horizontally, then vertically. Trinididian-style, ah. Thoms has a true ornithologist’s instinct in him. The women outside his office mill around. And will Danny oblige them with another e-mail, no? Another text or blog sent from some other obscure corner of the world before long?

Thoms’ office is now like a war room, for real action to take place. Oh, imagine Danny and the CEO facing each other once more. And Thoms’ new strategy it will be: there must be a farewell party for Danny. Every action requires a counter-action!

Names of members of Parliament and senior government officials in Ottawa are quickly drawn on a special invitation list: now to really bid Danny farewell. Imagine the guests swallowing Beaujolais and eating pate, all talking cheerfully. Thoms looks at guests coming, not without with suspicion, as is his nature. Then he invites Danny to make his farewell speech.

Danny, adenoidal, quotes Wayne Gretzsky: about going where “the puck’s going,” though he has never played a real game of hockey in his life. “Let’s get the puck outa here,” Danny chuckles next with bonhomie, with an immediate stick-handling gesture.

The guests laugh at his moves. But Thoms keeps being disdainful.

“Canada’s the first international country,” Danny cries next, imagining Joe Clark now in the audience. Not Prime Minster Harper?

Next Danny announces new places he must indeed get to, if going through the hazardous Khyber Pass, then to Peshawar...and Kandahar. Pakistan jihadists wave cheerfully, see. Danny sings, “To Peshawar it will be then.” “Really Jalalabad next!” calls out one from the Foreign Affairs Department. More Beaujolais, drinks floating around.

“I must go there to spread democracy,” Danny thrusts his arms out.

“But there’s a war going on,” comes a warning. But Danny indeed wants to go to every paddy field in the Philippines and Malaysia also, even as the tropical heat sears. Yeah, Danny Durango being Black Irish will endure it all. Malaria...dengue fever, as a true Canadian, not just the ugly American! And the partygoers fan themselves as they bear up to the intense tropical humidity, though cold it really is in Ottawa.

Danny is literally taking his audience with him everywhere.

Hummingbirds flutter again in Thoms’s ears; he eyes everyone ruefully. Danny is next in a run-down factory in Venezuela, criss-crossing continents as the whim seizes him. Then it’s meeting members of the Medellin Cartel in Colombia to negotiate with them, even as the drug-lords lambaste him about the American people’s demand for drugs. “If Americans want to end the drug trade, let them stop demanding it. Tell President George Bush!” comes the cry.

“I’m only a Canadian,” Danny replies.

Thoms repeats the mantra: Municipalities are the first order of government, in a lugubrious tone. And to Sri Lanka Danny goes next to forge lasting peace between the Tamil Tigers and the Singhalese Army, and musing about Buddhism and Hinduism in the same breath almost.

Not just entertaining Muslim fundamentalism?

Then to Darfur, North Korea, and next to Fuzhou Province in China he goes, where many refugees and illegals will come from...will want to enter Canada one day soon! See, Danny’s spirit keeps soaring. He urges the Chinese to know real Canadian values, about our principles of fairness and equality. Oh? “Canada has peace, order and good government,” Danny crows.

For the Native Peoples most of all?

Another party-goer immediately worries about Danny being nabbed by terrorists while again going through the Khyber Pass controlled by those coming out of the madrassas and calling themselves the mujahideen. But Danny sits on a safe spot in the Hindu Kush; maybe his captors demand twenty lakh rupees for his release, don’t they? See, Danny will pay, but not before haranguing about municipalities being the first order of government. Saint John Mayor Elsie Wayne cheering him on, he imagines.

Thoms becomes wary. What else does Danny have up his sleeves?

That natives around the world must fend for themselves, same as Canadians do? The CEO is more nervous, even as Danny waxes on, becoming almost poetic.

But what if Danny’s real aim to invite people from every outlying part of the world to come to Canada...the immigration doors thrown wide open! Thoms looks at each guest, aghast at how seriously they are taking Danny Durango...as still the Black Irish.

Party-goers’ hearts beating faster. And Danny just keeps hectoring his audience, now about a time for genuine peace in the world. Let the G-20 countries take note! The United Nations too!

Applause everywhere. Imagine Canada transformed overnight, if Danny has his way. Thoms’ knuckles at his mouth, then at his throat. He must do something to stop Danny!

But...what? Maybe tell everyone about the time when the MNA held a special meeting up north. Thoms walks up to the microphone: he
will tell his audience...a secret. Won’t he? “Tell us everything, there should be no secrets,” hisses the women staffers, swallowing pate.

Something titillating?

“See, Danny and I went fishing up north,” begins Thoms, also adenoidal, as he keeps going on at it.

But did it really take five long hours?
And Danny caught...what?
“One small trout,” laughs Thoms, looking directly at his audience.

Then he turns to Danny who has almost glazed eyes.

Chuffed laughter everywhere.

“The same small trout Danny caught, holding it up like his big trophy,” Thoms regales everyone, pleased by how much humour he can extract from one bland story. The federal government types laugh loudest. And Danny looks glum. Then Thoms reveals that Danny has been living a secret life all along.

What secret life? The female staffers are all ears.

Is it true that Danny really brought a female friend with him up north...to see him catch, well, one small trout? “Danny's not the type,” Shirley, an older female with an elongated jaw, hisses. Thoms looks caustically at her. Not the type?

Yippee!

Danny still wants to send more e-mails from other exotic places.

But Thoms knows that his audience is glued to his every word.

More hummingbirds flutter, everywhere. Isn’t it about the natives? Thoms’ mind is working full speed. The party-goers hiss louder.

“One small trout, that’s all,” lets out Thoms, like a victory cry, “that’s all. Yes, one small trout after five hours of fishing up North, and his girlfriend is really disappointed. Ha-ha!”

A release letter Thoms figures Danny must obtain from the NMA before he leaves...for good. See, Thoms knows his plenipotentiary power has been put to the test, even as he conjures up races of people – real natives – from every corner of the globe Danny yet imagines he’s going to meet...many who are now bent on coming to Canada because of lax immigration rules, no?

Sir John A Macdonald listen! William Lyon Mackenzie King too!

Thoms cries out, almost in desperation:

“Maximum bureaucratic delay it will be,” like his tried-and-proven tactic. Danny Durango must not be allowed to leave the NMA to go to another exotic place...never! He must be put on a leash!

Thoms is playing his trump card, though it’s all so dizzying. And images of the future of cities and towns, all cluttered with hordes of newcomers, people of all races, creeds. Never mind Parliament Hill and the new stripes of colour among incoming parliamentarians.

Go on, tell them, Mr Thoms.

“Imagine the Prime Minister of Canada being called Danny Durango,” he grates.
“Imagine...eh?” others repeat, if almost heckling.

“Now who’s the real Canadian among us?” another quips. “Who... with your Anglo-French background?” harangues another. True Canadian?

Yet mayors keep talking about wanting to travel to exotic places the world over, if only to emulate Danny Durango, some even adopting his name like a permanent moniker. Truly?

Thoms shifts and waddles his body, ungainly or uncomfortably.

He indeed wants Danny stopped once and for all, if only because of the power of the real first order of government! “Maximum bureaucratic delay it will be,” he announces, even as he mulls over Danny’s secret life fishing up north, then looks at the female staffers, like loyal serfs. Really a secret life?

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One week, two... then a month goes by, and Danny is sending more text-messages – e-mails from Southeast Asia and Latin America, as natives everywhere urge him to do...back to Canada. And now standing next to him are mayors and town councillors: from Nunavut and Whitehorse to St John’s, Newfoundland – all now feeling connected with the rest of the world, you see.

“He’ll soon be back, mark my words,” Thoms tells the next caller: the mayor from Moose Jaw, who demands to know where Danny’s really going. “Canada needs him... here,” Thoms lets out. Then, “They will all be back!”

“Is Danny Durango yet determined to go everywhere to spread the good news, is he?”

Who’s asking? What good news?

Thoms looks at the pictures of heads of state on the office walls, some more gargoyle-like... even as he recreates Danny fishing for five long hours at Great Slave Lake, for one tiny trout. “Municipalities are really the first order of government, no?” one Big City Mayor snaps.

Then, “If you want to keep him at home, make Danny a better offer, Thoms.”

“Well... er, yes.”

“But Danny’s now in Kathmandu...” cries one female staffer, as if with joy. Others huddle round the coffee machine reading the latest e-mail. All the while Thoms keeps hearing hummingbirds fluttering, and natives crying out. Yippee. Each wanting to be like Danny Durango, and nothing will stop them coming to Canada...even if they will pronounce the country’s name... as Xanada, then Xanadu.

Oh, Danny’s dreams are coming true! “He will go wherever the puck goes,” comes a shrill voice. Immediately Thoms sticks his thumb into his mouth, almost gagging himself, then hisses: Now who’s really a Canadian?
Talking With Lance Olsen

Interview with Flore Chevaillier

Lance Olsen’s novels, hypermedia texts, short-story collections, poetry, and critical works have explored modes of writing that diverge from traditional paths of story-telling. His latest book, Head in Flames, is a collage novel told by three alternating voices, each inhabiting a different font and aesthetic space. Lance Olsen also serves as the Associate Editor for this issue of *Rampike* magazine, gathering a host of FC2 (Fiction Collective Two) whose works are presented in this special issue on contemporary fiction.

In this interview, Chevaillier and Olsen discuss the aesthetic, political, philosophical, and cultural dimensions of contemporary fiction. More specifically, as the Chair of the Board of Directors at Fiction Collective Two, Olsen addresses the state of the current publishing industry and the ways in which it impacts formally innovative writing. The interview also explores the origins and purposes of his literary experimentations; his interest in collaboration, appropriation, and collage; and his investment in literary theory and politics. [Photo of Lance Olsen by Andi Olsen]

**FC:** In your essay, “Fourteen Notes Toward the Musicality of Creative Disjunction, or Fiction by Collage,” you observe the increasing production of “critifictions,” or texts that breakdown the distinctions between criticism and fiction. Could you explain why you find this mode of writing particularly valuable in the context of “fiction’s present” (185)?

**LO:** I’m not sure I’m interested in the question of “value” with respect to fiction’s present. I’m not even sure I quite understand the use of such a word when discussing aesthetic issues, since it houses within it connotations of commerce, of monetary or material worth. The sort of fictions about which I care for these days aren’t concerned with such matters, or perhaps are actively working against them.

So, at least in this context, it might be useful to replace “valuable” with “significant.” If we do that, if we ask why the increasing production of critifictions is particularly significant in the context of fiction’s present, my answer would take some form of the following observation: the kind of fiction I’ve been responding to most over the last few decades, the kind that has been referred to as “innovative,” “experimental,” “alternative,” “avant-garde,” “postmodern” (all, granted, over-determined, troubled and troubling terms), has been inextricably linked with a certain critical, or, better, theoretical consciousness. From one perspective, of course, all narrativity save for those most acutely cookie-cutter varieties (Harlequin romance, pulp science fiction, potboiler porn, and so forth) is “experimental” in that it involves countless acts of exploration and discovery on the part of the author and the reader. From another, however, such a statement is devoid of nuance, a sense of the larger conversation across time and space called literary history, and an understanding of the (ir)realities concerning the pragmatics of the contemporary
American publishing industry. Maybe closer to the point would be some provisional statement along the lines that “experimental” narrativity—or “innovative,” “avant-garde,” or whatever other term we might choose to employ in this situation—is that which asks such questions as: what is narrative? what are its assumptions? what are its politics? what are its limits? how does narrative engage with the issue of representation? of identity? In other words, perhaps another way of approaching a tentative definition of “experimental” narrativity might be to suggest that it is the sort that embodies a self-reflective awareness of and engagement with theoretical inquiry, concerns, obsessions, forms. By its very presence, in other words, it evinces a self-reflective awareness concerning the problematics of language and writing.

What’s significant about the proliferation of such postgenre, postcritical prose—this collapse of criticism into its object, the ongoing rich complication of the accepted difference between privileged and subordinate discourses—is the varieties of extraordinary forms, aesthetic and political critiques, and play to which it gives rise: The Difficult Imagination, we could call it, the sort that challenges what we want to take for granted about texts (the world being one text among others).

FC: How does the collapse of “theory and fiction” affect your own writing (185)?

LO: For better or worse, I guess, my fiction is contaminated with a theoretical awareness, my criticism a fictive one. And once you’ve left the edenic garden of narrative innocence, well, there’s no turning back, no return ticket. I’ve been interested for decades, as I say, in what Raymond Federman called critifiction, but, in many ways because of my training in the academy, I tried to keep my criticism and fiction separate for a very long time, like two misbehaving children—until 1999 or so, when I began working on my novel Girl Imagined by Chance, a story about a childfree couple who invent a little one to appease the culture committed to being fruitful and multiplying, and everything changed for me.

One of the principles that governs Girl, at least in my mind, is that of “hovering”—a certain refusal, in other words, to settle that occurs at different strata in the text. Obviously there’s that hovering between a certain theoretical imagination and a certain creative one (Baudrillard is a strong presence in the book, for example), between nonfiction and fiction, between fiction and poetry, even between words and image (in many ways, Girl is ultimately a text about the difficulties inherent in the idea of representation that employs photography as its dominant metaphor). There is also the hovering at the stratum of plot concerning the invented girl’s physicality. Given the narrator’s slightly unhinged mind, it’s not surprising that his prose also exhibits a kind of hovering, a jitteriness, a failure to stick with any idea or feeling for more than a few arrhythmic heartbeats, thereby giving rise to an aesthetics of uncertainty.

Behind that aesthetics floats Wittgenstein’s ghost. What I’ve always loved about him is how, toward the end of his life, he became more and more possessed with trying to say what we might be able to know about the world with anything like conviction. The more possessed he became with the problem, however, the less he could be sure about. Something analogous seems true to me about any photograph: the more you study and contemplate one, the less you know about it. What can you say with anything like conviction about what’s going on in it? Who took it? When it was taken? What its relationship is to “reality”? What its “staged”? How much has been “authentic”? How much is “authentic”?

And one form of hovering that engaged me a great deal in Girl was between autobiography and fiction. Girl is particularly intrigued by how much our memories of ourselves, our pasts, those events we think of when we set out to construct who we are carry a deeply fictive charge, and how we
compensate for our lives being a series of distinct photographic instants in a sea of forgetfulness by generating narrative links, by turning discrete shots into filmic (and forever disputable) narrative.

That critifictional frame of mind has followed me through my last several books, and is especially ascendant in Anxious Pleasures, a retelling of Kafka’s Metamorphosis that fractures the original (which, it turns out, wasn’t strictly original to begin with) into a number of different points of view, some of which masquerade as (and some of which in fact quote) scholarly engagements with Kafka’s text. The idea in certain ways was no more complicated than showing a novella that had had a profound effect on me that I cared about it, but doing so brought me full force into the critifictional moment.

Currently I’m working on a novel that in good part is infused with the earthwork artist Robert Smithson’s theoretical writings about “entropology,” a neologism Smithson borrowed from Lévi-Strauss that holds within it both the words entropy and anthropology. Entropology, Lévi-Strauss asserts in World on Wane, “should be the word for the discipline that devotes itself to the study of [the] process of disintegration in its most highly evolved forms.” For Smithson, entropology embodied “structures in a state of disintegration” – but not in a negative sense, not with a sense of sadness and loss. Rather, for him entropology embodied the astonishing beauty inherent in the process of wearing down, of wearing out, of undoing, of continuous de-creative metamorphosis at the level, not only of geology and thermodynamics, but also of civilizations, of earthworks like his Spiral Jetty, and, ultimately, of the individuals – like you, like me.

**FC:** History is also central to your work. Can you say more about the relationship between fiction and history in your novels?

**LO:** I’m drawn to artists and thinkers out of step with their times, those who tend to proceed through paralogy rather than homology toward creation, who believe, as Lyotard once pointed out, that “invention is always born of dissenion.” Now I’m not sure how much, if anything, my Kafka, or my Nietzsche, or my van Goghs have to do with the flesh-and-blood people who once shared those names. The relationship of fiction to yesterday in writing is nothing if not mind-bogglingly tricky. Rather, those characters remain, despite the research I’ve done on them, constructs for contemplating the role of the artist or philosopher in our culture, as well as troublings incarnate (and I use the word loosely) of what we think about when we think about selfhood and how it’s scripted. That is, through their fictional iterations, my characters ask in what sense all selfhood is full-on fiction, all history and biography and memoir subsets of storytelling, what the connection might be between subjects acting in “the world” and “subjects” translated into syllables and sibilants.

My novel *Calendar of Regrets* is arguably more obsessed with these questions than most of my work. The text takes the shape of twelve interconnected narratives, one for each month of the year, all having to do with notions of travel – through space, through narrative, through (or perhaps nearly so) death itself, and, of most consequence to this conversation, through history. For the first half, each of the first eleven narratives breaks off midway through, at which point the next narrative commences. For the second half of the text, each of the first eleven narratives concludes inconclusively, but in reverse order. Hieronymous Bosch inhabits one storyline, Dan Rather another, Iphigenia another, a journalist in Burma in 1976 another, and so forth. Each of its narratives is connected to the others, not through plot events, but rather through a musical structure of recurring metaphors and images, transpositions of the same scenes and/or phrases, and temporally transmuted characters. The result, I like to hope, is a multiple narrative about narrativity itself, the human passion for trying to make sense through story-telling, how we tell ourselves and our cosmoses again and again in an attempt to stabilize them, but *Calendar* is also an exploration about the relationship of past to prose.

It’s endlessly fascinating to me, these concerns we’ve been thinking about at least as far back as Hayden White’s *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century*: how historians don’t simply find history but actively shape it by arranging events in a certain order; by striving to answer questions (i.e., to narrativize) about what happened, when, how, and why; by deciding which events to include and exclude (i.e., to edit); by stressing this moment and subordinating that (i.e., by purposefully ideologizing)—which is to say by making a kind of fiction out of sixteenth-century ’s-Hertogenbosch, or last week’s Topeka, or whenever and wherever.

But writing that imagines itself to be history creates the illusion of endeavoring to get every bloodless fact right, whereas writing that imagines itself to be fiction can do something shockingly different: it can allow a reader to experience an experience from inside out, from within a player’s consciousness, from multiple subjective perspectives, can release the scent of diesel into the air, the background
sounds of trams clanking on the streets bordering Oosterpark in Amsterdam, the way the light falls on a field of wheat at twilight after a hot day in Auvers-sur-Oise, the imagined cadences of a fanatic’s voice. That’s what really engages me: the complexities of a moment felt.

From that point of view, the point of view Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, whereby texts express both intense self-reflexivity about their own processes and (incommensurately) “historical” “events” and “personages,” such a fraught aesthetic and ontological gesture is definitional, I suppose, of the postmodern mode of consciousness, if we still want to use that adjective.

FC: You mention the “(ir)realities concerning the pragmatics of the contemporary American publishing industry.” Could you say more about such pragmatics, both as a writer and as the Chair of the Board of Directors at Fiction Collective Two?

LO: If we checked in on American publishing in New York in the early sixties, we would find more than a hundred thriving houses bringing out a plethora of innovative writers: Coover, Pynchon, Gass, Ishmael Reed, John Barth, Donald Barthelme. All that began to change with the recession brought on by the 1973 oil crisis. Attention in the publishing industry shifted increasingly and inextricably from daring artistic investigations to the bottom line. Great editors were laid off. Publishers went under or were absorbed by other publishers. What we’ve seen over the fifty years or so, then, is what one might call the McDonaldization of U.S. publishing. (We’re back, I’m afraid, to my ongoing analogy between culture and fast-food franchises.)

In a sense, then, the worst has already happened in the world of books. By and large they have come to seem over the last four or five decades an increasingly conservative, market-driven form of communication. In addition to the publishing situation in Manhattan, even bestsellers now exist in a secondary position in our culture to the spectacles of film, television, the web, the Xbox, the iPod, the iPhone, the iPad. Currently not a hundred thriving houses, but three behemoth media corporations dominate commercial publishing while employing the print arms of their swollen conglomerates as tax write-offs. They consider low sales figures and small audiences tantamount to failure. That is, they view their products exactly the same way executives at McDonald’s view theirs. More dishartening still, many independent presses have decided to mimic in miniature this preposterous paradigm rather than trying to subvert, re-imagine, or otherwise stand in opposition to it.

That isn’t to suggest, of course, that Manhattan isn’t bringing out some vibrant and surprising work (one need think no farther than José Saramago, David Mitchell, Don DeLillo, Lydia Davis, and Mark Danielewski), but it is to suggest that Manhattan is bringing out less of it – much less of it – than it once did. Nor would I want to suggest that alternative presses don’t bring out some embarrassingly bland, simple, sloppy work. Still, those alternative presses by and large remain sites of energizing aesthetic, political, and philosophical resistance. They remind us that our fiction, and hence our lives, can always be other than they are. They exist as possibility spaces where everything can and should be thought and attempted, where the work of such corporate authors as Dan Brown, John Grisham, or Danielle Steele simply isn’t seen as enlightening, let alone engaging.

It’s as though, next to the universe of commercial publishing, there has come to exist an alternate one, à la one of Borges’ stories, composed of (often innovative) authors who live a completely different existence with completely different aims and ethics. They bring out each other’s work, read and review it, teach it at colleges and universities across the country, study it in critical essays, urge others to start up journals and presses to help get the word out about the fiction they love, fiction that takes the act of exploratory, frequently demanding writing earnestly—all that, and those people write their own fiction, too. I think of them, with the greatest respect and admiration, as literary activists – people like Lidia Yuknavitch at Chiasmus Press, Ted Pelton at Starcherone, Steve Gillisat Dzanc.

If it’s the case that the early twenty-first century is the worst of times for American fiction because of those market pressures that favor novels and short stories collections that want to be films when they grow up, it’s also the best of times because of these sorts of people. Competition in their universe has been replaced with collaboration. Corporate paradigms have been replaced with collective ones.

FC2’s story in particular, which now forms part of our country’s past, points as well to one future of American publishing by offering a successful model based on alliance and partnership, a production paradigm run by and for authors, the idea that it is less important to make a profit than it is to disseminate significant experimental projects. The result is to remind ourselves with every book printed in this universe that there are exciting options that stand against the commercial milieu’s structuring, functioning, and ambitions. There are
ways of caring about innovative fiction that Manhattan, to put it bluntly, can’t begin to begin to fathom. If executives there exhibit a McDonaldization Effect on publishing, the small, independent presses that have been proliferating joyously across the States over the last two or three decades offer the equivalent of an amazing mom-and-pop Vietnamese restaurant down the block.

The one constant for Fiction Collective, and now Fiction Collective Two, is that there have been no constants except a commitment to our mission statement: “to publish books of high quality and exceptional ambition whose style, subject matter, or form push the limits of American publishing and reshape our literary culture.” The Collective has always stood against, as one of its founders, Peter Spielberg (others, by the way, included Jonathan Baumbach, Steve Katz, and Ronald Sukenick), pointed out in 1974, its first year in existence, “books designed by cereal packagers, marketed by used-car salesmen . . . and ruled or overruled by accountants.” That’s more the case now than ever before, I’m happy to say. The Collective fashioned itself as an adaptable, flexible entity, and here we are more than thirty-five years later (originally the idea was to put together a literary experiment that might last two or three, tops), with the help of such leaders as Curt White, R. M. Berry, and Cris Mazza, having brought out some of the finest and most diverse innovative writers of the second half of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first: Brian Evenson, Toby Olson, Leslie Scalapino, Steve Tomasula, Raymond Federman, Lidia Yuknavitch, Harold Jaffe, Stephen Graham Jones, Kate Bernheimer, Noy Holland, Doug Rice, Samuel R. Delany, Michael Martone, Clarence Major, Vanessa Place, Melanie Rae Thom, and so on. In addition, we established two contests to help identify and celebrate innovative writers not yet published by the Collective: the Sukenick, which comes with $1000 and publication by FC, and the Doctorow, which comes with $15,000 and publication by FC2.

**FC:** You also teach at the University of Utah. How does your understanding of formally innovative writing’s current state and goals affect your teaching and translate into the institutional setting of the university?

**LO:** It’s pretty easy, unfortunately, to write merely competent fiction—the kind cranked out in most of the 350-or-so creative writing programs across the U.S.: so-called well-crafted domestic realism where character is plump and Freudian, style is transparent, plot is pleasantly arced, and adversity always gives way to luminous moments of human connection and insight. My own approach to teaching writing is to short-circuit that approach, become self-conscious about it, invite my students to conceive of fiction writing as an opportunity to explore, question, and rethink narrativity and its assumptions—all in workshops that are the opposite of therapy sessions. I continuously urge my students to remain curious and realize it’s only at the brink of failure that liberating, illuminating breakthroughs occur. I continuously urge them to keep in mind, while they’re composing, Beckett’s lines in Westward Ho: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

At their best, I think, creative writing programs can be special, energizing zones of mutual support, mutual challenge, and personal-aesthetic growth by means of exposure to a multiplicity of challenging voices and approaches, both “creative” and “theoretical,” both contemporary and historical. (In my workshops, we’re as likely to spend time discussing an essay by Bataille or Barthes, a novel by Ourednik or Pavic, a story collection by Gary Lutz or Lucy Corin, a poetry collection by Susan Howe or Stephanie Strickland, a hypermedial project by Steve Tomasula or Young-Hae Change, as discussing student work.) At their worst, creative writing programs can be stultifying assembly lines that spit out flat, faded, predictable well-made products in order to fill classrooms and make money for deans. But in either case—and perhaps this is their greatest contribution to our culture—workshops generate careful readers, thoughtful readers, close readers, self-reflective readers at a time when many literature courses teach how to think in sweeping ideological terms while employing texts in quite general terms as symptoms or samples of this position or that.

When talking about them, it’s useful to keep in mind that creative writing programs usually exist within English departments that usually exist within some form of humanities divisions that exist within the larger institution of the college or university that is in ongoing crisis due to recent budget cuts in the wake of the economic collapse, but, more profoundly, due to the corporatization of higher education. Just yesterday I came across a story emblematic of this trend in, of all places, USA Today. A biology professor at L.S.U., Dominique G. Homberger, was removed from her teaching position mid-semester for refusing to artificially inflate her grades. Apparently her transgressions, according to those in power, included giving quizzes at the beginning of each class, both to check on attendance and encourage students to keep up with reading, and failing to grade her tests on a curve (believing “students must achieve mastery of the subject matter, not just achieve more mastery than the worst students in the course”). Not only
was she yanked from the classroom, but the administration also raised her students’ grades after Homberger left—a gesture that brings up all sorts of questions about grade ballooning and professor autonomy, but also one that suggests just how much our institutions of higher learning are becoming the equivalent of (once again) fast-food franchises that value customer satisfaction over something like real intellectual complexity and learning.

Put that together with continuously smaller numbers of full-time faculty, greater numbers of lecturers and graduate assistants behind the desk at the front of the room, more work for less pay, fewer raises, overcrowded classes, necessarily less face-time between professor and student, necessarily shorter comments on papers and stories and tests as a result, the proliferation of online courses that sabotage human interaction and Socratic pedagogical models, more emphasis on silly national rankings that privilege quantity over quality, more emphasis on “outcomes assessment” rather than thought, and a departmental atmosphere virtually everywhere shot through with a sense of being continuously under the gun (which invariably leads to greater tension and petty squabbles), and I wonder how many of us will be able to recognize what higher learning has become in another five or seven years.

All of which is also to say my relationship to the academy is conflicted at best. The thing that keeps me here now, is the extraordinary zone, even in its currently decadent form, called the classroom. It’s a zone that exists nowhere else in our culture, and currently decadent form, called the classroom. It’s a zone that exists nowhere else in our culture, and

**FC:** For you, formal innovation allows aesthetic and political developments. Can you elaborate of the ways in which the aesthetic and the political coincide in your work?

**LO:** A few years ago, you may remember, the N. E. A. notoriously questioned 17,000 adults about their literary preferences and habits. It defined “literature,” I should mention, as “any type of fiction, poetry, and plays [sic] that … respondents felt should be included and not just what literary critics might consider literature.” Consequently, opening one of the 723 novels Barbara Cartland wrote during her lifetime (and which have sold more than a billion copies worldwide) is equivalent to opening The Unnameable, say, or Gravity’s Rainbow. Even so, the survey, published under the title Reading at Risk, discovered that since 1982 there has been a loss of roughly twenty million readers in the U.S. (a number representing a ten percent drop in readership), and that reading rates are declining among all demographic groups regardless of gender, ethnicity, education, age, or income level, with the steepest drop in the youngest groups—i.e., those between 18-24 and 25-34, respectively. Although annual sales for all types of books were predicted to top $44 billion by 2008, up 58 percent from the year before, only 46.7 percent of adults say they are reading “literature” (remember what passes for same), compared with 56.9 percent two decades ago. Of those surveyed, 95.7 percent said they preferred watching television to reading, 60 percent attending a movie, and 55 percent lifting weights. “At the current rate of loss,” the N.E.A. concluded, “literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century.”

The survey points to the rise of electronic media—especially television, movies, and the internet—as the primary culprits for drawing our culture’s attention away from fiction, poetry, and drama. Yet the problem is not simply that people are reading less. It is also that they are reading easier, more naively, less rigorously.

In addition, we’re talking about the nature of the narratives people experience daily—both inside and outside books. In The Middle Mind, Curtis White contends that the stories generated and sustained by the American political system, entertainment industry, and academic trade have helped teach us over the last half century or so by their insidious simplicity, plainness, and ubiquity how not to think for ourselves. I doubt much needs to be said about how recent political narratives of the United States have led to the “starkest and most deadly” poverty of imagination, nor about how, “on the whole, our entertainment … is a testament to our ability and willingness to endure boredom … and pay for it.” A little probably should be said, though, about White’s take on the consequences of this dissemination of corporate consciousness throughout academia. For him, the contemporary university “shares with the entertainment industry its simple institutional inertia”; “so-called dominant ‘critical paradigms’ tend to stabilize in much the same way that assumptions about ‘consumer demand’ make television programming predictable.” If, in other words, our students want to talk about Spider-Man, Stephen King, and hip-hop in the classroom, well, that’s what they’re going to get to talk about, since that’s how English departments fill seats, and filling seats is how they make money, and making money is what it’s all about … isn’t it? Who needs Wallace Stevens or New Criticism? J. M. Coetzee, Shelley Jackson, or Carole Maso?
Unfortunately, the result – particularly in the wake of Cultural Studies – has been the impulse to shew close, meticulous engagement with the page; to search texts “for symptoms supporting the sociopolitical or theoretical template of the critic”; to flatten out distinctions between, say, the value of studying James Joyce or Kathy Acker or Ben Marcus, on the one hand, and Britney Spears or Bart Simpson or that cute, feisty gang from South Park, on the other; and therefore unknowingly to embrace and maintain the very globalized corporate culture that Cultural Studies claims to critique.

What we are left with, then, is the death or at least the dying, as I mentioned earlier, of Difficult Imagination – one that often comes coupled with the charge of exclusiveness, snobbery, and elitism leveled by frustrated, faintly anxious readers at disruptive, transgressive, nuanced, intricate texts dedicated in myriad ways to confronting, complicating, interrogating, and even perhaps for brief periods of time short-circuiting the bird-brained, user-friendly narratives produced by our dominant cultures that would like to see such narratives told and retold until they begin to pass for something like truths about the human condition.

I’m not at all sure, when discussing the question of the avant-garde (or whatever we decide to call it) and accessibility, what we really mean by the latter term, since “accessibility” is one of those highly subjective words that, as Nabokov claimed of “reality,” should always appear between quotation marks. Nor am I clear about whom a work should be “accessible” – an M.F.A. student, a bus driver, an associate professor of biology, a rancher, a river guide? Nor do I understand why many people seem to believe texts in general should be more than less “accessible.” But what I want to suggest is that, whatever we may think of when we use that word, texts in general should be just the opposite. They should demand greater labor on the part of readers, even a good degree of uneasiness, rather than effortlessness and comfort. Why? Because I want to suggest that texts that make us work, make us think and feel in unusual ways, attempt to wake us in the midst of our dreaming, and dream us in the midst of our waking, are more useful epistemologically, ontologically, and politically than texts that make us feel warm, fuzzy, and forgetful.

So when I speak of renewing writing of the Difficult Imagination, I am not referring to the renewal of a series of vanguard theoretical constraints, doctrines, or trends, so much as the renewal of a narratological possibility space. What is important about its products is that they come into being often and widely, because in them we discover the perpetual manifestation of Nietzsche’s notion of the unconditional, Derrida’s of a privileged instability, Viktor Shklovsky’s ambition for art, and Martin Heidegger’s for philosophy: the return, as Curtis White writes, through complexity and challenge (not predictability and ease) to perception and contemplation.

Because of its natureless nature, writing of the Difficult Imagination will always make you feel a little foolish, a little tongue-tied, a little excluded, before an example of it. That’s a good thing. You will find yourself standing there in a kind of baffled wonder that will insist upon a slightly new mode of perceiving, a slightly new way of speaking, to capture what it is you just experienced. I began in the late eighties writing fairly conventional, if faintly magical-realist, fiction. By the mid-nineties, that had changed—in part because I simply lost interest in my earlier works’ familiarity. After my novel Burnt, the architecture of my sentences and narrative became increasingly more intricate, deliberately resistant to default reading methods. Emblematic of this impulse, is my novel *Head in Flames*, a collage text composed of chips of sensation, observation, memory, and quotation shaped into a series of narraticules told by three alternating voices, each inhabiting a different font and aesthetic/political/existential space. The first belongs to Vincent van Gogh on the day he shot himself in Auvers in July 1890. The second to Theo van Gogh (Vincent’s brother’s great grandson) on the day he was assassinated in Amsterdam in November 2004. The third to Mohammed Bouyeri, Theo’s murderer, outraged by the filmmaker’s collaboration with controversial politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali on a ten-minute experimental short criticizing Muslim mistreatment of women. In the film – it’s called *Submission*, the translation of the Arabic word “Islam” – four Muslim women narrate how they were abused; their naked bodies are veiled with semi-transparent shrouds as they kneel in prayer and Qur’anic verses advocating the subjugation of women are projected onto their flesh. My intention is that the aggregate unfurls into an exploration of art’s purpose, religion’s increasingly dominant role as engine of politics and passion, the involvedness of foreignness and assimilation, and, ultimately, the limits of tolerance.

Writing from the Difficult Imagination reminds us, then, that language, ideas, and experience are profoundly complicated things. But such talk may seem to beg the question: can the Difficult Imagination’s project ever hope for something resembling “victory,” however we may define it?
The answer is absolutely not. And maybe. Staging the inaccessible is an always-already futile project. And an indispensable one. Its purpose is never a change, but a changing – a unending profiting from the impossible, from using our marginal status as innovationists to find an optic through which we can re-involve ourselves with history and technique, present ourselves as a constant (if, admittedly, embarrassingly minor) prompt that things can always be different than they are. Any such changing will occur – if it occurs at all – locally. That is, such writing will never generate a macro-revolution, but a necklace of micro-ones: nearly imperceptible, nearly ahistorical clicks in consciousness that come when you meet a startling, illuminating, taught fictive thought experiment. Then again, what else could any of us possibly ask for from a narrative?

FC: You suggest that “texts that make us work, make us think and feel in unusual ways, attempt to wake us in the midst of our dreaming, and dream us in the midst of our waking, are more useful” than others that do the opposite. Yet, some think that when this “work” does not come from a direct response to current pressures in the content of fiction, it cannot be political. Are you implying that texts can resist, or at least question, the cultural developments you mention without addressing them directly in their content?

LO: I mean to suggest that texts can critique dominant cultures, not only through their content, but also through their structure, through their use of language, through their difficulty, through the ergodic process one must learn to negotiate them.

I tend to be fairly uninterested in texts whose politics – whatever those politics may be – are situated primarily in their content and are primarily effortless and obvious rather than involved and nuanced. I’m left blank before a novel like, say, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, which wears its predictable politics on its sleeve, despite some absolutely beautiful language. (I’m afraid I find it overrated.) I remember Marjorie Perloff once asking me, with reference to it, whether there were really still any readers out there who might come into contact with the book who would need convincing that slavery and slavery’s ghost were bad things. Morrison’s novel, that is, is telling us what we already know in ways we already know it. I simply don’t find that a particularly appealing reading experience. I’m not suggesting novels invested unsubtly in identity or leftist or conservative or other politics shouldn’t be read. I’m just suggesting I’m not going to be their most ideal reader.

Rather, I’m interested in the opportunities inherent in, for instance, Mark Danielewski’s House of Leaves, or even in any individual sentence written by Ben Marcus or Joe Wenderoth – writing which seems, at least on the face of it, at least in terms of its content, nearly apolitical much of the time. Such writing’s formalistics – different as they will surely be from example to example – are (as Samuel R. Delany once said of science fiction) tools to help us think. House of Leaves, for instance, challenges us through its narratological, epistemological, and ontological complexities to contemplate how we narrativize, and why; reminds us that at root the word narration is related to the Proto-Indo-European word gno – to know. Every Marcus or Wenderoth sentence asks us what a sentence is, how it functions, how language languages, what its relationship is to the things of the universe, how it is always already manipulated, and asks us by each sentence’s very presence on the page to consider by whom and to what end. Again, such writing, by its otherness, tells us to remember variety and change at an existential level, which strikes me as an immensely significant political act.

Limit Texts, I suppose you could call instances of this strain of writing (varieties, Lydia Davis might say, of disturbance) – those that take various elements of narrativity to their brink so we can never think of them in quite the same ways again. To the brink, and then over. Perhaps Grenztexte, after Karl Jaspers’s notion of Grenzsituationen – moments, that is, accompanied by anxiety, in which the human mind confronts the restrictions of its existing forms; moments that allow us to abandon, fleetingly, the securities of our limitedness and enter new realms of self-consciousness. They’re the sorts of texts that, once you’ve taken them down off the shelf, you can’t put back up again. By being in the world, they ask us to embrace a politics of thought, freedom, radical skepticism. I imagine which texts comprise such a category will be different for each of us, depending on who we are, and where, and whence we’ve come. For me, they include such weirdly sundry texts as Kathy Acker’s Blood and Guts in High School, Michael Joyce’s Afternoon: A Story, Robbe-Grillet’s Jealousy, Steve Tomasula’s VAS, Jen Bervin’s The Desert, Stuart Moulthrop’s Reagan Library.

So I guess what I’m ultimately suggesting is that meaning carries meaning, but structuration carries meaning as well.

FC: When reading Head in Flames, I found myself wondering about which font of the story attracted me the most on each page, which one seduced me when I did not focus on processing the words only. I thought about what called my attention, and I
I was writing finishing the first pass, I traveled to Finland on a couldn't have articulated why at first. Shortly after which didn't feel at all right to me, although I existence for her in order to appease our culture of creates a make-believe daughter and make-believe draft, although slanted in content (a young couple this idea of structuration-as-meaning occurred when. Right now we're working on a series of fake diseases for her ongoing installation project, Once we began working closely together, the page began to lose its invisibility for me. It became real, a conscious element in the authorship of any text. I obviously returned to that notion of white space as Nordic formalistics in Head in Flames, and, as you noticed, also became interested in how font itself influences how we read, how we think of the text before us, how we (usually unconsciously) process it. I suppose for me there's some weird synesthesia at play. Early on in the writing process, my imagination came to associate a gentle, graceful Times font with Vincent Van Gogh. The brash bold version of that font seemed quintessentially Theo, a type of Michael Moore figure (only more so) in the Netherlands. And a font from an entirely different universe elementary, brutal, even –felt right for Mohammed: a Courier for the courier delivering a message that the western world doesn’t want to hear; one can’t see that font, I think, without hearing the loud, unsettling clacks of the manual typewriter.

From the early nineties on, my partner Andi and I also began collaborating on text-image collages. Right now we’re working on a series of fake diseases for her ongoing installation project, Freak Show. Once we began working closely together, the page began to lose its invisibility for me. It became real, a conscious element in the authorship of any text. Recently, Andi and I collaborated on an entire text-image collage chapter in Calendar of Regrets.

Another important moment for me with respect to this idea of structuration-as-meaning occurred when I was writing Girl Imagined by Chance. Its first draft, although slanted in content (a young couple creates a make-believe daughter and make-believe existence for her in order to appease our culture of reproduction), was quite conventional in form, which didn’t feel at all right to me, although I couldn’t have articulated why at first. Shortly after finishing the first pass, I traveled to Finland on a Fulbright for half a year and rediscovered those stunning pared-down lines, not of northern European literature, but of northern European architecture – the sort imagined by Alvar Aalto, the so-called father of modern Nordic design, himself intrigued by the cubist and collage impulses in artists like Braque and Picasso. I worked on Girl almost every morning while in Turku, a town about an hour north of Helsinki by train, where Andi and I lived and where I taught, and by the third month there I noticed the sentences in my rewrite of the novel had changed dramatically, become leaner, more compact, something like more lyrical. The movement from one to the next worked less by conventional transition than by collage-like juxtaposition. I also became increasingly aware of white space – how the reduced, purified sentences floated in it on the page in ways that struck me as beautiful and somehow sad. I’m sure it was an easy step from that emphasis on the visual and notions of reproduction the appropriated and manipulated photographs that introduced each chapter.

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So the page has become increasingly part of the stage in my writing, affording, I like to think, it’s own contribution to the dynamics of the text, its own awareness of the author’s role in the production of the text’s materiality, how a text matters. I can’t imagine that having happened without books like Federman’s Double or Nothing being in the world. To know they exist, at least for me, is to always-already be influenced by them.
and I suspect that, for you, it does not express a void or a lack. Could you say more about how you consider the white space, its materiality, its role?

**LO:** White space is never blank space, never void, in writing. It is always something else, even in the most conventional short story or novel, where it functions as a visual announcement that a modification in time, space, or point of view is in the process of occurring. In innovative fiction, that function widens a good deal, often becoming something close to graphic metaphor. In Carole Maso’s *Ava,* for instance, the wash of whiteness on the page suggests the wash of death itself that is infecting the protagonist through the course of the novel. In Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves,* white space is emblematic of the not-knowing that pervades the text, the Nothing at the text’s and the house’s heart. In Beckett’s *How It Is,* it’s a kind of musical notation: the breaths the protagonist takes on his crawl through the mud. There’s that startling splash of it following the final period of the nine-page syntactic erasure that “concludes” his Unnameable, as well: a torrent of white silence that produces what we that couldn’t exist in its present form without the illusion of seamlessness in the finished product, which illusion, interestingly, can generate a stronger sense of the uncanny in the reader/viewer – you know, something so perfectly perfect that it actually unsettles. One image in our fake diseases project, by way of illustration, shows an elderly woman with her mouth sutured shut. Andi digitally manipulated the photograph of sutures she had on her own leg (the result – long story – of a chainsaw accident she suffered several years ago) and, as it were, grafted those onto that woman’s face, which was appropriated from, I believe, a medical textbook. The consequence is so realistic as to be doubly, deeply strange, other and not other and not not other simultaneously. With the photographs in *Girl,* and those in *Calendar,* the manipulations are subtler, but the consequence is the same: a trompe l’oeil that produces what we hope are disconcerting effects on the viewer, a sense of defamiliarization, a rupture of habitual perception. Andi and I are also exploring, in another chapter in *Calendar,* as I mentioned, the idea of layout, and, in another, I’m exploring words as images, words as having a very real visual component to them.

I guess, speaking of which, I’ve always been a weirdly visual being. Living with Andi’s remarkable sense of sight for the last thirty years has brought that out in spades. And I’ve always been attracted to highly visual writers like Laird Hunt, Guy Davenport, and (oddly, perhaps, considering his blandly suburban plots and characters and forms) John Updike; always been attracted to page manipulators like Federman and Tomasula; always been attracted to painters, sculptors, new-media artists, filmmakers; always been fascinated by how the purely visual can usually do a lot more work a lot more quickly than the purely linguistic (think, for instance, of any four square inches of a polyptych by Bosch, or dense panel in Gibbons’ and Moore’s *The Watchmen,* and recall how many narratives are at play there, how many intimations), but also by how (to echo N. Katherine Hayles’ notion of M.S.A., or Media Specific Analysis) the visual performs in remarkably different ways in different media, that each medium rethinks what the visual is and can do, and how it can do it.

Once you begin thinking about visual elements on a page, it’s very hard not to think about visual elements on a page, not to think about every page as more than a vehicle for words marching like so many black ants down from the upper left-hand corner to the lower right-hand with the only
impediment in front of them being the occasional punctuation mark or new-paragraph indentation.

**FC:** You mention your collaboration with Andi, and you have explored collaboration throughout your career. Our discussion is a different mode of collaboration, one that involves a weaving of ideas through our written exchange. Would you care to comment on your views concerning the interview form?

**LO:** These are the strangest things for me, these written interviews that take their course over a period of months and yet give the illusion of unedited spontaneity, improvisation, facility … while in reality taking the form of carefully constructed artifacts – fictions (like memoir, like history), perhaps we could call them, that masquerade as nonfiction, as unmediated structures of communication, even as they meticulously stage voice, character (which should never feel like character), plot, rhythm, you name it. I’m reminded how, later in life, Nabokov refused to give real-time ones because he was keenly self-conscious about how stuttery and stupid he could sound in them. Even for those he did participate in that impersonated face-to-face ones, Nabokov would, as I recall (and, needless to say, I could be inventing a fiction as I write this), sit up in his room at the Montreux Palace Hotel in Switzerland and have the interviewer sit down in the lobby. The interviewer would then write a question on a card, which he would send up. Nabokov would write out his response, which he would send down. Such a process allowed them, as our interview does us, to think in slow motion. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Who in the world wants to watch an interviewer and writer think in real time? The consequence, at best, would usually be the same as art speeded up and flattened out: entertainment rather than illumination, heat rather than light. At worst, it would be all muddle. I’m grateful for the opportunity here to shape what amounts to a kind of (to return to one of our touch points during our conversation) collage of mini-essays, and, although, looking back, I hear silence after silence among what we’ve said that could have been filled with interesting sound, we’ve covered some wonderfully productive, suggestive ground. I greatly appreciate it, greatly appreciate your sharp questions, Flore, that have taken us both into spaces we didn’t know we were heading.

And, of course, what we’ve generated has underscored performatively the sense that collaboration is the basic mode of most writing, most creation, although our culture usually likes to repress that fact by embracing the washed-out Romantic myth of the solitary artist creating in the solitary mind in the solitary room. All published stories and novels are collaborative projects that involve an author, other texts with which he or she is in dialogue (either consciously or unconsciously), various ghosts in the machine, editor or editors, publisher, printer, reviewers, bloggers, teachers, critics, people who set up reading series, and on and on.

The only thing we’re doing here that most writers aren’t is acknowledging the obvious: we’re producing something neither of us could have produced alone, and have thereby taken ourselves to destinations we couldn’t have imagined before beginning our journey, and most likely not even then.
Theories of Forgetting

Lance Olsen

And then the man opens his eyes to find himself standing at the kitchen island. He is studying, through light the texture of television static, the cereal bowl on the granite countertop before him. It must be morning—four, four thirty: that’s what he would guess. The cereal bowl, black, black or gray, is half full of granola and the man realizes there is something in his left hand and something in his right. An open carton of strawberry yogurt. A spoon with aerodynamic design. To the best of his knowledge, he is making breakfast.

This thought happens to him and the man hears a noise and raises his head. He thinks cat before he remembers there isn’t any cat before he remembers there was no cat, but maybe now there is. A few seconds, and he settles on the idea of floorboards adapting, a breeze bothering things outside, even though it is summer and he knows there aren’t many breezes at this time of day at this time of year.

He scoops the yogurt from carton into bowl and stirs the granola from the bottom up. At the counter he discovers a large fruit dish beneath the paper towel holder, except it is a different one, chrome grid, with different kinds of fruit in it. A pale white apple, which would, he imagines, appear green in daylight. One orange, which the man picks up and rotates and sniffs and puts back down. Two bananas, one splotched with biomorphic stains, and he chooses the other. Opening drawers, closing drawers, he locates the silverware again and selects a knife, a steak knife, no, just a regular blunt-end knife, with which he cuts up the peeled banana over the yogurt and granola and listens to the wet sound of slices ticking into the mix.

This is when he becomes aware of the spiky scent of ground coffee and notices the coffee maker beneath the cabinets near the microwave. The machine must be black because it blends in almost entirely with the countertop. He can see it and then he can’t and then he can. The one they had was black, too. No, silver. No, brushed aluminum. He would guess two tablespoons of beans in the wire mesh filter. He would guess the timer set last night.

This thought happens to him and the man hears someone take a quick breath across the room and he raises his head.

A stranger is suspended in the doorway between the hall to the bedrooms and this place, the one the man currently finds himself occupying. He is in the process of lifting a spoonful of granola and yogurt and banana to his lips, semi-thinking about how a glass of orange juice would taste good, possibly recalling and possibly misrecalling a carton on the shelf in the refrigerator amid a calamity of white light behind a yellow plastic mustard bottle, a quarter full container of red salsa sauce, a pickle jar with two pickles wafting in cloudy pea-green brine, an open can of peaches in sugar water covered loosely with a sheet of Saran wrap.

A woman. The woman. She is scrutinizing the stillness the man has become. He wonders if she can really see him or if she can only sense the accumulation of his body in space. Should he remain motionless? Should he continue eating? She is smallish and several years older than he is and maybe she wears glasses and maybe she has left them on the bedside table when she got up to investigate the noises coming from her kitchen. His kitchen. Her kitchen. It used to be his. Now it is gray hair, shoulder-length gray hair, and he thinks kindergarten teacher in a pink quilted robe. He thinks: I can easily take her.

He feels rather than sees her part her lips to speak and recalls he is wearing a t-shirt, a plain white t-shirt, and saggy worn jeans and a pair of new white sneakers. The t-shirt and sneakers are glowing in this dimness, he guesses, giving him away, and then she is saying: "You’re doing exactly what here?"

She adds something he can’t make out. "What?" he says.

The noise, she says. Her voice is younger than she looks. Someone in her thirties. Someone in her forties. I’m not the noise, he says. You’re the noise. I hear things, she says. I come out to check and there’s nothing here.

She is holding something in her hand. A modest pistol. What they call a subcompact, with names like Bobcat, with names like Taurus, and the way
she annunciates makes him wonder how many bridges and caps and onlays she has in her mouth, how many teeth are her own. The pistol is pointed at him.

I’m thinking maybe mice, she says. Squirrels. Animal sounds. I’m thinking maybe my house wears down around me a little bit every time I go to sleep.

No, he decides, a pack of cigarettes.

It’s been months, she says. How many months has it been?

No, a pistol.

When did you buy? he says.

Buy?

The house. When did you buy the house, this house?

You’re asking me the questions? I’m asking you the questions.

They are both quiet, he remembering how his dentist once explained to him how teeth are perpetually adrift in your aging gums, forever migrating, no matter who you are or what you try to do about it.

Three months, she says. Three and a half.

No, a cell phone.

Three and a half, he says. Five, six.

He steps over to the sink, spoons the contents of the black or gray bowl down the drain, flips on the water, the garbage disposal; flips off the garbage disposal, the water.

You just come in? she says to his back. You just do this?

I don’t take anything.

Food. You take food. And then … what? You eat? Clean the plates? Put them away?

The man dries the bowl and spoon with the luminous dishtowel on the stove front, replaces the bowl in the cabinet, the spoon in the drawer.

I eat off the plates you’ve eaten off? she asks.

She adds: The doors are locked. The windows. The one that looks onto the deck? he says, facing her again, leaning back against the granite countertop. That one? The lock only feels like it locks.

You know this?

The catch. It’s broken.

He is moving effortlessly. Her kitchen. His. He squints and she grows younger. He squints and she grows older. He experienced the same effect when twice he hovered over her sleeping body in bed. Her face kept changing. He couldn’t get over it. Her face kept becoming other people. He recalls being mildly impressed by the resonance, the tenacity, of her snore. She had a white scar over her left eyebrow that suggested a grain of rice or a flatworm.

The man becomes aware the light surrounding him is resolving toward what is the word? Legibility. The light surrounding him is resolving toward legibility: colors rising out of the room’s complex aspects, shapes. He notes her robe isn’t pink. It is a difficult shade of blue. Blue or gray, but definitely not pink. It isn’t quilted, either. The word is terry cloth.

He is fairly sure the woman is wearing matching slippers and all at once she isn’t suspended anymore. She is planted on the planet just like he is. She is speaking to him just like he is speaking to her.

I’ve already called the police, she is saying. Just so you know. I’ve already called them.

Do you like the house? he asks.

Before I came out. I called them from the bedroom. I want to be transparent about this.

Its character. I believe that’s what you call it. Do you like its character?

They’ll be here any minute. Like on one of those reality cop shows.

The word bungalow, he says.

I work for the phone company, okay? I answer the phones. I listen to complaints. That’s what I do for a living. What have I got you could possibly want? Her face, he sees: she is wearing a surgical mask.


The man repeats the word corbels and becomes aware the woman’s cell phone is on. He can see fuzzy phosphorescence radiating from it and he understands the line is open. Somewhere a 911 operator is listening in on their conversation, recording, evaluating the dimensions of what is being said, and with this recognition the man becomes conscious he no longer has a lot to add to what they have already said. He does have a lot and then he doesn’t, and so, in a quick, relaxed series of gestures, he pivots, cuts across the kitchen, unlocks the sliding glass door, glances back at the woman who is now raising the phone to her ear and parting her lips to speak.

See you soon, he says, and steps through.
...O000O00, then I was downtown, right?
Trying to remember whatever it was that you wanted me
to remember, he apologized to Abril, when I
found myself in front of this granite pillar
rising from a pedestal, a tidy pyramid of
bowling balls at each corner, a huge stone
Eagle at the top, even a poem:

_Till the Years of Earth are Over_
_And the Skies Gathered like a Scroll_
(or some such)

... 

_We Remember The Union Army_
_Erected, Chamber of Commerce, 1939._

Words cast in bronze (now green).
And I’m thinking, said Bop, that that’s like 1939 - 1862 = 72, 71 years after the Civil War. So what did they know about it?
Them and their bowling balls.
Or maybe they were supposed to be cannonballs.
Did any of them, the artist, poet, or businessmen who made the memorial, fight in the Civil War?
Was anyone from the Civil War even alive in 1939?
A matter of representation.
Or knew the difference between a bowling ball and a cannon ball? It’s not impossible. Some squirt, a drummer boy say, 15, 16, mans-up in 1867 just as the war ends, and so survives to make memories another day. That means he’d be like 94 in 1939, which is possible. But then you gotta wonder, how much did this squirt see? How sharp’s this geezer’s recall? Not that some kids aren’t wide-eyed, not that some geezers aren’t sharp as tacks at 94, or even 100. Even good bowlers. But still, you see the point. This granite memorial isn’t at all like those memorials to victims of highway crashes, or drive-by or schoolyard shootings where the photos, flowers, and teddy bears pile up before the bodies are cold. The wounds still fresh. Too fresh. An outrush of emotion. Too much to bear. Can’t have that. Can you imagine? A forty-foot granite teddy bear? No, better to wait.

7,000 corpses scattered across the fields of Pennsylvania, blackening in the summer heat.
Better granite bowling balls. That’s what makes history history. And not journalism, or memoir. The forgetting. The not being there.

Dear Diary,
I’ll get back to you. . .
72 years later.
The mistake or fraud or whatever was the dispute over it, in that book. Hoaxes. But that part about the bombs, and bodies and the dead. The last of them died in 1956. They gave him a tee-shirt: I Survived the Civil War. You forgot about me, May or June accused, because you didn’t want to talk about it. Didn’t want the tee-shirt. Some will say. No, Calloway wasn’t my uncle. That’s if you believe my other uncle, Cab’s brother, who loved to tell the story. Of course I was only a kid when he died. And he was pretty old—a geezer actually. Who liked to embellish things, gild his words, leave out details, too, or arrange facts to make a better story. Not so unlike historians, though sometimes he’d confuse things with movies he’d seen.

Bowling balls too, no doubt. But not people. Not even family photos. In 1954 there were still six soldiers from the Civil War still alive. You forgot about me, May or June accused, because you were reading books. About frauds. The last of them died in 1956. They gave him a tee-shirt: I Survived the Civil War. You forgot about me, May or June accused, because you were reading books.

Mistakes. Hoaxes. But that part about the bombs, and bodies and the dead. Eagles wasn’t the hoax they were talking about.

In that book, The mistake or fraud or whatever was the dispute over who should have gotten the tee-shirt, a Confederate solider claiming in 1957 that he was the last civil warrior standing, until he died in 1958, whereupon a Union solider piped up from his nursing home to claim the shirt. Then he died. And a different Confederate soldier rose up—The South Shall Rise Again!—to claim the title. A pride thing, etc. And so it went, Union, Confederate, Union, one old geezer after another claiming he was the last. The winner. One able to prove it. None able to prove it. There not even any written records. No one ever wrote it down. Or they lived but their records didn’t.

Sherman’s March to the Sea. Who can say? Maybe some of these geezers were just confused. Brain fade.

Memory as roadkill along the march of time. Thought they were at Bull Run when they’d really been in Hawaii. Or Iwo Jima. And that’s not counting those who were there but didn’t want to talk about it. Didn’t want the tee-shirt. Remembered vultures not eagles.

Like my uncle. 77 Years—as far from the Civil War as we are from The War to End All War II—got a Silver Star, my uncle did. In Okinawa. Or maybe it was Normandy. Hard to say since he never wanted to talk about it: how his entire unit was being mowed down by machinegun fire. Uncle Cab rushed right at the pillbox with a flame thrower strapped to his back, a weapon sort of like the bowling balls full of napalm that his son dropped on Vietnam (if you want a more recent reference), with dozens of Germans or Japanese shooting at him the whole time as he dodged and danced his way to the pillbox, just like in movies, and sprayed in his liquid fire—What I put in is as important as what I leave out—burnt alive a bunch of guys. Saved a bunch of guys. Depending on your point of view.

Stench of burning hair and flesh. Not what they show us in the movies.

When the sublime celestial bugler
Rings our heroes’ reveille....

Too bad no one was there to take a photo. Or erect a plaque like the one they put aboard the Voyager Spacecraft, traveling, even as we speak, out of the solar system, out of the galaxy, out deeper and deeper into space. The best memorial you can have, really, Till The End of Time—or at least until aliens find it—a drawing onboard of our solar system, big X with an arrow pointing to earth—WE ARE HERE!—a line drawing of a naked man. A naked woman too—a big improvement given how often women have been left out of the story—even if this woman doesn’t have any genitalia. Like Barbie.

What I leave out is as important as what I put in.

Better a photo. Now with 10% More Women! Like the one of those guys on Okinawa. Or those Civil War photos that Mathew Brady took of corpse-strewn battlefields.

Not that words can’t be memorials.

We include with 10% More Women. Remember the Alamo! Never Again!

Till the Skies Unroll like Scrolls, etched (by businessmen) in bronze (now green) to last forever. In fact, one poet today—or was he a programmer?—wrote a program to generate poems (programs) to be read in the future by other programs (poets). The idea’s the same as the poet who wants to write his poem using the genetic alphabet of DNA, then insert it into a kind of bacteria that’s older than the earth, so old, they say, that it evolved before the earth formed, and since nothing on earth can kill it, not x-rays, heat, cold, or any of the things that kill life forms that evolved on earth, they say it will outlast the earth. And that’s what these poets are after: a poem that will outlast us. Now there’s a memorial! Comforting, even, to think that even if we achieve the war to end all war our poetry will live on. Maybe be discovered by another species. A record of who we were.
Like that plaque on the Voyager Spacecraft, better even, since whoever finds that Voyager plaque might get it wrong. Might think we used to reproduce by budding. Unless they find both the DNA and Voyager memorials and figure that we looked like bacteria and wrote in hieroglyphics that look like Barbie.

Till the Skies Unroll like Scrolls.

Then you gotta wonder, What are the chances that little green men will get the references? Adam and Eve. Ken and Barbie (or maybe aliens say Barbie and Ken). A matter of interpretation. Like the plaque erected in a field where we camped last summer, near Bear River where troops, fresh from their victory in the Civil War, were sent to join the war to end all wars with the Indians out west. The Battle for Bear River, the plaque reads.

The Troops sent to Bear River being hardened military men. Maybe even the same guys immortalized in bronze poems back east. Used to the stench of burnt bacon. Strategists. Smart enough to wait until winter, when most of the Indian warriors would be away hunting. And the snow so deep that army horses could charge but the women and children camping at Bear River wouldn’t be able to run away.

When they attacked at dawn.

Why don’t genocides have numbers?

Wouldn’t that make them easier to remember? Like Superbowl5?

It’s complicated, of course, one man’s genocide being another man’s Battle for Bear River. Like when my uncle asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I told him I wanted to be a vet, meaning I wanted to take care of sick animals, and he thought I meant a ‘vet’ the way everyone meant a ‘vet’ back then, fresh from The War to End All War II, and he just misted up, shook his head and walked away.

What I leave out…

Lots of rapes at Bear River, some say. Not the Indians, of course. Nor photos, like Mathew Brady took, and the camera doesn’t lie, as people say. Of course, the people who say that obviously never took a picture of someone trying to kick them. Have you ever noticed how enormous the foot in one of those photos looks? Still, people say things like that. Meaning, the person had to be there for you to take a picture of them, the way a vase of flowers had to be there for you to take a picture of it, or a teddy bear, your uncle, or the Grand Canyon had to be there for you to take a picture of it. Of course that wasn’t strictly true either, or mean that just because you were there someone would take your picture, but whatever. The point being, 9 times out of 10 the thing that a picture was of had been in the world at a particular place (in front of the camera), at a particular time (shutter snap), and that’s what’s so mesmerizing: proof of existence. A memorial.

That’s why old photos of the dead have such power over us. Sepia-toned stares. Or those washed-out colors in photos from the 50’s, when everyone was moving to bomb shelters in the suburbs and Kodak was king—4th of July!—but the kings of photo-as-memento-mori were daguerreotypes like those carried by Civil War soldiers of their wives, sweethearts, mothers. Or those daguerreotypes soldiers left behind of themselves in uniform. Poignant. The way they had to sit still as a corpse (instead of waving flags—4th of July!—or having a squirt-gun fight in a backyard pool). Because of the long exposures, Open, dead-eyed stares at the camera. Couldn’t duck-and-cover, or even smile, or blink because a blink would blur the picture, not at all like that famous photo of soldiers raising a flag at Iwo Jima, a victory, an instant memorial to the taking of the island, though afterwards the story gets a little fuzzy, with some soldiers who were there saying that the shot was faked, if by fake you mean staged the way some people say Mathew Brady faked his shots: put one dead soldier’s hand on his heart, or slump two together as though they passed away in their sleep, rearranging them into more moving postures. Makes a better story that way, though the Iwo Jima photographer denied doing any such thing. Said it was spontaneous—the photo, not the flag raising which everyone knew was staged by a general—until a second, different, negative was discovered (the camera doesn’t lie) at which point he remembered that he’d shot a spontaneous one, then asked them to raise it again so he could have a do over, but couldn’t remember which was which. Whatever.

Anyway, Congress made a statue of the photo, then Hollywood made a movie about the statue about the staged or rehearsed or spontaneous photo (whatever) of the raising of the flag.

Is this what they mean by “The death of photography?” photographers laying teddy bears and wreaths on what the creators of those Civil War daguerreotypes meant by “a picture” when their subjects couldn’t even blink, let alone run around with squirt guns or raise flags, or photographers couldn’t change the hairstyle of their subjects, or airbrush out their acne, or Photoshop her Ex out of that really great wedding photo in which she looked so hot, and rearrange—brides, grooms, best men, best women, bowlers too, but not that philosopher whose name starts with a D or W who once said Of what we cannot speak we must remain SSSssss—
Sketchbook/ from the “Apocalypses” series

Lucy Corin

Babies
They were cute, but they didn’t know anything. They were full of shit babies and they kept her, when she came home from the shit in her life, from recovering, from what do you call it healing, from learning. They didn’t know anything but they were busy, they were drawing pictures and developing their sensibilities. They were cute, and they were fun, too, they thought of such original things, and they helped her, they made her forget—wait, no—it wasn’t forgetting, it was feeling like she was making something, making something out of babies, even though they had no idea, they were mostly drawing pictures and coming up with shit. She thought she could keep them clean. She thought she could keep the shit outside, she thought she could take it outside, she thought she could leave it outside, but when they grew older so much shit would happen to them as it happened to her—they would get beat, shit would rain from the sky on them, too, what do you say about weathering vs. weathering a storm, a shitstorm. Well, in the future they weathered it, in the future she went back into the house, they were gone, she flew around in there, in the house with everything her kids made, that held up the walls.

Options
A narrow man with enormous glasses in a floppy green hat and a blue rain slicker has placed himself on an orange stepladder head-high to a dormant tree in front of the arched doorway of his clean-lined mouse-colored house, raising a yellow hacksaw, eyeing the tree for pruning, which he clearly keeps up; it’s pared to the shape of a candelabra, bare knuckles, he has made its history. This could be a future, god on stepladder, composing, friendly, the sky one density of gray, his froggy, neighborly smile among colors. Or a drawing I remember from an exhibit of the works of madmen: the pencil lines of half a city, one line for the sidewalk extending horizontally, like a sidewalk or a plank from the truncated skyline _, a line moving rightward into the blank page, like time.

View
One of the hardest parts of the evening, standing in their birch room with black windows over a cliff, besides the expense, the expanse, was the man’s penis from long ago, before he was married to this hostess in white. She knew it curled in his herringbone trousers. The penis, keeper of her promiscuous past and container of the futures of many possible people.

It had been longer than usual.

It had been formative, lying near him and thinking about what an ass she was because he smelled to her like spoiled milk. The hostess had such strong brown arms.

It’s hard to think about futures without making a joke about money.

It’s hard to think about a penis and time without thinking of rivers and tears.

Hung above the long, smooth, knotty pine table (it’s hard to think of knotty without the memory of deviant behavior; it’s hard to think of pine without nostalgia), a painting of a woman as a landscape like the very landscape visible, from the great window it faced, during the day, but not now, because it was night. It is possible the hostess painted it. Across a field of floor another couple lounged closely on a couch, the man so in place in this house, in his body, near this woman’s bosom, that he was happily nodding off. It doesn’t seem to be a painting of anyone; it seems to be a painting of the history of walking around on ladies personifying.

Now she is on the other side of the black glass with her feet over the picturesque chasm that she couldn’t even see if she looks away from them in order to look down. Her feet are over nothing. There are no current explosions. Someone’s cooking in the kitchen. Someone’s nodding on the couch. It’s their house, it’s their chasm, it’s the view from their bodies.

Real Italians
In all of the dreams it was an ornate bar, and she had to walk by dozens of rich people some of whom she knew to be his daughters by the way they looked like Sophia Coppola was going to look once everyone knows about her. They all might leap up at any moment and kick her out for being a minor. When she’d get to him it was obvious his Cadillac lay like a chocolate bar outside with its same car phone hanging up between the front seats and its cord, like all the phones’ cords back then, dreamily flopping between the seats, him calling from it, still not impressing her, even as she got in the car all over again.

But in the bar, where they never were in real life, she remembers talking about the apocalypse: he asked her what she’d wear, she said, “I don’t have anything good,” and he starts listing all these clothes he likes. She can’t tell if he thinks she has these clothes, or if he’s just listing ideas, but every outfit he says she can see hanging, ready for anything. What’s important is how one person’s fantasies can start taking over another’s.
He keeps talking about his plans with Robert DeNiro who he heard is looking for real Italians. She keeps trying to remember an obvious song by Blondie. He did turn out to be a minor henchman in a bunch of shows since then. She got a clip from one where he gets offed by getting shot and falling off a pier into the water, and put it where she can click it on her desktop, so in the dream he can lean back with his hand reaching for that brass rail and seem to be falling away and she’s yelling at him: “but you’re only a minor dealer and I’m the one with the future!” She does remember when she first saw him on tv, though, and what’s killing her—and this might be a consistent pixel within the forms he takes in her dreams—is that she was really was impressed, as if he’d made it.

Time Machine
He arrived at her house on his bicycle, chained it to her porch, buckled his helmet to the rear rack, and knocked. A helmet, seriously, now he has a helmet and it’s for a bicycle. He hadn’t wanted to drive, because he was afraid he might run over something.

She opened the door, wearing, at four in the afternoon, men’s flannel pajamas, rolled to the knees and elbows. She had her hair held back with a pencil and she had a second pencil behind her ear and a third pencil in the pocket of the flannel top. “You,” she said, and tilted her head, which made the pencil behind her ear slip, which she caught and held in her teeth like a rose.

Instantly, he liked her house. He stood in the doorway, then stepped in as she stepped away and they both stood in the half-moon foyer. He tried to think of why he liked the house and it was the smell. It didn’t smell like his house, he realized; what his house smelled like was baby, because of the baby.

“Thank you for this,” he said. Nothing had even happened yet and he really meant it.

She helped him take off his windbreaker and left to put it somewhere. He looked around the living room for a moment and then he sat on the sofa next to a blanket. Everything was so harmless. He went to her fridge and got a soda. Harmless, rooting around her fridge. He sat back on the sofa, pushing the blanket into a lump to the other side. Harmless. She’d come over and pick up the blanket and sit where it had been and lean against the arm of the sofa with her knees up and her feet pointing at him. They’d be like two machine parts at angles on velvet. The soda was harsh and he remembered wondering as a kid how they could call it a soft drink. I’ll have a soft drink, he imagined saying with a mouth was still sweet. He heard faint static, and then he saw it. He kept his eyes open for a second or he could blast off, or something else that he couldn’t think of. He was so scared he took his penis out and started fooling around with it. He kept his eyes open to the cacophony of tiny lights. He thought, by the time I’m done, I’ll know what’s going to happen next.

Artists
The transformation of things covered in ash is what artists do when they transport the furnishings of a family room into a gallery space and paint everything white. Some of it might be: knitted afghan, previously fuzzy and multicolored; oversized patriarch chair with pop-out footrest and sweatcatchers on the head and armrests like sugared pancakes; the fireplace of brick; television, huge-assed or flat-screen, depending on the era, oozing spray-snow; shag carpet turned frothy white sea, as frozen in paint as the sea within us; the bookcase of books arranged with knick-knacks from around the world, little children with outfits that used to be the colors of national flags—but back to the books, because what else in the room might have something still comprehensible there on the inside? (That sea?) Perhaps if you crack open the popcorn on the coffee table it will reveal a GM seed within a seed beyond its cover.

I remember when we completed the remodeling of the house what we had done was to cover every surface with another polymer, and then we found out about the plumbing in the cement. We’re supposed to raise a family in this sack of shit. Artists do this all the time, cover the surface, cover like news. These artists with their white paint are signifying ash to make a post-apocalyptic space. It’s because of where they came from: earth. Coating the things with paint erases and exposes them simultaneously. The artists are panicking in the funkiest clothing they can think of.

When we are with the artists I’m thinking of, our throats have filled with cotton to help us be ourselves even when bisected. As painted things float farther from their meanings, we can too. When everything is coated with the debris of everything else it has the appeal of a finished product.
Freud

Hal Jaffe

In September 1939 Freud persuaded his physician and friend Max Schur to assist him in suicide. “My dear Schur, I trust that you remember our discussion. You promised not to forsake me when my time came. It has come, my friend.” Schur administered three doses of morphine over several hours that resulted in Freud’s death on September 23, 1939. 83-years old.

Grandson of the seminal psychoanalyst, the painter Lucian Freud was born in Berlin in 1922 but (like his grandfather) settled in Britain to escape the Nazi virulence.

Lucian Freud is reputed to have fathered 40-plus children by 30-plus females.

Can there be so many females eager to bear a bastard child with Freud- blood coursing through its veins?

In inclement Britain, no less.

Did he stoke the furnace by ingesting cocaine like his controversial grandfather?

The oddity is that Lucian Freud’s canvases, mostly portraits (paint applied thickly, even chaotically, brush strokes and pallet knife marks foregrounded) signify death.

Often nude and translucent, with decay seeming to thrust up through the bones of the perplexed sitter, Lucian Freud’s portraits are as much about death as his theatrically masochistic colleague in arms, Francis Bacon.

Lucian Freud: “When I look at a body it gives me the choice of what to put in a painting, what will suit me and what won't. There is a distinction between fact and truth. Truth has an element of revelation about it.”

Lucian Freud must not have bought into the postmodern paradigm of shifting, socially constructed “truths.”

The “revelation” he cites, however he envisions it, is (must be) death.

His portraits reek of it.

Death in art.

Alongside Lucian Freud’s enormous zest in real time.

The opposite would apply to the great man, Lucian’s grandfather.

After siring five children Sigmund Freud evidently became impotent at age 38, or at least withdrew sexually from his wife, Martha.

Apparent impotence, even as he was developing his theory on all-encompassing sexuality.

The irrepresible id and impotence.

Of course sex itself—it’s culmination—represents a kind of death.

But death in the throes, keenly energized, infinitely repeatable.

Impotence qua impotence is different, not so deep as a grave, but might as well be.

In any case, it is the dialectic that vibrates: Eros-Thanatos for Lucian Freud. Thanatos-Eros for Sigmund Freud.

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According to the self-serving, compulsively unreliable Alma Maria Schindler Mahler, her composer-husband Gustav Mahler, 20 years her senior, “withdrew his libido” from her.

Which is why, she claimed, she began her affair with the young German architect Walter Gropius.

Friends recommended that the despondent Gustav Mahler make an appointment with Sigmund Freud, which Mahler did three times, his nerve failing him twice.

Finally Mahler called on Freud in the latter’s hotel in Leyden, Netherlands, where Freud was vacationing. They spent the next four hours strolling about the town, lunching at a café, while Freud conducted his analysis.

Not surprisingly, a mother fixation was diagnosed: namely Mahler was attracted by his Alma’s youthful beauty while at the same time resenting that she was not old and decrepit like his mother.

Alma, conversely, had, according to Freud’s on-the-spot diagnosis, a father complex, hence found her husband’s age appealing, but needed something more palpable from him than his obsession with his music, which she did not particularly admire, in any case.

She also deeply resented that he began composing his sequence Kindertotenlieder (Songs on the Deaths of Children) even before their sickly five-year-old daughter Maria Anna died.
As if he were more committed to his musical requiem than to the tragic death of his own child.

That could be true.

After all, Mahler reportedly ordered the songbirds around his studio poisoned so that he could compose his melancholy sweet songs of the forest in Das Lied von der Erde.

Mahler’s disciple, the conductor Bruno Walter, disputes the bird poisoning accusation.

After the four-hour walking / cafe “analysis” by Freud, who smoked three “Reina Cubana” cigars and ingested a third of a gram of cocaine in three oral doses, Mahler felt somewhat reassured and returned to Alma, libido revived.

However, he died within the year. Age 50.

Alma lived until she was 85 accumulating scads of lovers, primarily world-famous artists.

**

There is a story about young Sigmund Freud and his father in Vienna suddenly being surrounded by menacing anti-Semitic thugs.

(Vienna’s sordid history of anti-Semitism long preceded the birth of that homely dog-lover / housepainter with the comical mustache).

Freud’s father raised his walking stick with one hand, with the other took hold of his son’s hand and marched determinedly through the Jew-hating hoodlums’ midst, without incident.

That courage, lack of fear, or successful combating of one’s fear, seems to have been passed on to Sigmund.

Anti-Freudians with a Puritan bent blame Freud’s conceptual boldness on the mania induced by his life-long use of the then-legal cocaine prescribed for his sinus problems then later for his cancer of the jaw.

What about the rumors that Freud would keep one hand in his trouser pockets to toy with his genitals while conducting his analysis?

Correction, that was Ernest Jones, Freud’s feisty, devoted British biographer.

Incorrect a second time; it was Montgomery Clift miscast as Freud in John Huston’s bio-epic (1962), who stroked his genitals through his trouser pocket. Houston hadn’t noticed it until someone mentioned it.

After that he was sadistically cruel to the emotionally vulnerable Clift on the set of Freud.

The movie flopped at the box offices.

Whoever it was who couldn’t keep his hands away from himself, the point is that after the chronically long sexual repression, Freud’s grand opening was contagious.

**

Freud had famously claimed that neuroses and even psychoses are generated by the conflict between natural sexual instincts and the societal suppression of those instincts.

Freud theorized an inherent sexual energy in the body, which he called “libido,” and described as “capable of increase, decrease, displacement and discharge, extending itself over the memory traces of an idea like an electric charge over the surface of the body.”

For complicated reasons (and--according to Reich--conservative peer pressure) Freud later diminished the libido to nothing more than a hypothesis.

By 1929, Freud was arguing in Civilization and its Discontents for the necessary “sublimation” of what he once called the libido so that humans can erect their skyscrapers and social institutions.

Reich’s clinical work convinced him of the precise opposite: the organically present sexual instinct must be desublimated.

If “orgastic potency” is inhibited the energy continues to accumulate without adequate release, fueling neurotic and physical disorders, including a muscular rigidity which Reich called character armor.

Eventually, the revolting everywhereness of sexual inhibition forced Reich to conclude that the solution to the problem of psychogenetic illness wasn’t treatment, as such, but transformation.

“Revamp thinking so as not to think from the standpoint of State and Kultur, but from what humans desperately need. Then arrange your social institutions accordingly.” (Reich Speaks of Freud)*

Reich’s ongoing agons with official culture landed him in federal prison (ostensibly for transporting his orgone boxes across state lines.)

That he was an Austrian Jew and former member of the Communist Party didn’t help matters.

Reich’s orgone, combining “orgasm” and “organism,” is an “accumulator,” which attempts to compress life’s vital forces into a small box constructed from galvanized metal, with a single small opening for air.

One enters the box naked and sits upright.

Reich may have dared even more than his absconding “father,” Freud.

He paid the price.

Became psychotic, had hallucinations about Jesus and President Eisenhower, and died in Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary of a heart attack in 1957, age 60.

William Burroughs was among those who purchased an orgone box, employed it successfully, he claimed, and kept it until his death.

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Freud is the father of psychoanalysis. It had no mother.  — Germaine Greer
Three Stories

Diane Williams

The Emporium

I had stretched my body into a dart, inhaled deeply, and passed through the aisles at top speed and then a man with a skinny woman and a girl came up to me, and the man said, “You don’t remember me! I’m Kevin! I was married to Cynthia. We’re not together any more.”

They had been the Crossticks!

What he wanted now, Kevin said, was peace, prosperity, and freedom.

And I more or less respected Cynthia Crosstick. I didn’t like her at first. She is not very nice. She’s odd, but that’s the whole point.

I didn’t like my fly brooch at first either. It’s fake. You can’t get it wet. It’s very rare and the colors are not nice and I get lots of enjoyment from that.

I picked up Glad Steaming Bags and Rocket Cheese.

“It’s very cold. Do you want some lemonade? --” said a child at a little stand, “we give twenty percent to charity.”

I said “No!” loudly, as I exited the emporium, although there might have been something to enjoy in swallowing that color.

“Why is she crying?” the child had asked an adult.

*Why was I crying?*

I had tried to hear the answer, but could not have heard the answer, without squatting -- without my getting around down in front of the pair, bending at the knee, so that the proverbial snake no longer crawls on its belly.

I should have first stooped over.

The lemonade girl hadn’t mentioned the gumdrop cookies they had hoisted for sale.

Just the mention of cookies brought back memories of Spritz and Springerlie and Cinnamon Stars -- party favors -- attractive, deliciously rich, beautiful colors, very well liked, extra special that I made a struggle to run from.
On The Job

He looked like a man whose leader has failed him time after time, as he asked the seller awkward questions -- not hostile. He was looking for a better belt buckle.

The seller said, You ought to buy yourself something beautiful! Why not this?

He paid for the buckle, which he felt was brighter and stronger than he was. His sense of sight and smell were diminishing.

He could only crudely draw something on his life and just fill it in -- say a horse.

“Can I see that?” he said, “What is that?”

It was a baby porringer.

At the close of the day, the seller counted her money, went to the bank -- the next step. She hates to push items she doesn’t approve of, especially in this small town, five days a week, where everything she says contains the mystery of health and salvation that preserves her customers from hurt or peril.

That much was settled, as the customer entered his home, approached his wife, and surveyed his chances. Hadn’t his wife been daily smacked across the mouth with lipstick and cut above the eyes with mascara?

She had an enormous bosom that anyone could feel leaping forward to afford pleasure. She was gabbing and her husband -- the customer -- was like a whole horse who’d fallen out of its stall -- a horse that could not ever get out of its neck-high stall on its own, but then his front legs -- their whole length -- went over the top edge of the gate, and the customer made a suitable adjustment to get his equilibrium well outside of the stall.

“It’s so cute,” he said to his wife, “when you saw me, how excited you got.”

His wife liked him so much and she had a sweet face and the customer thought he was being perfectly insincere.

He went on talking -- it was a mixed type of thing -- he was lonely and he was trying to get his sheer delight out of the way.
Comfort

She made assurances that satisfied her ambitions -- saw the body interred, spent the rest of the week asking questions, suggesting action. She visited with her family and reminisced.

Getting routine matters out of the way, she headed home after buying a grounding plug and ankle wrist weights.

She fed the dog and put the boys to bed. Allen didn’t go to work.

She received a call from a woman whose sister had died.

She made some of those unequaled assurances, was escorted with the family to the grave. People seem to respond to her. She talked with them, gave a woman a played-out peck on the cheek.

Getting routine matters out of the way, she attained riches, social position, power, studied for an hour or so, cleaned up, took the family to a movie, after which she forecasted her own death with a lively narration that gave her gooseflesh.

She felt raw, pink and so fresh!
**Metafiction Salad**

**Daniel King**

**Ingredients**

1) An allusion to writing or some other artistic process;
2) An allusion to something not generally associated with writing but which, on reflection, can be seen to have artistic implications. In the present recipe, for Metafiction Salad, that ingredient is cooking itself. Other ingredients can be added to taste.

**Method**

1) Take two characters: a narrator (Deb) with literary aspirations and a desire to lose weight, and her companion (Beatrice), who has political leanings and also a desire to lose weight.
2) Add a setting: a kitchen. (Pectin is necessary for the setting of jams, but here other kinds of setting are needed. Also, the two characters are not necessarily in a jam.) The kitchen is bright and modern(ist), with little impressionist transfers of plums, dates, rice, kohlrabi, beetroot around the wall. Stock cubes have been laid out neatly on the sink, creating the resemblance to a computer keyboard.
3) Prepare dialogue: "Don't the words 'weight loss' seem to you to have literary implications? Perhaps weight control is what really goes on when an author writes a story. All elements are weighed carefully, and everything that tips the balance is discarded."
   "I'd say that 'weight loss' is political rather than literary. I can just imagine an organization called the Jenny Craig Hit Squad for the Liberation of Palestine. An organization designed to help Israel to lose weight. Anti-Semitic - or semiotic."
4) Combine the ingredients, beating if necessary. Make sure the dialogue is not too stiff.
   "There's a typewriter in this food cupboard."
   Beatrice withdraws her hand. "It's covered in ink, too! Hand me the soap."
   "It's not ink; it's plum jam." Deb passes a bar of Lux. "At least, I think it's plum jam. It reminds me of the writing process itself. There's no such thing as purity. Even the most innocent-looking recipe bears the mark of other discourses."
   "Yes - discourses like politics. The only excuse for not being politically active is if you have no intelligence at all, a vegetable."
5) Let the mixture stand for several minutes. Use this time to give some thought to presentation.

**Presentation**

For best effect, consider an Italian dressing. Failing that: italics. The key is to be bold - either in typeface or in the behaviour of the characters. Eg, perhaps have the characters step out of the kitchen and on to the surface of a fused salt lake. Deb and Beatrice can both be dressed in mirrored cloaks. The sun (blue): on the point of setting. Harsh rays like plum lines striking at an angle the surface of the lake and the distant cubes and storeys of a steel metropolis.

"I wonder how the operatives of the Jenny Craig Hit Squad for the Liberation of Palestine pass on their secrets. As recipes, clearly, but anything complicated would take a long time to digest. I'm not sure the recipes could pass superficially for stories, for example."
   Ignore the sauce for the moment.
   "There's no absolute difference between a 'cookbook' and 'cooking the books' then."
   Now that the two basic ingredients have been combined, wait half an hour for the flavours to permeate, tossing occasionally.
   "That's not right. Those slabs of salt look like the pages of a book. I thought this lake was the Dead Sea, but it's clearly just an allusion to writing."
   In an attempt to pour all the ingredients into the metafictional bowl, 'salt' - part of the etymology of 'salad' - has been added to the mixture. Don't be surprised if you also find pieces of bread: etymologically, 'bread' is closely related to the word 'companion'. Take out and quarter any excess bread for croutons.
   "A cookbook would therefore be a book full of lies."
   "And so a waste of time. You might set out to prepare a salad and be reduced to serving a wholly different dish."
   Add some stock to the mixture and then a handful of rice. Bring to the boil.

**Serving Suggestion**

We're almost done. Retain any of the water and reduce it so that you are left with rice paper. The presence of paper will provoke literary thoughts. You will then have a satisfying artistic creation. Indeed, perhaps you have already digested most of it. **Bon appetit! (Serves thousands).**
Good Enough for Jazz

Cris Mazza

Oh Miles what am I going to do when I finish this book? It’s the only life I’m living.

Intro: Verse

My therapist – those two words entered my lexicon 9 months ago – has periodically asked about the progress of this book and my satisfaction with it. But more than once she has gently inquired: couldn’t you make it into a novel, do it as fiction? I say, “I’m changing people’s names – no one deserves humiliation-by-association.” But, she asks, What about your name?

I don’t know why, but I feel beyond caring who knows about my sexual “condition.” Growing up female in America – what a liability,” Erica Jong said. Her character answered disillusionment with promiscuity, with angst over empty masturbated orgasms, with living out the zipless fuck. She didn’t specify that the risk in our perilous circumstance could be this too. My failures, my dysfunction, my frigidity – feminists of 2nd and 3rd wave alike chastise me for the terminology, which places the blame on and finds something “wrong” with me. But wasn’t that my own stance from the beginning? What other word is there? I ask them. No suggestions. Try this: a wall of thick clear glass between me and the sensual, lascivious world that is paraded, painted, filmed, flaunted, blared, boasted about, advertised, analyzed, danced to, dramatized, and even purred about softly in every subliminal white noise.

Writer friends believe I’m “brave” to be so open. Of course critics have called any writer, especially a woman, brave for exposing sexual histories on the other side of the glass. Just this week, browsing a bookstore, on the “face-up” table were two memoirs by women about their sexual compulsion, about the joy and thrill of one-night stands, about the addiction of being sexually active and desirable. Yes, they couch it in terms of the low self esteem one must feel to believe her value is measured by a man’s carnal desire for her body. But still, isn’t the unspoken aura that these women are – for the same reasons – exotic, worldly, exciting, charismatic, provocative … or just plain cool? (The future adult pain of the cool girls who looked at me with their heavily mascara-ed eyes, down their small tilted-up noses, and snarled “well, you’re cute.”)

Is being bold in this way and exposing my sexual dysfunction just another “here’s my tragedy” memoir, and to what purpose? One thing I can allege: I didn’t realize the benefits and the purpose I would discover, until embroiled in the writing, the events affecting the writing, and the person I instinctively reached out to as a result of the writing. Which is why it’s not really a “you need to know my story” memoir, but an “I need to find my story” journey, even if finding the story isn’t yet a “solution” or even resolution.

A jazz chart sometimes provides only sketchy information: the key, the meter, the main melody, something that might only take 30 second to play if taken literally. But no one asks, “What does this tune intend to accomplish?” as readers of book manuscripts sometimes insist upon knowing up front. When I started, I thought I knew, then got discombobulated, and discovered something else entirely.

“Write our story, Cris,” Miles begged, some time in the middle of the process. “It’ll be the greatest love story ever told. How can it not?”

1 Intro: (1) A composed section at the beginning of a tune, heard only once.

Verse: In many older standard songs, an introductory section that leads up to the ‘chorus’ or main strain, which is the tune as generally recognized. The verse is often performed in tempo rubato (Italian stolen time) the slight speeding up or slowing down of the tempo at the discretion of the soloist. The aim of rubato is to make music sound expressive and natural. Jazz players (and fakebooks) usually omit the verse.
Counting Off: How to Read A Book While It’s Being Written

I began writing in winter or spring 2008. Around that same time, I received an email from my (long lost) friend Miles. The two seemingly unrelated actions coiled around each other, until, like legendary images of snakes, one consumed the other. I thought I was writing a memoir about of block of time I had purposely skipped in my first nonfiction book, Indigenous: Growing Up Californian. I thought I was writing a memory-search for the reasons my sex life had been set on a path toward dysfunction or complete failure, based on my coming-of-age in the era sexual-harassment laws were first germinating, when supervising teachers told their student-teachers to try masturbating; when prettier, more vivacious young women were considered more efficient employees; when fetching coffee for a male supervisor proved one’s value to him.

To preserve the way the book was affected, how it morphed, how the morphing is the story the book wants to tell, I included the date (month or season) the first draft of each chapter was composed, on the top right of the first page of each.

When Miles asked me what had gone wrong on a night we were together in 1980 – the two hours of my life that were happiest, most optimistic and secure, he said – it became clear that a main route for the book would be to answer him. But I found myself with other matters I needed to expose first, before I could respond.

Besides my memory, and my obsessive introspection, I had use of forensic evidence: journals I kept between 1977 and 1980, letters I wrote, paper keepsakes I’d preserved, the fictionalized use of events from this time in my stories and novels, and the evidence of my unconscious internalizing of significant images and emotions that now are plainly visible to me in my fiction.

Using photo software and mouse-clicks that made my shoulders ache for weeks, I obliterated and replaced real names on scanned letters or pages of my journal. The font I chose to replace names in the jap eg of my journal is as close as I could find to my handwriting, appropriately named rage italic.

The use of jazz terminology began when Miles described thinking about me, even during the years he didn’t know where I was, while he plays with his jazz combo. The words he used started to resonate. Especially when he defined the head, the simple main melody of a jazz tune, as “Sometimes the head is just an excuse to get going and see what happens.” Bewildered as to what I was doing in the manuscript, I felt that’s exactly what was going on. So I began using jazz terms as section headers, sometimes chapter headers. The use of jazz lingo, therefore, increases toward the end of the book, but does appear in spots through the rest, if, on retrospect, I thought there was a particularly suitable term.

This narrative wanted to make use of basic chronology – maybe chronology. The chromatic scale progresses by semitones; the chronologic narrative in order of time. But the nature of memory, and the prerogative of reality, interfered. Basically: while I wrote this book, something happened. Something happened while I wrote the book I thought I was going to write which turned it into another book altogether. Or it became the book it was supposed to be.

2 Counting off: giving the tempo and meter by counting aloud. One must learn to count off correctly.
Intro: Some of the End at the Beginning

I’m told I was never sexualized in a healthy way. I don’t know how that passed me by. No standard traumatizing event, no crime committed. And wasn’t because my mother went man hunting, teaching me sex was love instead of reading to me. It had something to do with somehow being taught I was unlovable. Over the past three decades I have viewed my sexuality as the last part of me anyone would ever want, so what I’ve done in sexualized relationships is do anything “he” wants because I assume it’s the only way “he” could ever want that part of me, which is really “un-wantable.” Of course there’s the giant complication of some “dumb men” (as my friend Erin calls them) pretty much literally rejecting (by not embracing) “that part” of me, because their sexual limitations are so extreme. But because I – at first unknowingly, and then consciously – agreed with them, I allowed the years of not being touched except when I was fucked. I wrote a story around 1995 that had the line: “He would only touch me with his cock. He didn’t mind getting it dirty.” There were times when, in taking care of personal hygiene, I thought: why would anyone want to touch this?

So every sexualized relationship has been, on some level, another loaded gamble to see if a man will love “that part” of me which I’d already determined is unlovable. My non-sexual adult relationships have been different. Those people call me strong and brave. Who are they seeing? This is why friends like Erin hardly recognize me now.

Love was something I could either not earn or lose. By having “nothing to offer.” By being too unyielding, not feminine enough, or even being “too heavy” (my mom pushing me away at a formidable age). By not giving enough ... or not giving well enough or simply by being female, and having those troublesome, wet female parts that a man couldn't admire, the way he wanted his own body to be adored.

Are these related to how I had always been afraid to verbally express feelings for other people? Certainly this was a problem of my own making. Was it because I was afraid if I expressed it, I would be left exposed with nothing coming in return? Or was it that if I expressed the feeling I would then have to deliver “the goods,” and the inexplicable fear of that (of not having “the goods”) paralyzed me? Or was it because I had been told, in junior high, leaving the bus stop with two ‘tough’ boys following me up the dirt path, “Hey, Cris, Tim says you got nothing to offer.” Foreshadow to “Girl, you just don’t give me enough. You don’t put out”? How could I give you enough, Miles, when I had “nothing to offer”? Why did these normal rites of passage stay with me so long, or never leave me? Why does it seem everything that has ever happened is still happening? A writer’s temperament? Unfortunate or necessary, take your pick.

Swing: ‘feel that shit all up in your body’

Oh Miles what am I going to do when I finish this book? It’s the only life I’m living. How does a person who only lives while she writes, when she writes, in what she writes, write a memoir? It turns into a book that’s happening while she writes it. A life that ends when she stops?

I wrote the paragraph above on January 1, 2010, when I began what was to be this book’s last chapter, before the events that became the last chapter occurred. And now, January 31, 2010, that “new” last chapter is completed as well. A good time, then, to compose the instructions for reading a book that needs to be read while it’s being written.

Every time you ask a question, I think about the same stuff in a new way, looking around a different corner or with an altered light-source. Every time I think it through, I add to what I can hope to understand. Which I need to, or I wouldn’t be doing this. As you now know, this book has an underground river running beneath the story about the “older men” who influenced me. Running beneath, or perhaps above, or a new flood in a dry riverbed. A drip became a trickle became a rivulet became a brook became a creek became a river became a deluge became “a gray, deep, baleful, magnificent sea.” The current is the still evolving story of us ... of Cal and the no-name girl.

The writing of this book is the story. The story is the book being written.

3 (2) A simple way to make an intro is to take the last four bars of the melody and use that. Summarizing the importance of an intro, one can say: it is the “kick-off” for the tune.

4 Swing: (1) The style of the 30s, when the big band was the dominant form of jazz. (2) A rhythmic manner, unique to jazz, snidely called “Scooby-dooby-do” by legit players and teachers. (3) A mysterious, unexplainable quality in any music, but especially jazz, which makes one ‘feel that shit all up in your body’ (Miles Davis).

5 Alice Munroe
Black fur. Burnt paws. Some had open wounds. Screaming at me. Skulking among the dried and curled human shapes. I was afraid to touch them at first. They would come closer to me after a time, but they wouldn’t let me touch them, even after I was not afraid of them. Starving and senseless. I tried to trick them into letting me hold them. Mostly, they hid among the smoldering beams of the houses where they had once lived.

I don’t remember how we met. I don’t know if it was at the club. Maybe you saw me doing a show, showing the world my long legs and sometimes a bit more if I’d had enough to drink and smoke. Not on stage of course. Did I serve you drinks? Did you and your friends give me a hard time? There were no friends, were there? You must have come in alone without much idea of where you were. Coming in for a landing.

The cats all died after a week. Only Eule survived. She pretended to be an angry owl with her chalk-green eyes wide open. She kept her distance, chewing and growling long after I’d left her some scrap of food.

Your eyes were not the windows to anywhere. Your laughter, never joyous. Both were cunning. Irresistible. You took to the back room of my apartment: petulant, eager, biting your nails, and rubbing your secrets together between your ears. Did you trick me into offering you shelter or was I just feeling generous that night, high on one of Kristina’s concoctions?

I was at Kristina’s when hell came from heaven. The drone of a thousand metal hornets combining for the big sting. She always had something to calm me down, something to keep me under water when the sirens went off. I waited for her to comment on the curls in my blond tresses. She just kept playing the same American record over and over again until we were so drunk we danced while the earth trembled. Someone had given it to her at the club.

I don’t know where I’ll go now
And I don’t really care who follows me there
But I’ll burn every bridge that I cross
To find some beautiful place to get lost

I found Kristina by accident. She was gaunt and awkward in the subdued clarity of daylight through clouds. There were holes with caramel edges burnt into her summer dress. Her arms’ skin was raw in places. She had new glasses that didn’t fit her head. She’d lost hers in the fire that was still burning in the cellar where her house used to be. I didn’t ask, but I knew she’d taken them from one of the bodies in the street. She said they were better than nothing. Pale green eyes cringing behind the smoked glass. How did she find a pair that hadn’t melted into the face of the person wearing them? Everyone had started taking the few things that were usable, but for a long time I didn’t take anything.

One morning I stood by the library where I used to study as a child. Charred books smoldered in the mud, not one of them different from the other, each one of them saying the same thing.

For weeks, you came and went at any hour of the day or night. You walked heavily over the creaking floorboards. Once, when I was near sleep, fuzzy and limp on Kristina’s potent concoctions, it reminded me of my father leaving at dawn to work down at the docks. That night I dreamed of enormous dull fish. They glided around and around, never touching each other, unaware of the surface above.

We spoke as little as possible. You sometimes paid the rent I asked from you each week. It was a pittance, but you didn’t always have it. We didn’t converse. It made the loud silence that I thought we both enjoyed. We heard each other only through walls. We had moments in the kitchen: a few times sitting at the skewed oval table by the window, looking out at the flaking gray house next to ours. We shared some dry bread with a yellowish spread on it. Ours. Yes. Something was ours.

Enormous fish floated on the water amidst burnt wood. Bloated bellies to the sky. But they weren’t fish. They had black fingers and swollen arms. The land and the water the same bloodless gray, the color of the faces of people drifting by me. Nothing left inside them. I should have seen it then, in the vacant eyes, in the listless movements. It was the living who became the ghosts.

Kristina showed me how to dance. An aura of citrus and cedar. Her nutty cropped hair didn’t move. I thought I knew dancing, but I didn’t. We both knew I’d never be as good as she was. I never made it on stage at the club. Kristina rubbed my meaty hands between the palms of her dainty hands. She said I was too tall, so I just worked the tables.

I see how each survivor carries a city inside. Each one incomplete, already becoming more deformed from the quirks of fading memories. What if all of these cities could be assembled? How would a photograph of this...
traces of you had vanished except for five amber strands
Kristina had given me the scarf on Christmas Eve.  All
I kept in my top drawer wrapped in a red silk scarf.

One day you were gone and so was the little stack of bills
orange snowflakes falling onto the surface of the water.

They called it window.  Thin strips of tinfoil that floated
down through the dry summer air around us.  We picked
them up and scanned them for the words that might tell
us something.  But window was speechless.  Searchlights
jerked through the night sky in a futile choreography.

The fish were sliced in half.  I saw their metal innards
moving.  Sluggish clockwork flickering as fish halves
continued looping around me.  Above me I saw red and
blackened in the shadows.  I don't know how long I
saw a crumpled newspaper on the sidewalk after dark.
The fish have tiny human arms and feet with blisters.

I saw a crumpled newspaper on the sidewalk after dark.
The shape of it, the way it stayed there, still and small
and blackened in the shadows.  I don't know how long I
began walking into chairs and tables in the dim
light, knocking customer's drinks all over them.  After
closing she would curse the bruises on her milky legs.
She wore stockings in summer.  Backstage she tripped
over a cord and sprained her wrist.  She refused to see a
doctor.  It wasn't the first time.

Sometimes it's not the city that has become
unrecognizable in its ruins.

We became inseparable in the club.  She didn't move
around as freely as before, but with my help she danced
and made her way among the crowd a few times during
the night.  She only wore her glasses at home.

I peered into the kitchen.  You wore no clothes.  The
back of my hand disturbed a light layer of ash on the
faded diamond wallpaper pattern.  The rhythm of our
neighbor's hammering was bouncing off the dusty
struggled to open a jar of mackerels I thought I'd hidden
well in the back of the cupboard.  You shoved all of the
little fishes into your mouth in twos and threes.  There
would be no more for a long time.  I imagined nails
standing at attention as I rammed them into the flesh of
your fingers and the hammer finally breaking your teeth
with the fish still half-chewed in your mouth.  Yet, I
backed away into the hallway so you could finish without
interruption.  I ran to my room and latched the door.

I hadn't eaten for two days.  The church was in ruins.
The bell lay on its side in front of the crumbled tower.  I
thought of the last Christmas Eve I had with my mother
so many years ago.  I smelled the boiled carp in her
kitchen.  Every year I asked her to make something else,
anything else.  I hated carp, but I sat quietly and forced
bite after bite into my mouth.  I moved around to the
open side of the bell.

They called it window.  Thin strips of tinfoil that floated
down through the dry summer air around us.  We picked
them up and scanned them for the words that might tell
us something.  But window was speechless.  Searchlights
jerked through the night sky in a futile choreography.

The fish were sliced in half.  I saw their metal innards
moving.  Sluggish clockwork flickering as fish halves
continued looping around me.  Above me I saw red and
orange snowflakes falling onto the surface of the water.

One day you were gone and so was the little stack of bills
I kept in my top drawer wrapped in a red silk scarf.
Kristina had given me the scarf on Christmas Eve.  All
traces of you had vanished except for five amber strands
of hair on your pillow.  I had known all along that you
watched me the way I watched you that one time in the
kitchen.  When I was undressing for a bath with the door
open a crack after a long night at the club.  In summer I
wore as little as possible indoors.  That's the real reason
you stayed.  Isn't it?  To find the boy I hid beneath the
woman I wanted to be.

When Kristina found out I was renting you the back
room, she warned me to be careful.  Kristina had a bad
feeling about it.  She claimed to know things.  Things that
most people don't know.  I thought it was her
concoctions that made her think that.  They made the
world have too many colors.

A catastrophe is never so far away as I used to think.  I
know now that it can happen in a few minutes, in an
hour, in ten days.

In the library used to see engravings in the big books.
Images of things that I could only see on those pages.
Images that would later inspire versions of things no one
could ever know.  I have seen what shouldn't ever be
seen. Each page of a book burning through the blank
pages I want to see there.  I want to see nothing, but
something is always coming onto the pages.  It's a big
book that I have trouble closing.  It's larger than I am.  It
fills up everything on those days I will not remember.  At
first the book is lying closed on the table.  But sooner or
later I have to open it, because it is always there, filling
up the room, demanding to be opened.  And once I open
it, it stays that way and soon I can't close it and I can't
make the pages blank or black.

All the things you never think can happen to you can
happen.  All the good things.  All the bad things.  Kristina
said on days before that something was coming to us.

I saw a crumpled newspaper on the sidewalk after dark.
The shape of it, the way it stayed there, still and small
and blackened in the shadows.  I don't know how long I
stood there.  The summer wind was blowing, but the
paper didn't move.  Usually, it's a smell.  Meat cooking
in a sweet sauce.  Pork sitting in a stewing pot all day
with a little sugar.

Every year I want winter to stay.  I can't bear the slow
rise in temperature, the buds on the trees, the flowers
as they start to bloom and then the misty summer days.  It's
the worst when it's a dry heat, when you can feel the
moisture go out of the air in your lungs.  Long warm days
in late summer.  The soft simmering of old music in my
bones.  I don't feel it anymore.  It's just noise.  It's just a
rumbling or a tinkling or a drone that passes overhead.  I
wait for the big booms that will follow.  I look up when I
hear the music.  Into the gray summer sky.  The hot wind
makes me ache.  It makes me sweat.

The fish have tiny human arms and feet with blisters.
They grow human heads.  The skin is hairless, coated in
phosphorous, the color of spoiled skim milk.  It splits
open and falls off, floating up to the surface, catching fire
when it touches the air.  Dark shadows point their guns.
Miniature torpedoes burst open the bloated bags of flesh
one after the other.  Tuh!  Tuh!  Tuh!  Tuh!  Tuh!  Tuh!  Around
and around in a great big circle.
Come Thanksgiving

Matthew Roberson

Come Thanksgiving, Andrea’s ready for a trip. She says, Let’s get out of town. Anywhere, she thinks. Away. The kids don’t want to visit grandma and grandpa. They’ve seen enough of grandma and grandpa. Just the four of us, then, she says. Somewhere exciting. Michael says, We only have a few days. He says, Let’s drive upstate. We’ll stay in a Bed and Breakfast.

She says, No. She’s had enough bed. Something else. Let’s go to a waterpark, she says. An indoor waterpark. She says, And we’ll go out for a big Thanksgiving dinner. We’ll have fun, she says. Remember fun?

She picks the closest park, and they pack suitcases and backpacks, snacks, and a cooler. Coats and a bag of toys. A DVD player. Michael sticks his toy to the windshield. He turns when it commands. Andrea sits in the back, on the bench seat, with the kids. The swaying makes her a little sick. Big deal. Are we there yet, she asks.

Michael laughs—and then they are there, they’re driving up a hill to a building. It’s the size of a mall. Andrea can’t tell if the lacquered and knotted log walls are real. They’re real walls, Michael says, and she sees that he needs this, too.

Inside, they stop at the fireplace. The kids sit on luggage piled to the brim of their cart, and she stares at the flames.

It’s like watching a Zamboni, Michael says. You can’t not do it.

What, she asks. The fire? A Zamboni? Of course, Michael says. Can we check in? Yes, she says. We’re here for water, not fire.

Hamster-trails of heating ducts crisscross the vaulted ceiling.

The woman at the counter wears a tan uniform covered in patches. She looks like a park ranger. Or a waiter at Bennigan’s. The woman is jolly. Smiley. Smiley smiles all around. Her nametag reads Carol. Carol signs them in. She asks if they’ve made reservations for the Thanksgiving Buffet? She says, Seats are going fast. Michael says maybe they’ll call down, but Andrea says they wouldn’t miss the Thanksgiving Buffet for anything. She tells Carol to sign them up. Andrea is charmed by Carol. She doesn’t care that Carol is paid to be perky. Andrea is tired of people whose job it is to be serious. She says to Carol, You should join us, and Carol says, I would if I could! You have a fabulous time! Carol says, and they take their room cards, and ascend, to the top floor, Michael’s choice. If that’s what you want, dear, says Andrea. Well, Michael says, at least this.

They don’t check the beds. They don’t open mini-fridge or spring the balcony door. They don’t turn the taps. Michael doesn’t touch the binder holding all they need to know. Instead, they climb in their swimsuits and flip-flops and cinch the wristbands that allow them to the park they saw on the way upstairs. Tom and Isabel watch their father, while Andrea takes a shoulder bag to the bathroom. You don’t have to wait, she says, and pauses. Then she goes in. Always so white, she thinks, and looks up, then for the timer that sparks the infrared bulb. Instant hot heat. Oh, a hotel, she thinks, and takes out a robe as thick as she is. These prostheses are made from foam that feels like dough.
She squeezes and thinks they’d made good hand exercisers. She slips them down the front of her suit. Maybe a pillow for Michael. Maybe she’ll invite him to rest his head on her chest. They ride high. They move when she turns. They’ll pop out if she rides even one slide, so she puts them on the counter, then back in the bag, smooths the front of her suit, and buries herself in the robe. It’s that big.

What’s that animal in Star Wars, she shouts to Thomas. The one Han Solo cuts open? Tauntan? he yells back?

Yes, she says, opening the door. That’s the one. Let’s go.

Andrea says, My parents never took us to amusement parks. Maybe a couple state fairs, to examine the pigs. That was acceptable, she says. Then we’d ride the rides.

I never had enough tickets for the good ones, she says. Or I was too small. It was always too hot. I’d end up covered in cotton candy. She says, Who likes cotton candy, for real?

She says, My dad could only ever say, Five dollars for a hot dog? I can buy twenty at the store. Or he’d say that arcade games are for suckers. Totally fixed. Then he’d pay to shoot a plastic duck, which he couldn’t, and then he’d show us how the gun sights were screwy. Or something.

She says, My mom would hold us by the backs of our shirts. She’d say, Don’t wander off.

You ask her about the time they lost me, Andrea says. The hotel hallway stretches off like an airport concourse.

Michael shouts, to the kids. If we can’t see you, you’re too far ahead.

He says, That must have been scary as hell.

She says, Yeah.

It must have been.

The fair sucked.

.

Michael says, But this’ll rock.

The glass wall to the park stretches up the three floors to where they stand, watching. When the elevator dings, they squeeze in, down to the doors that open onto pool smell the cavernous screaming and heat.

Time for fun.

Michael says he’ll tail Thomas, and then he’s off up the rope nets to the rubber floors and tunnels of the treehouse in the middle of the park. Andrea watches them both reach the top, where they turn, and wave, and line up for the slides. Isabel’s satisfied with the kiddy pools and spray nozzles and water sluices and paddles, so Andrea follows her, then stops.

Some catlike part of her can’t go, though she knows the water will be warm, and she’ll be fine when she’s wet under a spray or in the pool, but, still, she only dips a toe into a puddle blistering a tile. Outside, through a window, small piles of snow. She’s the rotten egg, which won’t do. So, one, two. All in.

The man to her right has a sweater of fat. The man by him has rolls that fold over his hips. Their puffy trunks billow over their chicken legs. The next man has little hair on his head. Beside him, a man with hair everywhere. His wife wears a one-piece suit that bites into the cellulite above her thighs.

A woman smiling at Andrea has blue veins like worms up her legs, and deflated breasts.

It’s tough all over, she thinks, and feels less alone. The woman guarding the kiddy slides looks older than Andrea, tired in her flip-flops and cargo pants, whistle around her neck and a Gilligan’s all-purpose sailor’s hat. She stands under the cirrus of an umbrella that covers her post, dry in the middle of a million gallons spraying every which way.

Andrea imagines how much the woman hates shepherding the kind of people who blow cash on a waterpark.

Andrea waves to Isabel, and says under her breath, Everyone here is white.

Andrea rides the little slides, with Isabel, then the big slides with Thomas, and they all float a twisty river. Michael helps them carry inner tubes up the flights of stairs to big slides that stretch and circle even outside the building a turn.

The tubes are slippery and dark, and they make Andrea feel like she’s been flushed from a giant’s guts.

That’s awesome, she says, and they all of them climb the stairs again. And repeat. And they take a dip in the big pool, where the kids climb across a rope ladder over rubber lily pads tethered by chains.

Michael sprays them with a water cannon as high as his waist. But the big bucket that dumps a bajillion gallons every few minutes—that’s off limits, Michael says. He’s afraid it will crush them into soup.

Andrea knows he means her. She says, Look, there’s a five year old over there under it, but Michael won’t budge.

He says, Let’s hit the hot tub, which they do, and Andrea remembers when she and Michael sat in the bathtub with the kids, when they were little. Tiny. Family bath, she says, and the woman beside her smiles.

I wonder what happens in the adult-only tub, Michael says, pointing at another gate.

He says, Bow chicka wow wow.
He says to Andrea, Look at all the clocks, everywhere. They’re for us. Naked people don’t wear watches. And Andrea thinks it’s easy to lose track of time. It flies, she says. What, Thomas says. What what, she says. Chicken butt.

Are you guys cooked enough, Andrea asks. Let’s get room service.

Later, Andrea whispers to Michael, Did you see all the camcorders? He says, Yeah. Everyone had one, she says. People even took them in the pool. So, he asks. They have tight grips.

In the other bed, Thomas’s nose whistles. Isabel is asleep on her stomach. They can’t go five minutes without, she says.

They need pictures for facebook, Michael says. He says, I brought ours. Whatever, Andrea says. If you must. Just not in the waterpark. Not me. Oh, he says. Okay. He says, You look good, honey. That’s not it, she says, and touches the bristle of her hair.

By dinner the next day, they’ve passed the Thanksgiving buffet a dozen times—on their way for new wristbands, and on the way to the waterpark, and on the way back, and. Once on a run for snacks. It stretches down the lobby, five tables in length, two wide. They scout every chafing dish. Andrea tells the kids she’s going to start with the crackers and cut fruit, then move to salad. She’ll have a small piece of salmon before heading back for mashed potatoes and yams and some of the dark turkey meat in sauce. Maybe some breast under gravy.

Maybe not that. Cranberry sauce, at least. I’m going to eat and eat, she says to the kids, and a woman a few feet over hears, smiles, and looks over at Andrea’s ninety-five pounds before turning away, suddenly thoughtful. What about you guys, Andrea asks. What do you want? Dessert, Isabel says, watching the chocolate fountain where people stand dipping marshmallows impaled on sticks. Me, too, Andrea says. Thomas says, Do they have mac and cheese? And they eat.

That night, the twelve-dollar movie on TV features a Chihuahua in fancy clothes. The kids fight open their eyes but Isabel drops off, then Thomas. Andrea sniffs Michael and says, You smell like bleach. She thinks they’ll smell like it for days. It smells like semen.

She’d wanted a third child. She knows you can’t always get you what you want. Maybe you get what you need. Rolling Stones for four hundred, she says. Michael says, What? She says, Nothing. Give a girl a kiss, she says.

And then it’s light and they’re packed and out front, Michael bringing the van around. Isabel says, Can we come here next year? You had a good time, Andrea says. Let’s come here every Thanksgiving, Thomas says. Forever. Forever, Andrea says. Why not, she says, thinking just maybe. Absolutely. Yes.
A Series of Language Lessons

dkate hargreaves

CHAPTER ONE: Srpski Serbian

A. Words she can remember in Serbian:
   hvala thank you
   četiri four
   dobro well
   novi new
   pička pussy

B. She thinks the words for “to eat” and “to fuck” sound too similar.

C. Q. Where did you fuck last night?
   A. In the living room.
   A. At Swiss Chalet.
   A. In the car.

D. jedem ≠ jebem

CHAPTER TWO: ESPAÑOL (AELÑOPS)

El diccionario
El diccionario es
El diccionario es de Javier
El diccionario de Javier es viejo
El diccionario viejo de Javier es grande.
El gran diccionario viejo es de Javier.
De diccionario el es gran Javier viejo.
De el es gran viejo Javier diccionario.
Gran Javier de el es diccionario viejo.
Oiranoiccid reivaj ojeiv narg se le ed.
Oi a oi i ei a o ei a e e e.
Ooo ii iii a a eee eee.
Aaa cc dd eeeee g iiiii jj l nn ooo rrr s vv.
G l s cc dd jj nn vv a a ooo rrr eee e iiiii.
CHAPTER THREE: ENGLISH (IN GLASS)

Merriam-Webster
Murmurin’ webster
Murray M. Worcester
Mare I am rest here
Merry am rest stir
Marry and rest her
Many, um, vests there
Mary undress dear
Mary, um.

CHAPTER FOUR: FRENCH (NOT SPANISH)

en [ã] :
(fist to stomach/tongue to earlobe)

not
en [ɛn]:
(a sliver of ellemeno)

de [dɔ]:
(obviously)

not
de [de]
(light, glo, dream, break)

es [ɛ] :
(panting, PENting)

not
es [ɛs]:
(hiss slipping through teeth tips)

les [le]:
(an egg, a stranger, a potato chip)

not
les [les]:
(and leather, doiling his mother's kitchen)

CHAPTER FIVE: REVIEW

viejo  vehicle  vehículos  vozilo  véhicule
chalet  shallot  cive  cebolleta  luk
fuck  phoque  foca  morski lav  seal
pička  peach  pêche  melocotón  lepotica
I’m craving a new way of life, a new way of being. Death comes to me now. Not the death I don’t know, but the death I do know. The one who piles my days, one on top of the other, until I can’t remember who I am or what it is that I’ve been doing all these years. The one I’ve felt all along, but never seen.

Given all this, I must admit, I’m surprised to see that death is a woman. She looks like me when I was in my mid-twenties: wavy hair, a thin waist and red lipstick. Her movements and voice are affected. She speaks in low tones and grasps both my hands in hers, making it clear that she wants my full attention.

Death is going to see me through this appointment, but I don’t want her help. Not today. I tell her to leave me alone and I go in when the dental assistant calls my name.

I have a cavity that needs filling and it’s a particularly disheartening thought to have it filled, as it already hurts when I eat and I know the dentist will be in there digging. Even if my mouth is frozen, some pain will inevitably filter through. His digging, my digging. When I begin to dig, I remember.

I’m about nine or ten. I don’t remember being nine or ten. I remember being seven. I remember being twelve. I remember being sixteen. I remember being seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. I’m starting to remember it all now.

The dentist comes in. His face looks tired and worn and punchy. He tells me he’s just been apple picking. I want to ask him if he goes apple picking for himself or for his daughter. But it doesn’t seem polite. He asks me what I’ve been up to. I don’t mean to be rude, but I am. I tell him that’s too big a question to answer.

When I was nine, I was in grade four. When I was ten, I was in grade five. I had the same teacher for grade three, four and five, so all those years meld together. But I think I was friends with Gail Rig in grade four, because for some reason I think I remember she was nine, although I could be remembering incorrectly.

Gail Rig had a pencil case that was actually a pencil box. As I recall, you could shake the box and hear the pencils knock against the sides. I think it was also during this year that I got lice and also the year when Kristi and Lisa T. kicked me out of their group.

We were called the three gigglers, except after a time, I wasn’t one of the gigglers. I found the note in a notebook on my desk – it said, “You’re out.” Or at least that’s how I remember it.

The dentist explains that they are now ready to do the freezing. My tongue is not in the right place and he keeps telling me to move it, to where I don’t know. I try not to notice the long needle, but I catch a glimpse of it. I try not to move my tongue.

Come to think of it, Gail Rig might not have been around by then. Maybe Gail Rig was around in grade two when I had Mrs. Khan. I think so.

Because I don’t think I was in Lisa T. and Kristi’s class till grade three. Grade two was good. Grade three to five is a blur. Somewhere in there the gigglers kicked me out of their group. Then after that I think I complimented them on their matching green skirts, sometime later, or maybe before I was kicked out of their group. They went and told Mrs. Rowan that I insulted them. I wonder why they did that? Mrs. Rowan didn’t believe me when I told her they were lying. I was only one person, whereas Lisa T. and Kristi made two.

When I ran out of the room crying, they laughed at me. Mrs. Rowan, Lisa T. and Kristi. Mrs. Rowan wrote on my report card that year that I didn’t know how my words affected others.

The back corner of my mouth is starting to freeze, so is my tongue and I swallow just to make sure I still can. I tell the dental assistant that it feels weird to have my tongue freezing. She keeps asking me how it feels weird, and I keep telling her it doesn’t feel right.
I remember once sitting on the front porch steps and I told my mother my stomach hurt. I didn’t know what I was trying to describe, but it was the feeling of depression in my stomach. I told my mom something that happened while I was playing with my friends from down the street: Olga and her twin sister and someone else who I can’t remember. It had something to do with us playing *Charlie’s Angels* and they did something mean, like telling me I couldn’t play with them. When I told my mom how they treated me, she said well of course you wouldn’t be feeling well after that. Somehow I hadn’t connected all the depressing things that had happened with how I was feeling. My mom helped me with that. Maybe I thought sadness only happened when I was crying.

I wonder why I’m crying now. These old little wounds, seemingly so innocent. I have been left alone while the freezing takes hold. The spread of this numbing feeling produces an instinctive reaction – a rising anxiety that I’m not sure how to cope with. I pull tissues from the box on the counter behind me. Am I remembering things the wrong way?

The dentist is back and he wants me to rate the feeling of numbness on a scale of one to ten. He brushes his fingers along my lips and asks me what I feel. I say I’m at about a three. Then he pinches my lip and I can’t feel it and he tells me I must be at an eight or ten. Yes, I must be.

My favourite memories that I like to go over in my mind and savour involve the library, Mrs. Heart, the librarian, books and my family. My nose is slightly plugged from crying. My eyes and cheeks feel swollen. My chest feels opened but tired. Books…books were read aloud on my brother’s captain’s bed. Books like *Monkey*, *The Water Babies* and *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, and folk tales of hyenas and other animals like the tortoise and the hare. In the reading of these stories, I was safe and sound – completely engaged with whatever story was being told. My dad would fall asleep reading and would be mumbling nonsense. My brother and I would nudge him and he’d be back at the story, the characters coming alive again. There was lots of time then. The story never seemed to cut off short. We would be read to for hours until we ourselves fell asleep, full of stories in our bellies.

When I’m finally frozen, a flurry of activity starts. I don’t like when he explains what he’s going to do. I know he’s telling me ahead of time, so I don’t freak out. *We’re going to take the old filling out now*, he says. I wish he hadn’t told me.

Play fighting on the living room carpet was fun. We’d walk on my dad’s back. I remember the ironing room, where we were allowed to watch *The Beachcombers* or *Walt Disney* before bed.

I miss being safe and not thinking glum adult thoughts. I don’t even know what I think about. But most of what I think about doesn’t lift my heart up. Is that how Death gets in? In the gloomy cracks of my days, does she find me and take away my memory? Yes, I think she must.

The dentist seems to be finishing up now. But no. I only get a break. The dental assistant and the dentist leave. I hear him talking to other patients and an unknown woman in a peach uniform comes and goes in my room. After a while, I think to give her a stare that says *would you mind not using this room as a throughway?*

I remember swinging from a thick, yellow rope attached to our tree in the front yard – the rope rubbing against the branch – a see-sawing noise. Or was it the branch creaking under our weight? I remember the stairs down to the basement – a very dark, steep stair. There was a shelf on the way down and in order to retrieve things from it you had to stand in the middle of the stair. The basement door lock was faulty and I think for a long time you could just knock that door open with your foot.

Now the filling begins. The dentist puts green plastic over my mouth, like an awning to protect the insides of my mouth from whatever it is that they are doing. I feel like a doll with a pretend mouth. A mouth that you can’t put your finger in. I want the dentist to say we’re almost done. But I see why he doesn’t say so. It is a long time before he’s done. I focus on my breath. The core of my body hasn’t felt this alive for a long time. My hands are in fists at my sides. I smooth them out. I unlock my crossed legs.

The dental assistant’s name is Pearl. I’ve kept forgetting her name all of these years. The dentist tells me I did a good job. I tell him he did, too.
Aversion Conditioning or,  
Why I am Somewhat  
Conflicted About Poetry

Beverly Akerman

My playwriting instructor has just informed me I should consider myself an award-winning poet. That’s her right there, Colleen Curran. Lately she tells me every email I write is a monologue.

I wonder: does being a playwright mean seeing bubbles of dialogue come out of people’s mouths when they’re talking, or is that only what graphic novelists see?

I told Colleen I hate poetry. I also told her that I don’t hate it.

It would be fair to say I am somewhat conflicted about poetry.

But just last week I went to the launch of a book of poetry. They read the poems out loud there, I like that. Except when I don’t.

The book of poetry was called Pause for Breath. And I guess I discovered, sitting there in that bookstore called The Word that I’d never gone to before despite the fact that it’s right near McGill University and I went to McGill University for nine years, two degrees-worth—and even longer, really, because I worked there for years after that, too—that maybe the point of poetry IS to make you pause. And pause for breath, that’s a good idea, too.

It could calm you down. Because otherwise your thoughts might just bang around your brain faster and faster, like popcorn that finally explodes from those big greasy poppers at the concession stand at the movies. Which is awful when it happens to you in the middle of the night. But at least if it’s in your head it doesn’t make any noise.

(hold up book) Pause for Breath, by Robyn Sarah.

I’ve heard a lot of poetry this past year. Some of it I liked and some just made me sick. Like the guy at Banff, Nick somebody-or-other, who just had to say the word “cunt” in his poem. It hardly even belonged there, he used it like it was some sort of assignment, a challenge he’d set himself. Like it proved he was a real artist. It’s the only thing about the damned poem I can remember.

It stood out like a sore thumb.

The Japanese say the nail that sticks up gets hammered down. They don’t like people to stand out, or at least, they didn’t. Who knows what the Japanese like now? All I know is that they’ve begun their rapid population decline. All of us here in the West are supposed to be doing the same. I don’t know, I had three kids. I did my part. My brother’s having four—two are twins, just about to be born.

So. Hammers, Japan, cunts, twins and poetry, that’s what’s on my mind these days, because I’m an award-winning poet, don’tcha know?

In Banff I heard a lot of poetry. 12 of the 24 writers in my cohort were poets. I didn’t hate the poetry when they read it, but sometimes I feel, with poetry I mean, that unless the poet’s there to take me by the hand, (read this like poetry) to read it to me, to spoonfeed it to me, I can’t quite hold onto it. Meaning slips through my fingers like mercury, like water. Also some poets drone on quite a bit.

I offered to make Colleen some chicken soup. She has the H1N1—oooo, scary!! Colleen
said no thanks to the soup, her sister was making her some.

She told me Sylvia Plath won a poetry contest very, very young, too. Colleen thought this first Plath poem was about a beach. Sylvia Plath is so not a poetic name, it's like the least likely poetic name. Though mine isn't poetic, either. But Colleen Curran is a good name for a playwright. Alliterative. Good for a comedic playwright, especially. She says the “k” sound is considered comedic.

My award-winning poem was “The Marsh.” It was also my first artistic publication. I was in grade 5, nine and a half years old (I'd skipped a grade). “The Marsh” won honourable mention in a creative writing contest put on by The Vermont Poetry Society; for prizes, we got printed booklets (hold up the booklet) with the winners and honourable mentions in poetry and prose. We collected our booklets on TV—(deep-throated, like a TV announcer) WCAX TV, Plattsburgh, North Pole, Burlington.

I will now read my award-winning poem (clear throat):

The Marsh

The foul smell of rotted fish and wood Hangs heavily over the murky Marsh Making man and beast run in fright from the slimy snakes That haunt this eerie, eroded place.

Its fog hangs thick, silent and forbidding, As if doom itself hangs within.

It is a frightening place, with its spindly, fingery tree limbs, Ready to pull you apart if you dare to enter.

Its web of tangled grass, spider silks, seaweed and slime Threaten to hold you for eternity.

It looks like a dark refuge for the Devil!

It’s a place of evil and danger.

The Marsh is treacherous.

Keep Away!

The booklet says there were 1116 entries from 100 schools in Vermont, New Hampshire, New York and Quebec. A grade 6 teacher, Miss Tibert, drove me and my parents. It was May—the heat rose and shimmered above the asphalt, always just a little ahead of us, like a mirage. A visual metaphor for artistic success. Not that I was thinking that way at the time. I may have been mature for my age but I wasn’t a frickin’ genius.

I was on TV for all of about 10 seconds. I wore my hair in a beehive and had on a brightly coloured dress my grandmother had made, sleeveless, patterned and with lace trim—I looked like a miniature Stepford blimp!

It seems like we drove the entire day, and I was the kind of kid who got car-sick...

Which may explain where I developed this aversion to poetry, come to think of it.
Alexander MacLeod was born in Inverness, Cape Breton and raised in Windsor, Ontario. His recent collection of short stories, *Light Lifting* (Biblioasis) was short listed for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. His award-winning stories have appeared in many of the leading Canadian and American journals and have been selected for The Journey Prize Anthology. He holds degrees from the University of Windsor, the University of Notre Dame, and McGill. He currently lives in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and teaches at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax. In this interview with *Rampike* editor, Karl Jirgens, Alexander MacLeod speaks about his stylistics in *Light Lifting*.

**KJ:** Your collection of short fiction, *Light Lifting* was short listed for the Giller Prize and has drawn much critical praise. A number of the stories such as “Miracle Mile” or “Wonder About Parents” or “Light Lifting” feature events that appear to be at least partly based on personal experience living in Windsor or Montreal. Other stories feature actual events or prominent individuals from the distant or recent past. Could you comment on how you establish the combination of fiction and non-fiction in your writing?

**AM:** I built these stories out of the materials at hand and the experiences that surrounded me during specific moments in my life, but they are all fictional constructs and most of the big scenes are entirely imaginary. Like the characters in the three stories you mention here, I was a pretty serious long distance runner, and I have small kids, and I did the interlocking brick job. The parallels are there, especially for people who know me, but I don’t think that the narratives are autobiographical and I don’t see myself as the recurrent protagonist. In general, I think certain readers are fascinated by the magic possibility of a “true story” and on some level they desperately want what they’re reading to be real. That can be seen as a compliment - “this stuff feels so accurate it must have actually happened” - but in other ways, it misses the point about the craft of writing. I always tell my creative writing classes that a terrifying, emotional, hilarious or profound story. The two things are completely different. One happens, the other is constructed and, as everybody knows, *writing* a good story requires a very different kind of discipline, patience and hard work. A story is not an experience. It can draw on experience, sure, but the real art comes out of how well it’s made, not what it’s made of.

**KJ:** Your writing often jumps through spatio-temporal references, moving back and forth in time. There are references to the Tyson-Hollyfield boxing match, jumps in the time-frame of the narrator/protagonist’s thoughts, as well as appearances of historical figures such as Aristotle, Henry IV, Napoleon, and Lenin, among others. How do you approach the question of time itself in shaping your short fictions?

**AM:** Most of the stories in the book are structured around moments of decision or choice and I was definitely interested in exploring ideas of timing and consequence. Sometimes, as you note, I like to jump around in the sequence of events to examine what leads up to and then away from a moment of decision and I want to consider the way individual characters come to understand the significance of their own actions. The historical figures, from Tyson to Lenin to Henry Ford, are normally used only as references to other moments of important interpretation or choice. Tyson’s bite, to take the most obvious example, turned out to be significant
in ways that not many people would have predicted before the fight.

**KJ:** Many of stories follow the movements of the narrator/protagonist’s thoughts, including jumps to past memories. In “Wonder About Parents” there are multiple shifts, while in “Good Kids” the narrator/protagonist’s thoughts are interspersed with recollections from when he was eleven years old. How do you deal with memory when you are forming your stories?

**AM:** I think the way we understand or organize our own memories is probably the most basic form of narration. Memory is storytelling at its simplest. We take the past and turn it into a sequence of events that seems to hold together and make sense. Selections are made and some events and people are forgotten while others take on a near mythological significance, but these choices are almost arbitrary and their relationship to actual fact is nearly irrelevant. In “Good Kids,” for example, the narrator in that story remembers the boy who lived across the street in a very particular way and, for a moment, he considers the possibility that there may have been some subtle, but important significance in that kid that he missed at the time and couldn’t pin down or understand. In the end, however, when he really looks back at the life on their street, he’s not sure there was ever any mystery at all and the only thing he sees is the unambiguous operation of straight force. “Wonder About Parents” is similar. The partying kids at the bar eventually become the parents of the sick child, and when the narrator looks back to the first time he met the girl who eventually became his wife, there’s no way he can see the past without the present tense intruding on the image.

**KJ:** The various stories in *Light Lifting* shift from first person to third person narrative points of view. What prompts you to choose a particular narrative voice or narrative perspective in your stories?

**AM:** I don’t know. Those technical decisions are linked to basic choices about how to tell a story in the most effective way. It’s probably counter-intuitive and weird, but this time around I found that the ‘distance’ of the detached 3rd person narrator worked best when I really wanted to focus on only one character – as in “Adult Beginner I” and “The Number Three” – while the much discussed “intimacy” of the 1st person actually gave me much more space to examine multiple characters and the strange interactions of their relationships – as in “Miracle Mile” or “The Loop.”

**KJ:** Many of your stories are open-ended, and so, avoid closure. As a result, arguably, they are “dialogical” in that they feature some kind of unresolved question or concern. Why do you choose to leave some of your short fictions open ended?

**AM:** I believe in giving the reader a lot of credit and I don’t think it’s wrong to leave them with something interesting to work with or think about at the end of a story. Personally, I get frustrated with stories that are too neat and predictable and I think there is a lot of “dialogic” potential in non-narrated scenes. That being said, I don’t think the endings of these pieces are as totally open-ended as some people have argued. (It’s the number one complaint that keeps coming back.) I’m pretty sure that most readers can see where things are headed as the stories conclude and that they understand why those crucial last moments need to be left alone so they can work in the imagination. If a story is going to linger after you’re finished reading it, then there has to be some image or issue or question that keeps giving and keeps demanding attention.

**KJ:** Personally, I find the dialogism that emerges through open-ended stories to be a virtue, so, no complaints here. Your stories include naturalist depictions of people working, but often their lives or the lives of those they encounter are disrupted on either physical, mental or spiritual levels. On the
other hand, the narrative form is also ruptured in that it frequently jumps through time and place in accompaniment to what sometimes appear to be an almost stream-of-consciousness like thought pattern. Is there a connection between the subject matter featuring people's often ruptured lives and the frequently disjunctive narrative flow?

**AM:** I tried to put a fair amount of variety into the collection and I spent kind of a lot of time puzzling through how I might be able to twist the form and content of each piece so that each story presented its own narrative in its own way. I kept the form pretty straightforward and traditional for some pieces and then, at other times, I played with it quite a lot. For example, I wanted the running story to have a real pace shift in the middle of it, a moment where it actually accelerated and moved from pages and pages of waiting into pages and pages of action. The same is true, in a different way, for the parenting story. In that one, there’s barely a single complete thought, or sentence, or paragraph. I was trying to get at that sense of overwhelmed fatigue and distraction that often comes with small kids and I wanted the narrator to be right at his limit, forced to deal with a bunch of immediate acute problems while also rambling backwards and forwards through the worries of the future and the memories of the past. All this stuff had to be there at the same time, competing for attention, so the story had to have a kind of avalanche structure. Some people like it, others hate it. For the working stories – the bricklayers, the man in the plant and the boy delivering prescriptions - I was interested in trying to imagine how these people see themselves defined differently inside and outside of their jobs and I wanted the stories to formally represent that split or rupture. The straight-A high school kid or the reformed soldier who becomes a born again Christian can’t ever be “just” the person who puts down paving stone. And the guy who builds the car must also be the guy who drives the car.

Representing that duality in a formal way was important and I tried to build it right into the narrative structure of how the story was told.

**KJ:** Much of *Light Lifting* is set and depicts life in the Windsor-Detroit region. Biblioasis Press has emerged from Windsor recently and has already found considerable success through a number of its latest books. Could you comment on how you first connected with Dan Wells and Biblioasis Press in Windsor, and how that led to the publication of the book?

**AM:** Dan was my friend, and a friend of our family’s long before he became a publisher or a bookseller. He kept and still keeps very close tabs on the country’s small magazine and small press culture and he knew about my first stories as soon as they came out. He asked me to do the book right away, even though I only had one or two stories finished. It was a great show of faith and it meant a lot to me. I said okay, and then we just worked on it together and it took years and years until we had enough to make the collection. I never even considered another press. I think Dan has a great editorial eye and I trust his judgment. It hasn’t taken him very long to build a very impressive list of authors and books and I think he’s already established one of the finest presses in the country. If his energy and his resolve hold up – and I’m praying they will – Biblioasis is only going to keep getting better. I wish he could get filthy rich off of all his work and I wish that Windsor appreciated him a little bit more, but perhaps those two developments will arrive in the near future. My fingers are crossed.

Photo of Alexander MacLeod by Karl Jirgens
After Drink You Can Turn Earth Up Side Down

Rodge Glass

In this club in downtown Hong Kong the waitresses never let your glass get below midway before offering you another drink. They all look eighteen or nineteen. They all look good. They’re wearing tartan skirts above the knee and ties pulled loose over part-open white shirts, like someone’s got to halfway to undressing them before deciding against it. The emblems on the waitresses’ shirts read: WAN CHAI AMAZON: A WHOLE NEW ADVENTURE! As four or five of them zip between tables, talking in hand signals to punters (You want another beer or not?), I think to myself: we’re probably the youngest men in here. Then I think: it was funny, the way Angie put it. Our baby is born. Come and see. Like she wanted an opinion on a new dress. Like I was expecting the news and understood. Like it’s not a twenty thousand mile round trip from England to visit. Looking down, I notice my bag is poking out from underneath my stool, the panda toy and fake road sign I got at the market spilling out onto the floor. I don’t bend down. With one swift kick I push them both back in the bag, the contents resting under a nearby table. Then I shout into Nick’s ear. ‘Lot of westerners in here,’ I say. Nick doesn’t reply straight away. He’s watching the dance floor, where the first few brave souls of the night are trying out their moves to Eric Clapton’s ‘Cocaine’. Three couples are having a good time. One especially. A young local girl is slow-swaying along to the live band with a white guy in an Armani suit. Maybe he’s sixty, or older. The girl laughs at something the man says, claps her hand onto his chest then lets it run down the buttons of his shirt – one button, two buttons, three – before her slim fingers rest on his belly, just above his belt. Lingering there. Her nails stroking ever so slightly, slow and soft. The guy grins. Life’s just too fucking good, isn’t it? When he sees me looking, he winks, like I’m next in line or something. I give him the finger but he’s not even surprised. He answers by licking his lips and whipping the girl round, fast, in a circle. This makes Nick finally look away. He grabs more monkey nuts from the bowl, drops the shells on the floor with the rest and faces me. ‘Yeah, yeah,’ he says, readjusting his baseball cap. ‘So what?’ I’ve forgotten the question I asked, or if I asked a question at all.

‘So nothing,’ I say, keeping my voice light, one palm on his shoulder as I lean in to be heard. ‘Hey, you were right. Fucking GREAT band here. I mean. Just – fucking – GREAT.’ These last few days, I lie without thinking. I talk without noticing. Sometimes, I don’t know where I am. I wake up during the night, stagger to the hotel room toilet and think I’m already there, in my new home in the sun, Angie sleeping and the baby in the cot by our bed. Angie stirs and says, ‘Sweetie, come back.’ Like she used to. But here, now, I say to Nick, ‘This place is a real find.’ And it sounds like I mean it.

After a few songs I sneak a look at the score. No change. So I turn back. It’s probably rude to check the football while these guys are ripping into ‘Wish You Were Here’ as if they wrote it themselves, as if they’re really trying to tell us something, you know? But then, it’s not like we’re watching the real thing. In some shitty bar next to a strip club. On a Tuesday night in April. And besides, everyone seems to be doing it. Just before they go for one last chorus I even catch the keyboard player, this guy who looks like a tribal Indian or something, craning for a view from his place at the back of the stage. But no luck: the stocky, Zen-like bass man is in front of him, in his road. One of the two guitar players is to his left, knees bent, chin to the heavens, riffing in front of the other screen. The drummer, complete with full classic rock uniform – ponytail, hair dyed black to cover the grey, skull tattoos, faded Sabbath T-shirt – is crammed at the back, his cymbals in that bit too close, blocking the smallest screen. That’s the one by the exit. Or the toilet. Or both. There’s no signs on anything around here. Up front, the singer and other guitar player hover at the edge of the stage – in their minds, this is a different crowd. One’s doing the lead vocal, the other the harmony. Both have their eyes closed: Oh, how I wish you were here, they sing, crouching for effect. Then standing straight. Then opening their eyes again. The two of them, in unison. Like this outpouring of emotion, it’s sudden, unexpected.

Just as I’m thinking of jumping up there and joining them, dipping and stretching in symmetry, letting the sounds conquer me too, a tartan skirt comes by, picking up two empties and looking around for more. I don’t wait for a hand signal. I give a couple of my own, waving her over, then pointing to our three-quarter full bottles. She smiles, all cheeky, like I’ve
just done something witty or interesting and I think: I
could get used to it here. Meanwhile, Nick’s far away.
He’s been singing along, his whole body consumed,
feeling the thumps and chord changes along with the
band as he lunges back and forth on his stool, playing
the drums on his knees, his gym-toned muscles taut
and visible through a T-shirt I suspect was chosen
because it’s ever so slightly too small. I wonder if
Nick’s high. I met him three hours ago. How the hell
would I know what Nick’s like high? Or sober? Or
sad? It feels like an age before ‘Wish You Were Here’
finally finishes, the ripple of applause and whoops
slowly dies down, and he starts talking again. Like we
never stopped. Like, in this place, time doesn’t pass
unless Nick says so.

‘These guys play here every night,’ he tells me. ‘Ten
til six thirty in the morning. Three full sets. Can you
believe that? They know, like, six hundred songs,
man. You name it. You fucking name it. They know
it. The Stones. The Beatles. Anything.’

Trying to keep my face straight, I say, ‘They do any
African stuff? I like African music.’

Nick comes in closer, checks to see if I’m just passing
the time, then backs away.

‘Probably,’ he says, finally. ‘What’s wrong? You
don’t like The Rolling Stones?’

We’ve not paid for the drinks yet. I decide to play
nice.

‘Every night they play?’ I say. ‘Wow.’


‘Yeah. Well. They get two nights off a month.’

‘Must need a lot of stamina. And strong wrists!’

‘Lemme buy you another

Another few seconds pass before I take a
good long swig on my drink, which is actually, no
shit, called Hong Kong Beer. There’s not even any
Chinese characters on the side of the bottle. I think:
this fucking place! Then I think of how far I am from
Australia, and how long it takes to get there. Then
how long it takes to get from the airport to the city.
From the city to Angie’s. From her front door to the
back room, where my boy could be sleeping, right
now. I try and imagine his little nose. His ears. His
smell. I wonder what name she gave him, and why she
didn’t tell me on the phone. A wave of heat passes
through me as I allow myself to hope she named him
after me. I shake my head, forget where I am, then it
comes back.

‘These boys make a lot of money?’ I ask Nick,
pointing to the band with my bottle. ‘This place is
filling up.’

Nick laughs, snorts.

‘You’ve not been here long, have you my little
friend?’

Nick can fuck right off if he thinks I’m rising to that.
I’m not even supposed to be here.

‘Back soon,’ I tell him, keeping it cheerful. ‘Going for
a cancer stick.’

Standing up, I notice the back of my jeans are
suddenly soaking wet. Behind me, an old man in
Bermuda shirt and shorts who can’t be much less than
seventy is having a good time, laughing at the cocktail
glass he’s just knocked over me like he’s fascinated by
it, like he’s never seen a spilt drink before. The
teenagers either side of him are laughing too. So hard
it sounds like anger. The old man says ‘Sorry dude,’
laughs some more and says, ‘Lemme buy you another
one,’ but shows no signs of actually getting up, doing
it, or helping me dry off. I forget what I got up for in
the first place.

As I clean myself up in the toilet I think: it
feels like a long time since I stood at that airport gate,
boarding pass in my hand, watching my connection
get smaller and smaller and disappear into a paper cut
in the sky. For a while, I forgot about the cost – I was
just looking, looking, looking at that paper cut, a
narrow slit that let a plane through into the other side
of the world, my maybe future: Angie, responsibility,
the end of late nights and stupid mistakes. Back in
the club, I rub my jeans with a paper towel. It’s not
helping. I remember watching that plane leaving and
thinking: I could just hide. That was a week ago.

Today’s the third straight morning I’ve got up late,
hung over to hell, sat with a strong coffee in Starbucks
in Tsim Sha Tsui and stared into my coffee cup
imagining the little bubble in my drink is a plane, or a
ship, making its way across the water. Wondering
what I’m waiting for. I don’t know where the days
have gone. This morning, Angie’s message read: You
coming or not?

When I get back from the toilet Nick’s
joking with the band, between numbers, maybe
making a request. I look down, and see that in among
the monkey shells and the stickiness of spilt drinks,
my bag has moved again. Or disappeared. Looking
around on the floor, under tables, behind chairs,
stumbling around blindly, I know I’m not going to see
it. I remember buying the sign this morning: above a
series of Chinese characters that could have meant just
about anything it said AFTER DRINK YOU CAN
TURN EARTH UP SIDE DOWN. A few hours ago,
that made me laugh. I can’t remember why. It was
supposed to be a translation of something, maybe a
proverb. Something wise in a Chinese dialect made
silly by the English language. What did I buy the sign
for? And what about the panda? Its big black eyes
stared out at me, questioning.

The band are doing ‘Hotel California’ now,
the two guitarists smiling as they faithfully play out
the instrumental note for note as a duo, in harmony. It
sounds like the oldest song in the world. Tired, almost
dead. A dead song from a long-dead age. But these
boys are trying their best to bring it back to life. They
look like there’s nothing else in the world they’d
rather be doing than playing the instrumental from
‘Hotel California’. The whole scene gives me a shiver.
You can feel something spilling out of them, these
musicians, into the room and round the whole place,
the whole street, all over the Wan Chai district,
throughout Hong Kong. And Nick’s right with it, fist
pumping in the air. When the song finishes, there’s
damn near a standing ovation. The singer takes off his
hat, bows low and says, ‘Hong Kong – you are too
kind!’
'Hey Nick, these guys local?' I ask him.

‘Filipino, dude. You know nothing?’

I shrug. Nick shakes his head.

‘They left the Philippines together – all still live together too, in an apartment near here. And they still send most of their money home. Good boys. Fucking tragedy it is. Fucking triumph.’

‘Right, I say. ‘What?’

I’m trying to concentrate on Nick’s eyes, though they’re spinning now.

‘They went to Japan first. The Japanese are good musicians, you know, but fuck it, the truth is: their language can’t cope with English sounds. Wrong shaped mouths. Good news for Filipinos! So they worked in Japan. Then here.’

Nick rubs his index finger and thumb together.

‘More green,’ he says. ‘But still slavery.’

It feels like my turn to speak. To say ‘wow’ again, or give an opinion. Though I’m thinking of something else, somewhere else, I ask, ‘Do they play their own stuff?’

‘They could do that,’ he says. ‘Their songs are amazing. The best songs on this planet if you ask me. But what are you gonna do?’

He waves a hand dismissively at the crowd. I think to myself: yeah. Nick’s definitely high.

‘That’s a shame,’ I tell his spinning eyes. ‘Really.’

The band, I notice, is spinning too. Bass drum, spinning. Guitars, spinning. Dancers, screens, stools. All moving, in beautiful circles. Then more drinks land on our table and more empties are taken away. I don’t remember drinking them.

‘I understand it though,’ says Nick. ‘A lot of guys here are a long way from home. They want something that reminds them of what they’re missing.’

‘Then why don’t they stay there then?’ I say. ‘I mean, they’re just here for money, right? And to get laid?’

Nick puts his drink down hard on the table. The froth surges up the neck, over the lip of the bottle and down the sides of the label reading Hong Kong Beer.

‘Look buddy.’ He searches his brain for my name. Draws a blank. ‘You know fuck all about this place, alright?’ Nick clocks me checking out one of the tartan skirts zipping by. ‘You come in here, spit on us and leave. You types make me sick,’ he says, whispering the final word.

I don’t know what that means but I do know his two eyebrows have become one bushy line that won’t sit still. Why not? Why won’t it sit still? His pupils are spirals. I laugh.

Nick says, ‘Insult my people again and I’ll kill you.’

His face is hard now, the whole thing, like it’s set in concrete.

‘Your people?’ I say. ‘I thought you were from West Virginia.’

I look around the club, thinking: I could stay here forever. Thinking: I’ve got to get out of here. Thinking: but where to? For a second it looks like Nick’s going to boil over, frothing at the mouth, just like his beer. Like he’s going to hit me. But he just downs his drink, grabs his coat and leaves. Then, as if he’s planned it, the skirt comes by with the bill. Just a skirt. No smile. No woman inside. I pay and move to a barstool to watch the rest of the show. Taking my market bag with me.

I don’t sit on my own for long. As the band kick into ‘Crosstown Traffic’ I feel an arm slip through mine, and a hand fall on the small of my back.

‘Hello,’ says a voice.

‘Hello,’ I say back. But quickly, ‘My son is born. I’m not supposed to be here.’

‘That nice,’ says the voice, who also has a warm body, which has already pulled in close. Guitar Man Number 1 is changing over his instrument to one which is pretty battered, with black stains round the sides. I reckon I know what’s coming. This is Hendrix, after all. The suits expect.

‘I not supposed to be here too,’ says the voice.

‘Then what are you doing here?’ I ask.

‘I come to Hong Kong to make business,’ says the voice and body with hands. And after a moment, ‘Monkey business!’

Then a grin, a giggle. She smells like perfume, like sweat.

‘I have a family,’ I say. ‘I’m going to see them.’

‘Good. Our secret then. Monkey business?’

It’s not funny, so I don’t know why I smile. Laugh again. Can’t stop.

‘No way,’ I say, still laughing. ‘No more trouble. That’s why they went to – ’

‘England, yes? I go to England. We get married. I have lots of sons.’

I finish the drink in front of me in one gulp, though I don’t remember if it’s mine.


It’s hard to get words out now.

The voice and body is a girl, who looks young but old too. Her eyes say: I know you. Her lips say: I know you. Her hands say: I know you. She pouts, fake sad, sexy, pulling one of those little girl faces that must work on the guys out here. Seconds pass. Nothing happens.

Then she says, ‘If you can’t then what you doing here?’

Her voice is clipped. The night is short.

‘Hey. You hear me? What you doing here?’

When I don’t answer, she follows my gaze. The guy in the Armani suit is down the front now, the dance floor is full, and he’s bowing down in tribute as Guitar Player Number 1 is changing over his instrument to one which has already pulled in close. Guitar Man Number 1 is changing over his instrument to one which is pretty battered, with black stains round the sides. I reckon I know what’s coming. This is Hendrix, after all. The suits expect.

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The Medieval Notebook

Joshua Rapp Learn

“It looked like some kind of medieval artefact, something Marco Polo would have carried across the Gobi Desert. Dark brown leather – the thing even had a musky scent to it. I left it blank for the longest time because I felt I had to fill it with something beautiful and cohesive, worthy of the craftsmanship it took to construct. It’s too bad I eventually broke down and filled it with crap.”

“Crap?” the janitor asked.

“Ya well, I decided it was time to conform to industry standards. I think I left it right under that pay phone.”

“Did you ask lost and found?”

“They told me to talk to you,” the writer eyed the janitor suspiciously as his hopes of getting hold of his book dissipated. “It’s very important,” he added in anticipation of a more favourable response.

“I thought you said it was crap,” the janitor answered unsurely.

“Trash – that’s why it was publishable. You see I’ve finally isolated a fool-proof formula for the literary market. The journals would race to outbid each other – the reprint rights alone would sell to all kinds of annuals. Anthologies with names like “Heritage Tales,” “Cultural Perspectives,” and “Fiction in the Key of ‘Eh.’”

“What was it about?” The janitor asked. He didn’t like the aimless direction of the conversation. If it went on for much longer he’d miss his chance at cooling himself off in the train station’s air-conditioned convenience store. He liked to eat his lunch by the door, even chill down his body by clenching cold pop cans under his armpits while he watched out for the store’s manager with the help of the large mirror intended for the trains. The teenager that worked the early shift with a terminal case of shyness never had the balls to say anything about his loitering. In fact, he never even had to pay for the cans of sweaty pop when he was through with them. In a job like this, one had to live in the simple pleasures, the temporary reliefs.

“It’s about a poor immigrant kid – the mixed son of an expat Canadian soldier who moved to Somalia and married a local tribeswomen.”

“A tribeswomen?”

“So the kid immigrates to Canada with his newly widowed mother and begins to explore his Canadian heritage. But while scuba diving the shipwrecked remains of the SS Edmund Fitzgerald, he cuts his leg badly, passes out in the water and by some stroke of luck gets washed up on shore.”

“I thought that was an American boat.”

“Beside the point. Anyway, a group of passing Hutterite nuns picks him up and has to amputate his leg because of the onset of a flesh-eating disease. He lives with them for several months before they dispel him for enjoying the sexually suggestive pop songs he hums while harvesting alfalfa.”

“I didn’t know the Hutterites had nuns.”

“Of course they do,” the writer snapped, though the comment unnerved him a little. “The important part is the concentration on death and coping with loss. I’m going to have people dying left and centre. It’s all got to be terminal illnesses and such. Maybe a few suicides to make it utterly depressing.”

“You think people will read that stuff?”
“It’s the only thing the journals will publish. The whole family’s got to drop off – cancer, MS, a pair of schizo twins and an autistic half brother. The immigrant kid will be racing between rooms in the terminal ward on his peg leg. As far as I can tell, I have all the quintessential elements.”

“Are you sure that’s politically correct?”

“Sure it is. But just in case, I threw in a side story about one of the nuns being transsexual. You’re sure you didn’t see the notebook, eh?”

“Ask inside the convenience store,” The janitor suggested with a hopeful glance. The windows were cloudy with condensation.

“I think at one point the kid’s aunt almost decides to shoot her husband on life support in an effort to end the pain,” the writer continued, too caught up in his tale to heed the janitor’s response. “She decides against it, though. It would be too dramatic. Instead she kills herself in her garage – carbon monoxide poisoning.”

The janitor decided that silence was the best course of action. In any case this so-called writer had a haggard look to him. There was a thin layer of grime built up on his face and whenever he wiped the sweat from his brow he only served to move it around. Not that the janitor looked any better in his dirty overalls but hell, it was his job to wallow in filth. This poor fucker didn’t have any excuse.

“I mean you never know – it could have been genius. If I’m just going to lose everything I write, what’s the point of continuing? I could write my best poem ever, conceive an entire book or record the phone number of the love of my life only to lose it the next day.

“It probably got trashed,” the janitor stated.

“There was another story in there with more passion, spirit. Dangerous lines of thinking,” he began in an effort to avoid the onset of an uncomfortable silence. He suddenly felt a need to justify his artistic ability. “There was twisted poetry about dream forms in syncopated rhythms. West African drum patterns, love and the visceral texture of palm fronds. I had an idea about a traveler who gets robbed in Africa and ends up stranded in a small village household with an elderly Spanish missionary who had been a master of flamenco guitar before he

donned the robe. The missionary suddenly feels a tinge of nostalgia when he sees the traveler’s guitar and agrees to take her on as an apprentice.”

“Sounds interesting,” he ventured.

“Of course it was,” the writer responded pompously. “That’s why it’s entirely unpalatable. The other story would have made Trudeau weep in his grave. A quintessential piece of Canadian literature.”

“If someone didn’t pick it up, it probably got thrown out.” The janitor wasn’t sure he wanted to find this thing but listening to the kid yap was better than collecting trash. In any case the convenience store manager had arrived, so he’d already missed his chance for a daily cool-down.

The way he saw it, he got paid the same shitty wage no matter what he did. As long as he shuffled around like he was making an effort, nobody gave a damn what he did. They just assumed he knew what he was doing.

“Why don’t you just rewrite the story?” the janitor suggested in feigned interest.

“What’s the point?”

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Saying What Is

Roger Knox

It is a troubling matter the saying of what is, if you calculate it make a word mould that hardens to a mask it suffocates

or

Saying is already igniting into action your hissing waving sparklers and propagating seeds, it is this happy playing
From: The Angel Wire

Jason Camlot

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing and has got caught in his wings.  – Tweeted by Walter Benjamin

They buried the dead and returned to the line. The innermost were exempt while the outermost were obliged. They knew what they were.

They wore lights fastened to their heads when they lay in bed at night and grew accustomed to seeing mottled halos as they drifted to sleep.

There were the angels whose wings itched and the ones who felt perfectly fine in their wings. There was no itch cream for the first kind.

One angel in particular disliked the word feather and called them flutterwafts instead. They would have made fart jokes but had no a-holes.

The adolescent angel was going through angel puberty. He or she did not understand these new feelings. Hate. kindness. A dun halo surfaced.

She was 3 1/2 years old and had never been out of her earthly cage until this moment. She didn't recognize she (or he) was being called when Gabriel arrived to pick him/her up. She had no idea what she was.

This one angel liked to spit. He-She was pretty good at it and would spit into clouds until they took the shape of genitalia. God liked it.

They squeezed him through a shattered hole in the car window. He bled memories onto window shards to be studied under auto-shop microscopes. Angels were heard through Mr. Muffler’s stethoscope.

The one alienated angel at Angel High School listened to gothic human music, smoked white hashish from a polluted bong, wore torn feathers.

The laws concerning sleeping in the Angel Hotel are fixed only in regard to 1) the nature of dreaming, 2) sounds, 3) the blueness of angels.

The angel who was a social columnist had eyebrows so angular that it made her mouth appear to triangulate every time she spoke. And they made her eyes completely invisible.

The laws concerning sleeping in the Angel Hotel are fixed only in regard to 1) the nature of dreaming, 2) sounds, 3) the blueness of angels.

Because angels are spiritual rather than physical entities they needn't appear graceful and lithe," the horny seraphim kept telling itself.

The pixie wasn't afraid of the angel. The pixie stepped into the bar and told the angel to go fuck itself. Livid, the angel self-immolated.

16 generations gone since she was last an angel. Here she is again, on earth, remembering. She sees a bird. Her vestigial wings grow hard.

In the high school basement, behind iron doors, in the boiler room, behind the boiler, beneath a thick skin of dust felt, my teen angels sleep.