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PHOTOBLUR

by

John Sigurd Gudmundson

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through English Literature and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2003

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Abstract

The idea that context shapes text is traceable to Aristotle who identified poetry or “making” with the form or plot that best appeals to audience expectations. Today’s complex world, with its host of competing truths, requires texts that reflect this confusion. My novel reacts to this context, appealing to expectations in both form and story.

What are those expectations? The current appetite for shorter texts and the popularity of the short novel might be explained by a growing alliterate population, an educated group who value books, but who have little time to read them. Yet reading hasn’t declined altogether. Current event periodicals like *Harper’s* and *The Atlantic* have seen a dramatic increase in circulation since 9/11. These magazines are the home of the short essay, with alliterate expectations clearly in mind.

With *Photoblur* I’ve responded with fictional fragments that acknowledge the reduced attention span of today’s readers. But I don’t confuse alliterate with illiterate. The novel’s disordered form mirrors world events, particularly 9/11, fragmenting further in the pages following the destruction. The philosophical digressions are representative of the inter-mingling of short essay and fiction, linking the story with questions underlying the story. It is text shaped by context. Loaded with contradiction, it satirizes the postmodern world (and its players, preoccupations, performances, etc.) using postmodern devices. It pines for the past, but refuses to conform to its conventions. It weaves thematic threads, but some get tied in knots, and others disappear clear off the page.

The title, *Photoblur*, speaks to my fascination with blurs; those incomplete, unfinished stories. The unresolved moment. An image in flux, as Michael Ondaatje observed, “shapeless, awkward, moving to the clear.”

Photoblur

John Sigurd Gudmundson

For Uncle Sig



*And then from Gibson's your letter
with a blurred photograph of a gull.
Caught vision. The stunning white bird
an unclear stir.*

*And that is all this writing should be then
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
so they are shapeless, awkward
moving to the clear.*

Michael Ondaatje

Here is where the madness is.

Roland Barthes

Light/Flash

Light writing

The world's first photograph appeared in a camera obscura (dark room) sometime during the sixteenth century. Light projected through a tiny opening in one wall reappeared as a smaller, inverted image on the opposite wall. The process was eventually reduced to a portable box, and the invisible latent images made permanent on a plate of silver salt.

The first snapshot of a person came a few hundred years later, set on a simple street scene (the Boulevard Du Temple in Paris) in 1839. It seems likely that the photographer (one Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre) simply aimed his lens out his window and click - opened the shutter long enough to capture the required amount of light, and freeze the image into the picture I have in front of me. Daguerre became a poet of pictures with his snapshot. And thus entered into an age old debate.

Namely, was it a photograph created? Or discovered?

On one hand Daguerre made his picture through choices made in terms of angle, amount of light and time of day. On the other hand he found it. A man getting his shoes shined, a stranger, happened to stand in place long enough (the time exposure was a wearisome fifteen minutes!) to make the transfer onto Daguerre's metal plate.

The debate has far reaching roots in culturally dissimilar understandings of *poet*. In Old English he was called the *scop* (in Scottish the *makar*) from the verb 'to shape or create.' Whereas in Old French he was the *trouvere* (Italian *trovatore*) from the much more passive 'to find'.

A sixteenth century illustration: Light enters the camera obscura and an inverted image appears. The initial reaction, "Look what we've found!" sings one, "See what we've created" declares another.

A modern day variation: The pretty city of West Hill is blown to bits. Someone shouts, "Look what's been done to us!" while another laments, "See what we've brought on."

The first witness (an eye surgeon, Ian) stares blindly into a destruction he had no part in creating. A picture he found, quite by accident, forced on him by an obscure world.

The second witness (a writer, Frank) sees clearly the destruction he's made. A picture he helped create, albeit indirectly, by his mere presence in an all too visible world.

Which brings to mind something else about Daguerre's picture.

In capturing his subject unaware, Daguerre initiated a confrontation between these two worlds, challenging the boundary between the visible (the domain of light) and the hidden (the domain of dark). The man in the photograph represents that boundary. He is the first recorded stranger in the world of light.

But there's something more.

What about those countless un-captured people on the Boulevard? Are they any less significant than our captive stranger? And if Daguerre's picture represents a single permanent violation, an eternal intrusion, what then are photographs untaken? Ruptures that weren't meant to be?

Absent faces that still remain free.

Ian

Why have you brought me here?

You mean out of West Hill.

I'm not in West Hill?

No. You're in a hospital in the next town.

Langview?

Yes. Or another one, further away.

Pender? Glenville? Chute?

Chute will do. Chute hospital.

Was there an accident?

You were caught in a bomb blast.

A bomb blast?

On Lotus Avenue. You were on your way to meet someone.

At the café.

Yes. Tell me what you remember.

I remember having trouble sleeping on the couch in my office, at the clinic. But I must

have fallen asleep, eventually, because I remember waking up, in my suit. It's hard to forget waking up in your clothes. I'm not sure what time it was, but it was early. My secretary hadn't arrived yet. She starts at eight. Or nine. Some time before I arrive. Usually by ten.

I'd like to know about who you were meeting. At the café.

Ms. Winedot. I'd spoken with her on the phone. Something strange had happened. To her eyes. She was seeing things. Hallucinating. And I made plans to meet her. At the café.

Tell me about the meeting.

I don't remember the meeting. Or seeing Ms. Winedot. I remember hanging up the phone and cancelling my appointments. I stayed in my office until it got dark. And then I tried to get some sleep. I couldn't sleep so I got a drink and turned on the radio. And there was Frank. Talking about denial on the radio. And I was going through my own weird denial. It was strange. Listening to him. And thinking about those hallucinations. And then Frank played some music. And, soon after that, I guess I fell asleep.

The meeting.

I don't remember the meeting. Or seeing Ms. Winedot. I remember getting off the couch and walking into the bathroom. I wanted to shave, but I didn't have my razor with me. So I looked into the mirror. And. Strange. I'm drawing a blank. Where was I?

The mirror.

That's very strange. This is going to sound peculiar, but I don't remember seeing my reflection. I remember looking into the mirror, and nothing looked back. Nothing. It

was blank.

You were in an accident.

But I remember washing up and seeing my secretary come in. And we had coffee together. And then I remember going to meet Ms. Winedot. At the café. It was warm and sunny outside. A perfect day. But I remember feeling strange. About Frank. About the hallucinations.

The mirror.

No, not the mirror. Not then. But, that's also strange. Why can't I remember seeing my reflection, when I remember everything else?

Tell me everything else you remember.

I was walking up Lotus Avenue toward the café. And it was warm and sunny. And people were walking past me. And I could see the café. And.

The explosion.

I remember an explosion.

There was a big explosion outside the café.

I was in it.

You were knocked down outside the café.

I remember. The café collapsed. And Ms. Winedot was inside. I remember people

screaming. Maybe that's what she was seeing. The people in the explosion. And the screaming. And. And something else. I remember something else.

Yes.

I know.

Yes. You are.

I'm blind.

Frank

I understand the power of their faith.

The terrorists.

Yes, it equals the power of my denial.

Of religion?

Yes. I watched them on the news tonight and they said that they feared nothing as long as they served their god. I fear nothing because I serve no god. We are not so different.

In the strength of your convictions.

Yes. But where their convictions can lead them to destroy others, mine can only destroy myself.

Are you sure?

I have no desire to harm others. Only their faith. I want to strip them of their beliefs.
Burn their training manuals. Smash their pulpits.

Bomb their temples?

Okay. I see the point. But, in the end a building, a belief, can never equal a life. I'd
trade a thousand cafés for the hundred or so people killed that day.

What about you? Would you trade you?

No.

Tell me why.

I've got too many bibles to burn.

Matias

I can't get a dial tone.

You haven't left your office.

My sister is missing.

She's lost.

I'm trying to reach her boyfriend.

He was caught in the explosions.

The power's gone out.

There's been another explosion.

I'm bleeding.

The building is leaning.

I can't feel my face.

You need to leave.

Something's missing.

It might collapse.

My reflection.

Go.

My God.

Gone.

Francesca

It's only a photograph.

A picture of a grieving woman. Clutching her missing child's toy. A private moment.

No picture is private.

An execution?

Public.

A Plane crash?

Yes.

People trapped in burning buildings. Jumping from windows.

Yes.

Your friends Matias. And Teal. Jumping from those windows. What will you do?

Point. And click.

Teal

What?

Wake up.

Francesa?

There's been an explosion. Several explosions.

Silence.

You have to go.

Silence.

Your brother. Matias.

My brother.

Yes.

Where is he?

There'll be more explosions.

Outside, the buildings down the street are missing - they've gone.

You have to go.

That's where Ian works.

Good bye Teal.

Oh my God.

Silence.

I've disappeared.

Reflection/Focus

Another pretty place

West Hill, one week before the event, is the wet dream of a frustrated continent. The pretty place where everyone wishes to be. And those who get there try really hard to be happy. Because, it has been said, it sucks to be gloomy in paradise. This is likely where my characters would be.

In the heart of trendy Lotus Avenue village, Ian steps into a corner Global Kafé Villa.

“Large long double short?” inquires the Barbie doll barista.

The surgeon winks his reply, sliding two coins into her palm.

Sipping from his cup, he walks out the spinning doors onto a busy street. Strolling past multi-coloured pasta shops, puffy pillow boutiques, and sweet aroma therapy lounges, he arrives at the clinic shortly before nine.

Adorning the facade of the clinic are two giant eyes gazing with equal parts apprehension and ennui. Atop the sign are four interwoven words. “Windows to Your Soul.”

The young receptionist sings into the receiver, curling a bauble pen around her fingers. Ian smiles at her as he takes his place at the large marble meeting table behind door number two. An overhead fan spins slowly.

The receptionist raps lightly on the open door.

“Good morning Doctor.”

“Morning Daphne.”

“Dr. Taylor will be with you shortly. And your appointment with Ms. Winedot’s at eleven.”

“Thank-you Daphne.” Pausing. “You look startling this morning. Is that a new colour?”

“Cappuccino,” smiling. “I got tired of mauve.”

The meeting with Dr. Taylor goes well. Profits are up and a third Laser Eye Clinic will be opened in Upper South West Hill.

His appointment with Ms. Winedot goes even better.

“Do you think I'm ready, Doctor?” Ms. Winedot asks, rolling down her stockings.

“Yes. I’ll reserve the operating room for tomorrow afternoon.”

“This is wonderful. But, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to see you in the same way. I mean, after the surgery,” she says, removing her blouse.

“Ms. Winedot, you won’t see yourself in the same way. I promise you.”

She looks at him with giant eyes, naked beneath thick black glasses. Child eyes.

He looks down at his ledger. “Tomorrow then.”

Soon after the meeting Ian wanders outside, and into a demonstration.

Up the street at the WORD magazine office, Teal is on her way out to a protest. She pulls her t-shirt down over her neck and eyes the magazine editor in the next room.

"You need to publish more stuff on the hypocrisy!" demands Teal.

"I assume you're referring to today's demonstration," Matias replies.

"Damn straight. Time to raise the volume. Expand our audience. Passive protest alone is just not working."

"I imagine you'll want a full page for the next one."

"With pictures."

"Sorry sis, text only."

"You and that reflection theory."

"Need I repeat it? Pictures are mirrors. And mirrors lie."

"Dear brother, in the house of mirrors you are a vindictive hammer."

Further into the city a writer sits at his desk, preparing a presentation for an upcoming anti-terrorist conference.

Time to bring an end to the destruction, Frank writes at the top of the page. Time to erase the source of their hate, to burn their bibles. To eviscerate faith.

Meanwhile at a demonstration on the edge of town, a young photographer twists her lens, blurring a busy landscape, aiming, waiting, whispering through the camera, "Come to me."

Announcement in WORD Magazine:

Crush the State!

Join your sisters and brothers against globalization (SABAG) as we attempt to
shut down the Pacific Rim trade meeting at West Hill Regional Hall!

Date: Tuesday, August 28th

Time: High noon

Place: Regional Hall front lawn

Big wigs expected at the trade meeting:

South East Asian trade representative, Shuske Noguchi

Regional department chair, Gregory Fines

Bank of Finance president, Skip Keller

SABAG keynote speaker: Pietro Sanchez

Music by Destroy Inc.

poetry readings by terra

The past modern demonstration

Today's protest demonstration is like a circus, a twenty first century carnivale with:

People in costumes (police, demonstrators)

Acrobatics (mounting the perimeter fence, escaping from arrest, 'clutch and grab')

Celebrities (visiting heads of state, protest organizers)

Animals (marching horses, sniffer dogs)

Clown antics (teddy bear catapults, frantic police dodging)

Fire play (burning bottle tossing)

Death defying acts (bullet evading)

The grand finale (a city in flames)

And it's always on the road. Offering up its special brand of entertainment throughout the western world. And, like a circus, people of all stripes anticipate (with excitement!) when the carnivale will hit their town next.

So then it comes as no surprise that Teal, who at a very young age wanted to join the circus, soon became fascinated with demonstrations. At first as a spectator, then as a major participant. And, like every major participant, Teal found a cause (anti-globalization). And a protest costume to go with it.

On the day Teal meets Ian, she is wearing her naughty short blue dress (which is barely visible under her oversized Che Guevara T-shirt). She wears her signature thick rimmed glasses and goes shoeless (the western world's statement of defiance). Ready for battle, she enters the protest demonstration at the south end, quickly making her way to the main stage.

Ian, having just completed a productive morning at the clinic, is walking south on Lotus Avenue when he runs into the same demonstration. Curious, and several minutes ahead of schedule, he decides to enter at the north end. Not knowing where to go next he follows an animated voice on loudspeaker, which leads him to the front lawn at regional hall.

Francesca is already there, kneeling on a rise overlooking the main stage, transfixed by the flood of images that crowd her camera lens. Protestors. Transfixed themselves by a bearded man shouting into a loud speaker. How sincere, she thinks, this sea of serious unsmiling faces. Not at all what she wishes to take pictures of this afternoon (to be sure, a most agreeable, late summer day).

So Francesca decides to search out this dark gathering, for light.

Ian catches sight of the blue dress first, a dash of colour peeking out from under a large

T-shirt. There's a face on the shirt. An intense man in a bandana.

Her hair is red, the same shade of the sign she is holding above her head. It says "No to Glo!". She is wearing black rimmed glasses. And she is barefoot.

Ian continues to watch the girl while the crowd swells. At one point she removes the shirt, revealing sun tanned shoulders and the thin straps of a short blue dress.

The crush of the crowd continues, pushing Ian toward the stage. Toward the girl.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"What are you protesting?"

"You don't know?"

Ian looks up at the sign. "No to Glo."

"Globalization. This is an anti-globalization demonstration. That man on the stage. That's Pietro Sanchez, a SABAG activist."

Ian looks to the stage, at the bearded Sanchez, shouting into a microphone. And at the people closest to the front, pounding the sky with their fists. And back to the girl.

"Can I ask you something?"

The girl turns toward him, protest sign in one hand, clenched T-shirt in the other.

“Do you have a name?”

Click.

A young man and a young woman are facing each other in a crowd. The man gestures outside the gathering with his left hand. The woman, holding a protest sign, looks at him with interest.

The woman drops something. The man picks it up, a white T-shirt with a picture on the front. The man holds the shirt up so that the picture covers his face, like a mask. He starts swaying and sliding, as one might do in a waltz.

The woman removes her glasses, squinting in the heat at the curious image before her. And smiles.

Click.

And the rain begins.

At the same time Matias approaches Francesca’s apartment building. A necessary detour before the anti-terrorism conference.

With his wet thumb he hits a button on the panel beside the door. No answer. He looks up at the fogged, flickering windows. Checks his watch. Hits the button again.

No answer.

“Damn,” he says, digging into his jacket pocket for the key, unlocking the front door. Inside, he peeks into the mail slot, digging for another key. Forgetting.

Habit.

It's only been two weeks, but the stairwell seems different. Newly painted? No. Polished railing? Maybe. He never really paid much attention to the stairwell.

Her door stands silent at the top of the stairwell. He pushes it open, exposing the light from a fluttering TV screen.

Matias walks through the strobe effect, directly into the kitchen. Top shelf, left, he remembers. His WORD press pass. Shutting the cupboard door, Matias turns to leave. He notices a binder. A photo album resting on a table beside the door.

Two words, in red ink, are printed on the cover:

'Pictures - Matias'

Matias, now standing in Francesca's doorway, recalls certain reflections from his childhood. Unable to talk back to his parents, Matias was forced to watch his resentment grow inside glass. Mirrors of all sizes, collected by his mother on her travels, covering the many walls inside the small house. Walls that looked back at him, watching him, as he watched himself. And from these walls a grim face gradually appeared. A face not his own.

Matias is leaning over the photo album, opening it. Then he drops it, on the floor.

Why?

Think of Francesca's pictures as more than photographs, images of Matias at given points in time. What Matias sees are mirrors. And inside the mirrors are faces. Faces he denies.

Why?

Because Matias does not believe that a face, any face, reflects the person. To him it is merely a collection of muscles and tissue that contort and distort randomly, without meaning. A shifting image. A lie.

Thus, it is not surprising that Matias remains, sitting on the floor of Francesca's apartment, tearing up the pictures inside the photo album.

He is smashing the mirrors from his childhood.

The house of mirrors

What's with our fascination with the house of mirrors? The very idea of hundreds of repeated reflections of ourselves is frightening enough without the distortions. Perhaps the intrigue lies in the fleeting unreality of the distortions (we know the frightening reflections are momentary). And yet, our intrigue would quickly turn to horror if someone locked us in the house overnight. Trapped in a sea of twisted reflections, the horror of the distortion would soon be revealed as a much more frightening reality.

Who are we, if not the images we have of ourselves? What happens when those images are replaced by the unrecognizable? Of course, the horror would cease when the attendant unlocked the door the next morning, and we could see ourselves again as the image we remember. Our nausea, for the time being, would be averted. Our tenuous reality restored.

But what if the attendant didn't show up?

This is what Matias feared inside the living room of his parents' house of mirrors. Trapped in a sea of lies, with no one around to unlock the door.

Childhood cacophony

Teal Bergen, SABAG activist. Matias Bergen, WORD editor. Sister and brother with a shared longing for voice trapped inside a deafening childhood. An upbringing measured in decibels.

Fifteen years ago, a typical night around the Bergen table.

“Buttercup don’t look so sad. Where’s your pretty smile? Best find it fast. We’ve got an opening. And then the reception.”

“Listen to this Mat, 'Crisis in the Middle East Hits Home'. And we think we’ve just got labour problems over here? Son, it’s never too early to start taking things seriously. Potatoes.”

“Potatoes. Now, we’re going to have to find you a nicer dress than that. Your friend, from art class, Becky, will be there. Her mother’s a famous painter. Butter.”

“Butter. The painter’s Ex ran for a federal seat in the last election. I worked on his campaign. But he got shafted by the media. After that trick interview. Salt.”

“It’s right in front of you, Trick interview? No it wasn’t. More like he didn’t know the first thing about business. Put on your new dress please.”

“Bullshit! He knows business. And he also knows that without decent labour laws, we’re all fucked. You. Me. The kids. Everyone. The shaker's empty!”

“Put on your dress now. As for you ‘labour this, labour that’ I’m so sick of you and your commie cronies jamming directives down my throat. And get your own fucking salt!”

“Commie cronies? You... fascist! I’m married to a fucking fascist! Who won’t even fill

the fucking salt!”

Matias grew up in silent resentment. Teal gave them a special name.

“The enemies of subtlety?”

“Damn straight doctor.”

“They couldn't be that bad?”

“I don't lie. Imagine, eighteen years of aural bombardment.”

“Honestly, I can't”

“You know, I ran away once.”

“Don't tell me. The circus.”

Teal rolls to her side, facing the open window.

“No. I just kept running.”

It's true, Teal had wanted to run away and join the circus. Though when she finally got up the courage to run, she found she couldn't stop. As she got further and further away from her home, she began to believe that if she ran long enough, Teal Bergen would disappear. And when she finally stopped, she'd be someone else.

The next morning Matias stands hunched over a two page spread of the magazine. Teal walks in, shaking her umbrella.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” Matias looks up. “So, how was the protest?”

“A scream. Sorry you missed it.”

She takes a seat by the window. “Are you okay with September's announcement?”

“Sure. I've merely altered August's, replacing anti-globalization with anti-war, fight with resist, E.T.C.”

She leans forward.

“You really don't give a shit, do you?”

Matias stares at the window. “That was unnecessary. Sorry.”

She glances at his reflection .

“Forgiven.”

Teal accepts her brother's apology, but she misinterprets it. His apology is for tone, not content. To be sure, he is not indifferent to demonstrations. To the act of protest. But where Teal sees the possibility for change, her brother sees a dance with tens of thousands of interchangeable reflections waltzing to a similar number of rotating tunes. And Matias believes his sister has simply changed dance partners. The song itself may have changed, but the dance remains the same.

He turns to his sister, opening to an interview for the September issue.

"Speaking of protest," Matias says, handing it over. "Get a load of this guy."

Frank Montminy interview in WORD:

WORD: Tell our readers who you are. And what you do.

FM: My name is Frank Montminy. I'm a writer who believes the continent's terrorist acts of the past months are the end result of two thousand years of organized religion. Therefore, I've begun destroying their propaganda texts. The instruction manuals for terror.

W: You realize what you are doing? By burning these books?

FM: I know where you are going. But I don't agree with historical allusions. I don't discriminate between religions. I treat them all equally.

W: Frank, you're a writer who burns texts.

FM: Only the manuals.

W: Who decides what to burn?

FM: I do.

W: I'm having trouble with that.

FM: Really? What would you suggest? Would you like me to give you the statistics on how many people have died as a result of so-called holy causes? Causes fuelled by the hateful propaganda in competing manuals. Do you really expect me to accept that one religious cause is more just than another? When they freely admit they have no room for the other? I have no tolerance for that which omits the other.

W: You mean to destroy everything that in any way precludes, as you put it, the other?

FM: I am the enemy of the intolerance that necessitated the other. So, to answer your question, yes. Those with beads and Bibles, crosses and Korans, and everything in between have abused the opportunity to make things right. Now it's my turn.

The operation

It is late that same day. Ms. Winedot's operation has taken the better part of an hour. With Daphne assisting, Ian folds and unfolds the layers of tissue that make up each eye. The patient, breathing softly, arms folded across her chest, and the doctor, hunched over, pointing his laser beam. He directs the light into the membrane, opening it, exposing it. The modern day *trouveur* at work.

Earlier, Ian turned toward Teal in bed beside him.

"Teal. Where does this name come from?"

"Terry Lynn. TL. Teal. A natural progression."

"And the blue dress?"

"You mean the one that caught your eye? That's a secret."

Ian stroked her face with his hand.

"Speaking of eyes, yours are fantastic. Why hide them behind horrendous glasses?"

"That's enough of that," she stops his hand in mid stroke. "You remember the children's rhyme? Cross my heart. Hope to die. Stick a needle in my eye?"

Teal removed the surgeon's hand.

"No one, not even the eye doctor, touches these eyes."

Misunderstandings in Five Quarter Time

Ian: Your eyes lower like blinds behind glass.

Teal: You're like a dog, sulking in the rain.

Ian: I caught you staring at the storm.

Teal: Restless, wandering.

Ian: The storm, not me.

Teal: Put away your scalpel.

Ian: It's blunted, a mere symbol.

Teal: A symbol of the butcher.

Ian: The chisel of an artist.

Teal: The tool of a thief.

Matias: You're seeing someone?

Teal: He claims I don't see him at all.

Matias: He won't demonstrate?

Teal: He'd say masquerade.

Matias: But you love the gathering, you crave the charade.

Frank: She took you to church.

Ian: To show me a cause

Frank: Did you see the light?

Ian: I fed homeless food fights.

Frank: Did you enjoy the applause?

Ian: Put down the scalpel.

Teal: I want to leave my mark.

Ian: A mask's scratch.

Teal: A memory for the eyes.

Ian: But whose name will you carve, which disguise?

Image/Viewer

The event

Can mere words portray a catastrophic event? In most cases, no. Words make poor images. Pictures are much better. They live comfortably in our memories, like peas nestled in their pods.

Efficiency clearly plays a major part in the memory process. The big episodes in history eventually reduced to smaller, but intense, micro symbols. Picture fragments.

The Cross. The swastika. The mushroom cloud. A piece of blue sky.

Okay, I confess, the last fragment is my own. It may not ring many historical bells, so to speak, but it has stayed with me longer than most. My own private symbol that represents the explosions that shook pretty West Hill a few days ago.

Between the building pieces that floated downward, behind the thick smoke that expanded by the second, I saw slices of blue sky. Brilliant painted streaks across a shrinking horizon. But they quickly disappeared. The smoke rose too fast, like a thick black smudge washing over the landscape. And, for a moment, I couldn't tell if my eyes were closed, or open. Nothing, and everything, looked the same.

Now, when I recall that moment, all I see are pieces of sky.

A few days before the event Francesca is in her apartment looking over a snapshot taken at the demonstration. A picture of a young woman, carrying a protest sign. The activist has shoulder length red hair, the ends just touching her tanned back. She is wearing a short blue dress and, most likely, sandals (her feet are obscured). The young woman is looking to her left, away from the main stage.

It is late in the day, and dusk is washing over the apartment. The snapshot begins to fade and the young woman's features become grainy. As they merge with the darkness, Francesca sees something in the face. An image of a tear, falling into a smile.

Back to the first image.

On the morning of the event Frank will be sitting in a radio station lounge. The only television locked on the all news network. And pictures, of the event, and the reaction, will repeat across the screen.

A fireball rolls down Lotus Avenue. The buildings teeter like pins in a giant bowling alley, between recurring waves of explosions, debris and then, collapse.

Waves of people gathering, looking up, looking away, twisting necks, bending faces.

The words, the commentary on the attack, fade into the background and Frank closes his eyes, trying to picture the people inside the buildings, listening to what they are saying.

The terrorists. The victims.

Then he feels a crash, falling inside of him, crushing his stomach. And he sees the smoke, a thick paintbrush haze and complete darkness.

He opens his eyes and sees nothing.

He closes his eyes again and sees only pieces of sky.

Aridity

Frank Montminy was born in Quebec, christened Francois Maurice after the French Catholic novelist Francois Mauriac. Frank's father, a farmer, felt that the controversial

Catholic writer's imprint would inspire his son to take up the discussions of religion he felt he could not. At least not within the devoutly religious St. Lawrence town they called home.

Francois the novelist was someone the senior Montminy longed to meet. Often he dreamed of discussing the question of sin and suffering, which seemed inevitable for those lacking spirituality. Or, in other words, the faithfully impoverished.

But Frank's family did not lead an empty life (despite their apparent aridity). Their's was one of rural contentment. Of course they attended church regularly, mostly to stay on good terms with their worshipping neighbours. Still the household itself stayed far away from all things holy. Emphasizing this radical distance, his mother interwove 'tabernacle este' into her words so that even every day expressions became crudely secular. "Pass the sugar, tabernacle este." "Turn up the radio, tabernacle este." And so on.

This explains, partly, Frank's obsession with religion. Which has increased even more so in the days preceding the event, sitting at his desk, thinking about his inability to defend faith. No, he thinks, not an inability. A reluctance, a hesitation. A denial.

What if he were to better articulate this denial? Publish it. Get it out of his head, and into some periodical. He decides to call the magazine that interviewed him last week.

A young woman answers the phone.

"Hello, Teal speaking."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought I'd dialled WORD magazine."

"You did. I just forgot to say what I'm supposed to say."

"Which is?"

"WORD. Serious readers only."

"Please."

"You asked for it."

"Am I serious enough?"

"I haven't a doubt."

"Now, if only I could convince the publisher."

"Matias? Sorry, but he's stepped out. If you give me a name, I'll give him a message."

"Sure. It's Frank. Frank Montminy."

"Hey, I know you. I just read your interview."

"Actually, that's why I'm calling. I'd like to expand on the interview, write a longer piece on the subject, if that's possible."

"The subject? You mean your protest?"

"Right. Do you think he'd go for it?"

"Honestly? No. Matias is not a big fan of protest. Your interview, and the occasional public service announcement, are the exception. Besides, your message might be better received on radio, or television. You see, our readership is quite low."

"Radio? Now there's an idea."

"I'll tell you what, I've got to run, but if you'd like I can put in a word for you at the campus station, where I volunteer. Call back here tomorrow, okay?"

"Will do. Hey, thanks for the help."

"Hey, anything for a fellow activist."

Francois Mauriac remembered

Francois Mauriac was born on Oct. 11, 1885, in Bordeaux, France. He is remembered chiefly for his treatment of the problem of sin and of suffering for those lacking in spirituality. The twenty three novels he published between 1922 and 1954 show him haunted by the conflicts between the spirit and the flesh. He also wrote several plays and collections of poetry dealing with similar themes. Mauriac received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1952. He died in 1970.

Mr. Mauriac.

Francois, please.

Francois Mauriac, the Catholic writer.

By whose definition?

History's. Who else?

History? You mean memory's illegitimate son.

History aside, what do you make of this so-called bible torcher?

You want my opinion as a Catholic writer? And yet, you ask me to put History aside. Don't you see? I'm a Catholic writer thanks to History!

And the bible torcher?

He simply represents a backlash against a false muse. History is an enemy more formidable than religion. And this torcher is as powerless against it as I am against my legacy. There really is little else to say.

You have no further opinion of these events?

Only that today's events continue a never ending coupling of memory and forgetting.

And tomorrow?

Tomorrow we'll be forced to rely on their bastard son.

The perfect picture

"It's the perfect Demo shot," Francesca says into the receiver. "Attractive girl, early twenties. Protest sign. Sad eyes. Pretty smile."

She continues.

"I'm thinking GLObal, the new organic franchise. Politically agreeable food stuffs. Relevant music, videos, magazines, you know. Some fashion. And this photo could be the beginning."

She pauses.

"Yes, of course we'll need more. But, I think I know where to find her."

Francesca begins her search for Teal the next morning in the rain, stapling posters of the sad smiling demonstrator to utility poles that line busy Lotus Avenue, in North West Hill. She is joined by other 'staplers' as they approach her, lining the same poles with their own, rather different protest posters.

Francesca fails to acknowledge the irony. Rather, she sees something else. How cute, she thinks, sneaking peeks at the fashionable students on their bicycles, going about their work. Girls with tattoos, bonnets and short, sexy dresses. Boys in dreadlocks, bandanas and tight fitting sweaters. A GLObaL Inc. advertiser's dream.

The protestors, too, are unaware of anything peculiar. Striding back and forth across Lotus Avenue, digging into their bags, unfurling, smoothing, centring and stapling their anti-terrorism announcements, they fail to notice the picture of SABAG secretary Teal Bergen, sans glasses. A sad smile on every pole.

And meanwhile, on the sidewalks of Lotus Avenue itself, an endless stream of parasol capped couples window shop, back and forth, up and down, the trendiest street in all of West Hill. Unaware that anything is happening at all.

Ian and Teal are walking up Lotus Avenue, toward the clinic. People, some on bicycles with saddle bags, are darting between utility poles, up and down the street.

But the young couple is much too preoccupied to take notice. They are discussing Teal's eyes.

"Imagine how liberating it would be," Ian tells her. "Unbound eyes."

“Toss away the wire shackles?”

“To freedom.”

Teal forces a smile. “You really want me under your knife. Carved up.”

He pauses. “Don’t think of it that way. More like a hidden sculpture.”

“And you, the sculptor. No thanks.”

This eternal resistance! And yet, Ian senses a deep longing for change. He can see it in her eyes.

They stop in front of the clinic. Ian turns her face toward his.

“If you could be someone different,” he begins.

She removes his hand.

“Not your way.”

As Teal watches Ian retreat into the clinic, as she herself walks back the way they came, a large weight disappears. But his not so subtle pleading still haunts her.

Teal stops to steal a glimpse of herself in the window of a nearby café. What features stand out? Her mouth? Her eyes? He’s right, most definitely the eyes. But what about her glasses? And the dress. Don’t they figure somehow?

Walking into the drifting rain, she tries to remember when she picked out that dress.

Was her mother with her? No. She was alone. But where? When? Why has she

misplaced the origin of her famous blue dress?

The dress.

On the pole. In the poster on the telephone pole in front of her. Teal's dress.

On someone else?

No. It's Teal.

A poster size picture of her in protest. Smiling. Her face tanned, radiant. Her eyes, clear like crystal. And yet she's crying?

An address is stamped at the bottom:

francesca@shadow.light

Teal removes four staples from the telephone pole, and then the poster, rolling it tight, placing it under her arm.

And then, without thinking, she begins to run.

Running time

As Teal runs with the poster rolled tight under her arm, as she runs the length of Lotus Avenue into a driving rain, thinking not at all where she is going, these and other memories remind her of where she's been, where she could be:

The phone conversation with the bible torcher, the fellow activist, anarchist (atheist?) and, later, meeting him for coffee at the run down diner below the office. "I can't thank you enough," he'd said, touching her hand, thanking her for setting him up in the Monday

late night (Tuesday early morning) slot at the radio station, on the radio, wanting to know about her work, about her politics, about her thoughts on life, on God, on death, "there must be something after," she'd said to Frank, smiling, wondering, thinking of Ian, and a new life, his life, her face next to his face, her life into his, and this face, this poster face made from her other face, a different face (her true face?), not a sculpture carved by knives, a disguise behind shackles, but a photograph, a picture taken by a stranger who has seen the face rolled tight under her arm, Teal's soaked arm drawn flat across her beating chest, rain drenched pavement smacking, splashing streets, racing to the rhythm of a hundred thousand possibilities a second.

Last night

Frank is employed. The day before the event is his first day as a radio announcer. As part of his duties he is required to record sound bites.

"This is FCUK 107.7, West Hill Campus Radio. Drenching in aural discharge."

"Nice, Frank." A voice from behind the glass. "So, when's your first gig?"

"Tonight. Late shift."

"What you plan on spinning?"

"Cohen. Cave. Harvey. The usual."

"Pass me a tissue."

Frank spins a pencil toward the ceiling.

"And spoken word. They want my thoughts."

His first night in the studio goes well. But he has yet to say anything.

It is approaching 3:00 am. He clicks on the red button above his head.

What the fuck.

“That’s enough Gorecki for tonight. Enough *lento lento*,” taking a sip from his cup.

“I want to talk to you about life, after faith.”

Matias is tired.

It’s nearly three in the morning. Hours of sweating over the magazine have forced him into the oversized corner chair. As he fights sleep, his great uncle’s ashes or, more accurately, the Japanese cauldron on the top shelf that contain the ashes, stares down at him.

What would the old Kodiak Daily newsman think of Matias now? Struggling to publish a low budget, low readership monthly.

The deadline looms, but his mind turns to Francesca. And her pictures. And how, for some, cameras are thieves of the soul. Each snapshot erasing it bit by bit. Until it disappears. How would she respond to a true believer, pleading with her to put away her camera? To save a soul?

Matias shivers as he hears the clock radio, click.

“Faith is belief without need of certain proof. That’s what it says in the dictionary. But what do you call those who believe in certain truths, without need of faith? Scientists? Autocrats? Technocrats? And what about those who no longer desire certain truths?

Those people who define themselves by what they don't believe in? Those defined, by that which they deny?"

Ian is restless.

Rising from the sofa in his office, he struggles to recall the details of yesterday's phone conversation with Ms. Winedot.

She told him that something was wrong with her eyes. No. They weren't bothering her like that. No pain. No, they looked okay in the mirror. No, no rashes. No discolouring. No, her vision wasn't blurred. It wasn't clear, either. It was her vision. Something was wrong with her vision. No, she could see the wall in front of her. No, the book on table was clear too. Clearer than before. No, she couldn't explain it exactly. It's just that. It's like.

She saw things. No. Yes, she could see the things in front of her. She meant other things. Things that weren't in the room. No, not all the time. Sometimes. She saw streets. And buildings. And people.

She saw lots of people who weren't in the room. But. But, they were. In front of her. And they were screaming. They were screaming, but she couldn't hear them. She could only see them.

Yes. Yes, she would meet him tomorrow. At the café. The Global Village on Lotus Avenue. At nine o'clock. Yes. She would keep this quiet. She would get some rest.

Ian checks the clock. Not quite three thirty.

He clicks on the radio and searches for a distraction. He finds a familiar voice.

“So why do we bother? Those of us who are in active denial? Could it be that the rejection of truth is what keeps us going? Or maybe we need more. Maybe we need to challenge these so-called truths. Turn them inside out. Pick at them until they’re almost gone. Expose the bones that remain, after we’re done.”

Francesca is ready.

She’s prepared the apartment for an arrival. A giant blow-up of Teal covers the living room wall. It flickers, illuminated by a stand of candles.

The email came late. A curious message inquiring about the poster. The message was simple:

“When can we meet?”

Francesca replied:

“Tonight.”

The response:

“Where?”

Francesca walks into the kitchen. She reaches to turn off the radio and its sorrowful songs. But she's beaten to it by a sombre voice, which she could kill if she wanted, with the mere press of her finger.

“Fear of exposure. Expose. To lay open to criticism, or ridicule. Exposé. Making known publicly of something hidden, especially something evil or disgraceful. This is what I’m after. Exposing the truth of what lies at the heart of faith. A hidden evil. The

disgraceful heart.”

Frank takes another sip and pushes a CD into place.

“Sing on, Mr. Cave. Show us your hidden heart.”

Teal arrives at Francesca's shortly after 4:00. Francesca shows Teal the living room wall, the flickering grey outline of the photograph from the telephone pole, and leads her inside.

Standing under the giant picture, she removes Teal's glasses, blurring everything in sight.

And kisses her.

A hint of light from the window. Teal lifts the edge of the curtain, and peeks outside. Dawn, teasing the horizon with pleasing colours . A new day, scratching like a child at the tableau sky.

In that moment, in the collapsed time it takes to caress a new face, Teal believes anything is possible.

One early morning not too long ago, she is someone else.

Time/Shutter

Present tense

Let's clarify where our characters were the instant of the Lotus Avenue explosions.

Ian was caught directly in the first blast. Frank saw it repeated on television. Francesca watched it unfold from her window. Matias was hit by secondary debris near the blast. Only Teal was spared witness. She'd just entered into deep sleep beside Francesca, on the floor, near the window. She'd seen the sun rise as promised. A clear day ahead.

A head.

Her head. Someone was shaking her head.

Francesca, "Wake up."

"What," Teal's eyes were sealed shut.

"Wake up."

"Francesca?"

"I said wake up. You need to go. There's been an explosion."

Pause.

"You'll have to go. I've called a cab. Listen."

Pause.

"I know who you are. I know, I knew your brother. Matias."

"My brother."

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"There'll be more explosions. I've got to go."

"Outside, the buildings down the street are missing - they're gone."

"You have to go too."

"That's where Ian worked."

"Good bye Teal," Francesca leaving.

"Oh my God," Teal sitting, staring after the image.

And then she too disappears.

Frank digs in

I saw everything, I heard all their thoughts. And then I saw the stats that followed. The number one most common statement of horror among terrorists and victims alike was "Oh my God."

So where was God in all of this?

Certainly not in those buildings. To think, all those people praying. The victims, the terrorists. In the end wouldn't they all be invoking the same God?

You think it's best to invoke none.

For me, it's easy. But for others, convictions run deep. Faith. For some reason it gives them comfort.

What have you got against faith?

Nothing. But naming it, abiding by some mandatory spiritual training manual, shit, that's where the problem starts. There are too many manuals!

And your solution? Short of eliminating organized religion?

That is exactly what I'm talking about. Ban it. Outlaw it. Don't assign it to some grand holy cause. All in the name of some absentee God.

And where does that leave faith?

People need to be responsible for their own actions. Let them derive faith in that.

Francesca retreats

Let's follow Francesca to the airport on the morning of the explosions.

The crowds that greet her as she leaves her apartment are equal parts shocked and excited. And already an urgent acrid smell has wafted the five blocks east from Lotus Avenue Village. The smoke will soon follow. But Francesca won't taste it. She is walking too quickly from the event, toward the next major artery in the opposite direction of the disaster. She is one of the lucky ones who gets a cab in the immediate panic that follows.

"Lucky me," she says stepping through the back door.

What does Francesca see from the rear window as the taxi pulls away?

Black smoke, where the 1200 block of Lotus Avenue used to be. Plenty of people running from it. A few, directly into it, west toward the village. Quickly ten, twelve police cars block off the corner where Francesca got into the cab. An old man stumbles around the same corner, restrained from proceeding past the police barricades by a woman in uniform. The old man shouting something, the same word over and over again. A name? Of someone he knows? Someone he knew? And the policewoman slowly shaking her head.

And what does her camera see?

Smoke. A blur of bodies. Bright lights. Barricades. An old man. A bowed head.

As the taxi speeds further and further away from the event, Francesca leans forward, into her destination, covering the camera with her jacket.

The remainder of the drive is uneventful. Routine. And, as Francesca gets pulled into the airport on time, she feels the day merge into any other day. If only she hadn't looked back.

Ian retrieves

Nurse, I need to call someone. Could you please dial these numbers?

Let it ring.

Okay, try these.

A different ring.

I understand. The phones are out.

Could you send a note instead? A short message?

No. It's for a friend.

At the radio station. At the university.

It's been bombed too.

Okay, forget about the message. Just tell me when I can leave.

Matias cracks

I'm covered in pieces.

The building still stands.

Pieces of me.

It leans.

I can't find my face.

The windows are blown.

I'm cut.

The shards are so small.

Tearing apart.

Vacant chambers.

Bleeding pieces.

Ian returns

"Are you sure you want to go downtown man? It's a goddamn mess."

"Driver, just tell me what you see."

"Okay, but you gotta know it ain't pretty. Still some parts we can't go."

"Take me to Lotus Avenue."

"Most of it's blocked off. 'Cept for the north end."

"Take me to the south end."

"It's a mess, man."

"Tell me what it looks like."

"A fucking mess. The theatre has been wiped out. And two schools. Part of the university, and more. And, this I only heard, the whole 1200 block. One goddamn crater."

"How many dead?"

"Hundreds. Probably more."

"Where are we now?"

"Turning onto Lotus. But nothing's moving."

"Let me out here. "

"Fine by me."

"Which way is north?"

"You're facing it."

"How far am I from the 1200 block?"

"You'll start tripping over stuff in a few minutes."

"Right. One more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Is it night? Or day?"

Francesca recoils

If I squint my eyes, I see faces. Buildings, cities, forests, mountains. In the clouds, above the clouds. Curious faces. My face, in the thick airport window. Painted over the other faces. Hers. His.

I can't believe any of this. I told her to say bye to her brother for me. Another Bergen. His sister no less. What were the chances? A hundred thousand thousand hundred to one.

It's been awhile since I had too much to drink.

Hey guy next to me. Wake up. I want to take your picture. How can you sleep when there's so much to see? Everyone else looks afraid. Ugly afraid. But you don't. You look peaceful. I want to know. What dreams keep you so pretty?

So, they've decided to open the runways after all. But it hasn't changed the faces. Most

of them keep checking their watches. Except the guy next to me. He's not in this lounge. I want to join him. Wherever he is.

They keep giving me drinks until I stop them. But I won't stop them. Because no one else is drinking. And no one is watching the movie. I think they're trying to get them sleeping. They're trying to make them pretty like my guy. But not like me. Pretty not like me.

They say they'll be landing soon. But I want to stay. I'm sure they won't let me stay.

Wake up. I want to take your picture before we land. Open your eyes. Talk to me.

I want to be pretty like you.

"Excuse? No. I don't want to eat. Just a drink. I've a plane to meet."

Time bends in this place of arrivals and departures. Drifting leaves.

"Okay. Pour me a more."

Hey. The sorrow foreigner slurs against me. Teetering toward the fallen gate. "Trana? Kanda? Buddy, you tone know where you going."

"More."

Now, my guy beside me sits beside me. He sees me too. "Sure, I'll take your picture. No. Not mine."

No smiles. Don't show me your cracks.

"No more."

Forget it. I loved you better when you were gone.

"No." I won't reveal the number of her flight. The reason for my fright.

"No." I can't see you. Your picture is blurred. Not my vision. Something has left your face. And I don't want to anymore.

"No."

You're too late. You should have woken sooner.

I'm leaving. Remember, nothing became of me. Don't. It will soon lapse.

"And keep the change."

I can't miss my flight.

Okay, just one more drink before I go. One snap shot.

"Yes, I have dollars. Yes. It's a camera. And it's loaded."

Okay, ten more minutes. Just a small time.

I wonder if she's still pretty.

"Is there a way to control the noise? No. I don't want earplugs. I'll live with the noise."

She's coming home.

"No. But I'll have some water. And a mint. Do you have a mint?"

I wonder will she remember.

"Or some chewing gum?"

If she remembers.

"Anything you've got."

I want to taste nice for my little girl.

Frank believes

Frank, tell me what you see.

The hidden heart, as I pictured it.

Now exposed?

Still beating. Witness the people.

The group beside the crater.

Yes. I can't understand what they're mumbling.

They're praying.

At rocks. They're kneeling in debris.

One of many resting places.

Resting? You make it sound so temporary. But it isn't. The bodies are broken, their life force is finished.

You find it disgraceful.

Wasted life support for the dead.

Ian, your friend, was in the explosions.

Is he dead?

No. But he is blind.

Then I'm sad for his injuries. Yet for him, life goes on.

His patient, the woman he was to meet, is dead.

Then I'm sad for the loss.

Whose loss?

His, mine, yours. Yet, for us, life goes on.

And the terrorists? Are you sad for them?

Yes. They were at the mercy of their manuals.

The terrorists' intent was to kill.

Their intent went beyond the mere taking of life. They were following a higher order.

Their god?

No, higher. They were following those who wield the power of manufactured faith. Those who point to training manuals that promise virgin girls for violent sacrifice, eternal paradise for the victims for those left behind. But these are lies. Lies that provide spiritual comfort. Lies that beget lies. Spiritual comfort that causes this.

Of that you are certain.

It is the closest I come to faith.

A faith in truth?

No, much greater. Faith in the power of forgetting.

Body/Chamber

Eulogy for West Hill

West Hill, island coast city. First death, August 1st, 1984 AD. The day her fabulous famous sea side festival was cancelled forever. Coming the morning after, as some had predicted, the night West Hill threw up. The day I started caring less.

Known for its cheap beach area flats, reasonably priced restaurants and wholly unpretentious subtle airs West Hill gently rose to the scene circa 1954 with its promise of fully detached, two floor, front porch, back yard “West Hill Specials” that spread out along its golden tentacles of suburban expansion as far as the eye could see.

What a promise she made to me. Except I wasn’t born yet.

Strange.

My nostalgia for West Hill is buried in a distant promise made before I was born. So what am I doing, eulogizing her recent explosive destruction? Her final end? Eighteen years after that suicidal river of vomit?

The fact that I am lamenting promises made before I was born, and mourning an end that came long after I couldn’t care less, makes me want to challenge the venerable Bede and his medieval concept of calendars and time.

So, let me rewrite the eulogy.

West Hill City. Born (as a promise) before ‘I Couldn’t Care Less’ (ICCL) -30 years.
Died (in her own vomit) ICCL 0. Blown to bits (as had been expected) after ICCL +18.

Rest in pieces, pretty city.

Uncle Sig's arrival

Sig makes his entrance here, arriving after the other characters are familiar. But not too long after, not so close to the end.

Originally there were openings in two middle sections: "Image/Viewer" and "Body/Chamber". I considered the pros and cons of both:

Image is beautiful, but a liar.

Body is substance, but it is weak.

And therein lay the answer. Sig is nothing if not the embodiment of substance. And his earthly passing came about because, and only because, the flesh is nothing if not weak. Sig enters into the body of the novel. In the flesh, so to speak.

When Sig died I treated it like the final stage of a life long airport departure. I first met him sometime after he checked his luggage (the middle age of airport departures). Whereas I had just bought my ticket (the birth of the airport departure). We became close friends soon after his security check, and had our best times in the departure lounge. Keeping with the analogy, at this point I hadn't even called for a taxi. But this distance between our departure stages didn't seem to matter much.

Not too long ago I sat with Sig as he was about to board his plane. As we sat waiting for his boarding call, I did not feel in the least bit sad. In fact, I was excited for him. He was merely nearing the end of the often boring, sometimes painful process of waiting for his flight. And I felt fortunate that I got to know him best while sitting at the airport bar (as some would say, the most pleasant stage of departure).

Then, when Sig got up to board the plane (when the nurse called me to tell me he didn't have much time left), I walked with him to the gate (sat with him at his bedside). I shook

his hand and simply said , as people do when they see someone off, “Bon voyage.”

Sig boarded the plane on his own (as most people do). And I returned to the check-in counter.

Not until I handed the agent my ticket did I remember I hadn't asked Sig where he was going. But, by then, it was too late. His plane was already idling at the edge of the runway.

By the time I went back to get my luggage, which I'd forgotten in the taxi outside, his plane was gone.

Picture fragments

Before the series of explosions that tore at the heart of West Hill, Matias Bergen had feared the mirror. Now, as he looks at his reflection in the hospital lobby's window, he can't tear himself away from the altered image. It is the incomplete face that intrigues him.

“Are you okay?” An elderly man, in a beige winter jacket and matching corduroy slacks, asks from the lobby bench.

“I was released today.”

“That's one mean bandage you got on your head.”

“I was hit by some debris.”

“There seems to be a lot of that going around.”

“How does it look? Outside.”

"I've seen worse, seen battlefields. But, some are saying this is no better. So close to home."

"I have to go home."

"I understand."

"I haven't been there in years. It's not expected."

"I wouldn't concern myself with that. Everyone goes home."

Matias takes one last look at the mirror. Then he takes the arm of the old man who leads him on a slow walk through the debris, toward home.

Sig asks, "What's your understanding of all this?"

"A fear of mirrors."

"You mean our faces?"

"Our true selves. When we see what we don't like, we smash the reflection."

"So this debris..."

"Pieces of you. Pieces of me."

They continue their walk through a city of broken mirrors. Endless reflections of smashed buildings and shattered street lamps. Bent BMW's and spent SUV's crushed into one another. Twisted corporate logos dangling from split trees scratching unlit skies. Gaping sidewalks. Missing pieces. Absent faces.

"Excuse me. There's something I must do." Matias steps around the crater, toward a broken building leaning on the other side.

Sig spots a blind man digging in the rubble.

"What you digging for?" he asks.

Ian stops digging. "I think I feel it" and pulls a shop sign out of the wreckage. Two large blue eyes stare up from the twisted metal. Looking past the carnage.

Sig twists his thick glasses closer to his face, reading out the words scrawled above the eyes "Windows to Your Soul," peering into the late day sun reflected from behind.

"It's getting dark," he observes. "Can I take you somewhere?"

"Are the airports still open?"

"I believe so."

Ian tucks the sign under his arm, taking the old man's elbow with his free hand. They walk together, away from the wreckage.

Soon they are in a taxi speeding toward West Hill International.

A child's vision

I saw her from the plane stairs on the black ground. She looked like a city person. A big city shining angel. Someone told me she was my mother, but I didn't believe him.

Those guys were always telling me stories. But Eduardo said, Really. I didn't have to believe him you know. But I did because it made him feel better. And because I didn't

really know what my mother looked like anyway. And because I thought it might be fun to have an angel for my mother.

She was wearing a striped costume. And she had black hair. It was wrapped into a ball at the back of her head and that's why I knew it was long. It must have been longer than mine, but not as soft I bet. She didn't look like she had soft hair. But I knew that she was an angel because her eyes were smiling at me real hard. And she looked like she could fly if she wanted to. And because Eduardo told me so.

So my angel mother came to the plane and grabbed me and hugged me real hard until I had to tell her, Stop. She told me many things about her home and the pictures she took with her camera. And she also told me she that really truly loved me.

We had to drive the long way back because of some big problems in the city. My angel mother asked Eduardo about the place we came from and I knew she wanted to know about my house. Eduardo said that my house was good but that it needed some fixing up which I knew was true. Eduardo was being nice and saying everything true so I knew that maybe this might be my real mother. And then she told me everything was going to be better. Better than what, I asked.

The roads were still really busy but Eduardo was a good driver and we didn't have to leave the car when we sometimes got stuck. My angel mother was sleeping because she was probably tired from waiting and the busy airport she had to stay in. I wanted to stay awake and watch her sleeping but I couldn't because the car was moving too slowly and Eduardo wasn't talking and the sun was really hot. I tried really hard not to sleep but I couldn't. I don't know how long I was sleeping, but I know I was because I don't remember anything else from the trip except when Eduardo honked the horn real loud and woke me up. I couldn't open my eyes but I think he was talking to me because he said, be calm nina pequeño. And he only says things in Spanish when he is sometimes a little sad.

A child's voice

My mother is changed. But she is the same. She smiles, but it is different than before. And Eduardo has been speaking Spanish again.

When we first arrived she seemed happy. Then we took a long journey to the place with big lights. And sounds. I thought she would stay happy here. But my mother has been sleeping too much. And Eduardo is whispering "triste" too many times.

I like it here. The ocean is like soft sheets. And the birds are singing in circles on the ceiling. The bright lights don't matter so much because I am near my mother. But the sounds sometimes do. Especially the sharp sounds that send Eduardo away from me.

Sometimes Eduardo speaks another language that I don't understand. But when he strokes my cheek and says "tranquilé," I know everything is okay. He is gentle and spends so much time with my mother who is still sleeping. Eduardo is our angel.

Someone has been calling him doctor again, and Eduardo hasn't come to touch my face for awhile. And the birds have stopped circling and the ocean is gone. But the sheets are so soft and the lights are not so bright. And I can sleep again.

I wake up and my mother is far away. I feel like walking but someone puts me back down and says that the doctor will come back after he sees my mother. I ask her why she doesn't call him Eduardo and she says, "shhh".

The lights have gone and I only hear a soft noise, not like before. I think that my mother is farther away and Eduardo can't see me anymore. But I know that Eduardo is with my mother.

And I feel safe.

A child's touch

I've been tearing open plastic bags with my teeth and now everything tastes like plastic . Bags for the headphones, and crackers, and fruit cups, and peanuts. I know I'm in a hospital room but I don't see Eduardo. I don't see my mother. I only see white sheets, and plastic.

I know something's not okay with my mother. I can feel it in the way the nurse looks down when I ask questions about her. One time the nurse said something about another room, in the next ward. Intense Care, she told me. A sick room. She told me that's where my mother is.

The long hallway is empty. And cold. My feet are like crushed ice. But there's the sick room at the end of the hallway, just like the nurse said. It's really quiet, but not like the forest behind my house. And dark, but not like the night time. I think it is like this because the intense care room is for keeping sick people living. Hurt bodies are lying next to machines. The big machines are helping all the bodies.

Mother, which one is yours?

Over there. In the bed by the window. Behind a big machine. Hidden. Hiding the sun that watched over us this morning. Hiding the sky. I see my mother sleeping, and not smiling. But the machine is breathing beside her, helping her. Humming to mother while she sleeps.

Mother, I'm here. I want to wake you. But you're sleeping too hard, sleeping so deep. And I can't feel your breathing. Can you feel mine? Mother, please tell me you feel my breath. My kisses.

Tell me you still feel the sky.

Final WORD

I can still picture our pretty city before the deadly crater appeared in the 1200 block of Lotus Avenue. I imagine cheerful West Hill window shoppers and their reflections smiling back at them. Then all at once the windows shattered. And now the broken reflections are demanding justice for those responsible. Those unseen.

But it is impossible to attribute responsibility to the obscured. To lay blame one must know the accused. Our window shoppers, long ago blinded by their own reflections, chose to graze in pastures far from the unseen other, the truth in themselves, wandering contently up and down Lotus Avenue, happily tossing blame aside.

And now they plead for justice. They demand it. But it eludes them like dark faces unseen. Now only shattered as far as we see. Pieces of you and pieces of me. Absent faces that never can be.

Word crumple

A smoking office sits abandoned in papers and ashes and broken caldron. Inside a building leaning at the edge of a crater filled with rain. Outside a bandaged man in a crowd staring into reflections at the bottom of a hole.

The mirror I never knew.

Unbreakable you.

I'll die into you.

(your wrinkles dance fires that never go out)

So we let them burn, while we bleed the face of the earth.

Only the skin scars, only the skin cracks.

Only the skin forgives.

Am I standing too close?

(I see me in your depth)

Your surface lies the lay of an empty page.

(you who will take me whole)

But not today

(I wait to break)

Ecstasy's gaze

Ian is sitting in the taxi beside the eyes that once adorned his clinic. Two big blue eyes gazing beside him, while he stares into darkness, toward a farewell flight.

The highway is backed up. Smoking buses, rumbling cars, all kinds of people talking, shouting. But Ian senses only the women. Laughing past him, braking near him. He pictures them in his office. In his apartment. Which isn't too difficult. All his memories involve women.

Once, when Ian was a boy, he found his mom in jail.

"Mom?"

"Hi sport."

"What are you doing here? Did you kill someone?"

"Course not silly. Your mom's no killer."

"Did you rob a bank?"

"Nope. Nothing so bad as that."

"What did you do?"

"I guess you could say I pleased myself. In public. At the old movie house."

"What?"

"I know this is going to sound strange sport, but as I was watching this movie, well not really a movie, more like an art project, a giant face with two big blue eyes, staring right at me, whispered the same thing over and over. Windowsoul. Windowsoul. And then I felt this incredible urge to..."

"Mom?"

"... touch myself."

Years later, while in pre-med, Ian was reminded of his mother's not so private discretion. It was late in the morning in his dorm room. Ian staring deeply into the young nursing student as he closed in on her climax. During the build up her eyes had remained closed. But, at the moment of release, they shot wide open, staring somewhere past the ceiling above Ian's bed.

Where are you, he wondered.

A few years later, at the Laser Eye clinic, Ian took his curiosity one step further, exploring the mysterious link between climax and vision. Usually before the morning appointments, with his new secretary.

One morning he asked Daphne to keep her eyes open during the procedure.

"Open them, and tell me everything you see."

"Okay doctor. I think I see..."

"You see."

"I see..."

"Daphne?"

"...me."

And then, just last week Ian made his greatest progress.

"Where are you?" he asked, looking down at the activist.

"Now?" Teal responded, eyes closed.

"When you leave your body."

"Then that would be right..."

Teal's eyes open.

"...now"

"What do you see?"

"I see..."

"You see."

"I see..."

"Teal?"

"...death."

Deathsexual

Here's the link Ian discovered. The poet Rene Char understood death as a condition that affects each one of our five senses separately, then all at once. This brings to mind another condition, the moment of sexual climax, with its intense heightened awareness of the individual senses and then, ultimately, their union.

Freud, among others, saw sex and death as two sides of the same coin. And visions on the edge of death have been likened to lights at end of tunnels, flashbacks and so on. As for visions at the moment of sexual climax, what do they reveal? Dark tunnels at the end of the light, flash forwards, and so on? If this is the case then Teal's vision comes as no surprise. When she first opened her eyes she saw a foreshadowing of her death, a flash forward that was played out in the modern day tunnel. The airplane.

The inside of the airplane is an extremely reliable vision of death, combining three crucial elements. From the first indication of an air disaster the moment is heightened (due to the inescapable entrapment), prolonged (due to the high altitude locale) and certain (due to the negligible chance of survival).

Midway through the flight a loud bang from outside the plane wakes you from your slumber. You feel trapped (increasing your heart rate). The seatbelt lights come on, followed by the captain over the loudspeaker, notifying the passengers and crew to prepare for a 'routine' emergency landing (initiating a drawn-out descent). And then the worried look on the face of the young stewardess clarifies your worst fears (confirming a catastrophic outcome). The plane begins to descend at a rapid rate, you know you will die, and yet you have plenty of time to reflect in this, a farewell moment made possible by the heightened prolonged certainty of disaster.

It is in these final minutes where a picture of death emerges. A picture from inside the familiar locale. The place Teal visited the moment she threw open her eyes.

Teal Bergen, is that you?

I know you.

Yes, we met at the diner.

Frank the atheist. I remember.

Strange how that label has stuck.

Sorry. I don't mean to label.

It's unavoidable.

Like this tailspin.

Tailspin? Then we're going to crash?

Yes, in a matter of minutes. See, all the passengers are praying.

All, except for you.

And you. Here give me your hand.

You'll pray with me?

No. Something better. Something more.

A kiss?

A final caress.

Teal's vision ends. But unlike Daphne who saw only herself, Teal saw someone else.

A possible explanation. When Daphne looks in the mirror she sees what is there (a face in the light). When Matias looks in the mirror he sees what is hidden (a face in the dark). But when Teal looks in the mirror, she sees nothing (a face yet to be). And so, in the absence of a face, Teal's subconscious has sought out someone else.

When Teal met Frank he touched her hand as they spoke of death. "There must be something after," she'd said. He replied, "No," and did a most unusual thing.

It is this final gesture that is crucial.

As Frank got up to leave he held onto her hand, gently releasing each finger with a kiss. Five tips caressed softly, directly, then all at once, ensuring a privileged place in Teal's memory. A lasting image that resides in her vision of death.

That is until she finds a face of her own.

Intrusive entry

Teal, I no longer know you. Originally you were the memory of a stolen kiss in Rome. A moment, by the way, I'd always pictured in my imagination. There are no words to describe the elation when a moment mirrors your imagination.

We stood in an embrace in the central piazza, near the corner where earlier I'd taken a

picture of young girl at a flower stand. The girl is leaning forward into an explosion of floral arrangements. She does not look happy, nor sad. Only content. And beyond her, in the distance, is our piazza.

From that time there are more pictures, and brushes with other imagined moments. And I am convinced the Teal I kissed must have merged with the memory of another, distant caress. A kiss that took place in a fishing village on the coast. But in this previous embrace memory has been selective, choosing a blurred northern face for you, the character I created. Your true essence (your soul if you like) remains linked to that moment in Rome. And each time I look at the picture of floral contentment, it is you I remember. Or at least, who you were.

Teal, who dreamed of change, has indeed changed, into someone else. No longer the young activist in her naughty short blue dress, black rimmed glasses and shoeless defiance. Nor the Teal who lay next to Ian, shielding her eyes from his scalpel. Nor the giant photograph of a young woman, smiling beneath a tear. Nor she who caressed me in Rome.

They all are gone.

Soon after Teal disappeared from Francesca's apartment, a woman was seen bending over a terrorist in a schoolyard, near the centre of the first West Hill blast. It was dusk. I couldn't make out the young woman's thoughts. But I saw what she did clearly. And I heard the dying man clinging to his beads.

Why won't I die, he thought. I have failed my destiny. Heaven for me will not come. I wait to die in shame, that is all. Let me die quickly. This shameful nondeath must end. Death? Is this your form? I cannot move so you come to me. No. You cannot be death. You are the filth come to keep me in this nondeath. You who do not understand shame. Kill me you devil. Death? You kiss me before you take me. Then it is. You must be.

Praise my God. My death is on your lips.

His thoughts ceased, and I struggled to follow his dying gaze as the young woman walked away.

Impression/Imprint

Francesca

Do you know where you are?

I know where I am. I'm at the hospital. And I'm dying.

Then there isn't much left to do.

Apparently not.

You have no regrets?

I think you know the answer to that.

I'm interested in recollections. Do you have any final memories?

There are too many. And there are none. This I don't understand.

Perhaps your memories are no longer reachable.

So this is what death is? A chorus of regret, a flood of remembrance? Then, nothing?

It's a return to your origins. Chaos from nothingness. And back again.

You describe death. But what is life? What is the purpose of a memory erased?

Francesca, you might question the purpose of pictures kept, photographs saved.

I think I understand. Memories of life are images made.

The farewell

Two people, an elderly gentleman and a blind man are exiting a taxi in front of the departure terminal. Another is standing at the curb, loading his luggage onto a cart. The elderly man quickly takes the blind man through the main doors to the check-in counter. The other man follows behind. Luggage in tow.

All the while, the three individuals fall under the gaze of two large blue eyes painted on a shop sign, leaning against a nearby wall.

The man with the luggage proceeds to the counter behind the blind man who is purchasing a ticket. The elderly gentleman waits to the side, clenching a faded boarding pass.

Which he hands to me.

I am now staring at the bottom of my glass in the airport bar. I don't remember checking my luggage. Or walking past security. Or ordering this drink.

But somehow I know that a plane is readying for take-off.

My plane.

The author's nasty pen

Francesca is dead. She died with the understanding that her life was simply a series of images made. Let's recount them.

In the first one, Francesca is a child, watching her mother die. She is sitting on the damp asphalt beside the wreck, her bare knees pulled up to her chin. She is looking up at the mouth slowly moving behind the crushed passenger window. Her mother's broken mouth. It is making sounds, inaudible murmurs Francesca can't understand.

“What is it mama?”

The rain doesn't let up. And it is getting late. This stretch of the highway seems lonely, Francesca's father had said. That was earlier in the day. Now, he isn't talking at all. But her mother is. She's repeating something, the same something. But her mother's teeth are all broken, and Francesca can't hear what she's trying to say.

“What is it mama?”

You're driving too swift, her mother had said, the trees sailing past her in a green blur. Her father hummed an acknowledgement, keeping in tune with the selection on the classical program. Francesca played with her new camera in the back seat.

Click. Click.

“What are you taking pictures of Francesca?”

“The pretty trees.”

“Am I blocking your picture taking? I can lean over if you like.”

“No mama. I want you in the picture too.”

“But I'll be nothing but a blur beside the trees.”

The radio is still playing in the overturned car. The announcer said the song came from “On an overgrown path.” Pretty, Francesca thinks. She leans over to pick up her camera that only has one crack on the lens. Lucky. She thinks her mother's mouth is almost stopped moving, and wants to take some pictures before that happens. But this time she

makes the trees go blurry.

Click. Click.

It is almost dark but the rain has stopped. The radio has stopped too. It is quiet, and Francesca thinks she hears what her mother is whispering. She walks up to the wreck.

“What is it mama?”

“My purse.”

“Your purse? Where is it? Under you? Mama I tried that already. You’re stuck. And the car’s too heavy. No, not under you. Under the tree. Which tree? That tree? I see it mama.”

Francesca fetches the purse and brings it to the car. She dumps out the contents so her mother can see. Her mother waits until Francesca picks up the silver pistol, and then whispers something different.

“Take my picture with it.”

“But it’s not a camera.”

“Pretend it’s a camera.”

“But you don’t look so good mama.”

“Don’t look at me. Think of the pretty trees instead.”

“Okay mama.”

Francesca steps back and points the gun at the window, focusing on the trees behind her. Squinting so as to blur her mother's face.

Click.

In the second image Francesca is a young girl, witnessing an assault. She is standing next to the portable, behind where the bullies are hitting the new boy after school. The boy doesn't have a name yet. One of the bullies takes off the new boy's glasses and crunches them under his feet.

"Please stop," the boy begs.

Ricky, the meanest one, starts to kick the boy's face. The bullies all laugh. Then they all start kicking together.

"Please!"

Francesca digs into her school bag and removes her camera. She walks around the back of the portable, so that she is behind the boy. She aims her camera at the back of the scrawny frame being kicked and punched from the front. She focuses on the collar of his white shirt, and two tiny streaks of red.

And she waits patiently. Aiming firm, until the late afternoon light is just right.

In the third image, Francesca is eighteen, looking at her photographs. She is lying on her bed at her Aunt's apartment. Face up. The ceiling is covered with clouds, peeking out behind the pictures in her fingers. One by one she places them in piles. A big pile on her right. A smaller pile on her left. The small pile is for the pretty pictures.

Most of the pictures were taken at her new school. Pictures of teachers mostly. The pictures of Ms. Serena, the pretty Biology instructor, is her favourite. Especially the one where she is crying beside her new shiny red car. On the morning after Ms. Serena's husband was caught in the back seat with Francesca.

It was difficult, Francesca remembers, to take a good picture with all the other teachers huddled around the instructor. But she managed one when the other teachers walked away, leaving Ms. Serena alone beside her car. As she was about to leave, the Biology teacher hesitated for a second, leaning on the open door. Her wavy hair, which Ms. Serena usually wore tied up, lay about her face. Her teeth bit hard into her lower lip. Her narrow eyes filled with glossy tears.

Click.

That image lasted for barely a second. It's all Francesca needed.

Francesca leans over and puts the small pile of photographs in a glass box under her bed. She takes the bigger pile (pictures of her baby mostly) and dumps them into the bag from the photo lab, tying the ends tight. She puts the photo bag into the small trash can next to her bed, under a sea of clouds, at the far end of an otherwise empty room.

In the fifth image, Francesca is young woman, dressing. She is with Matias.

"You're leaving then?" Matias asks.

"You think me cold. Unfeeling."

"Are you?"

"Because I take pictures."

“You are indiscriminate.”

“Who are you to decide what qualifies as a suitable picture?”

“And what about you? What makes you decide?”

“All images are free. I take only those which I find beautiful.”

“You base your decision on an aesthetic, and nothing else.”

“The aesthetic is eternal. Pictures are eternal. There is nothing else.”

In the fifth image, Francesca is a young woman, removing her blouse. She is with Teal, beneath the window of her apartment. Francesca whispers instructions that lift the sheets away. She reaches down, and Teal's soft shaking eases. She whispers again, breathing into Teal's ear, and they come together. Sliding between thighs, she gently kisses her neck. Her lips.

Francesca stares into Teal's deep blue eyes, and squints. Smile, she says, blurring the moment into memory.

These are the final images. Five pictures stored by Francesca. Five memories awakened by a kiss. An entire life released, by the death of the body.

Boarding call

“Ian, old friend.”

“Frank, is that you?”

"In the flesh. I tried contacting the hospital."

"I got out as soon as I could."

"I see."

"But I don't. Ha. I can hear them laughing already."

"Who?"

"All those critics of my profession. More accurately, ex-profession."

"Let them laugh. Besides, you've got other plans?"

"I've got a place on an island. I've got some ideas. I think I'll take your lead."

"And eradicate religion."

"I said lead, not apocalyptic end run. Writing. Time to stitch some words together for a change."

"Good plan. I take it your experiments will continue?"

"Certainly. That's why I salvaged the sign. Besides, vision unduly influenced my choice of patients. Being blind has opened up a whole new world."

"A whole new world. Do you think that's where we're headed?"

"No. I'm only talking about me."

“As it should be.”

Frank digs into his jacket. And retrieves a purple folder.

“Ian, have someone read this manuscript to you. Your next conquest perhaps.”

“A manuscript. Who’s the author?”

“Me. It’s something I was working on before the explosions.”

“What’s it called?”

“Camera Obscura.”

“I’ll send you some feedback.”

“I don’t want feedback. I want you to finish it.”

“That’s a pretty high order. What gives?”

“Sorry. I wish I could tell you. But I’ve got a flight to catch.”

Frank looks up at two eyes watching people board their flights. Patiently.

“Good luck, Ian.”

Ian flashes a West Hill smile.

“Bon voyage, Frank.”

Frank turns away and the eyes follow him down the corridor, to the boarding gate, past the final check-point, and the aircraft beyond.

In a matter of minutes he's gone.



Francesca's emanation

Aware. Unaware.

She of form, of substance.

A vanishing blur, a moment's edge.

A photograph familiar, fading to black.

A simple image self-portraited, shot in anticipation.

A picture without weight, save the middle stone.

A burden the tree will lift, in time.

Present. Not present.

Object existing. Object as nothing.

Life. Death.

An impossible emanation that speaks of magic. And design.

Farewell forever once again.

Here is where the madness is.

Reflective Perspective

Let's look at this scene from the viewpoint of the hammer:

A disfigured face reaches into the darkness and pulls me out of the bottom drawer.

Something peculiar about its one functioning eye makes me think that this is not at all about that dream of nine inch nails and body length wood.

Your feet are taking you into the hallway. A picture maybe? Tacking up a little glass-framed postcard perhaps? No. You're not holding any picture tacks. No pin nails either. Nothing I can help you with.

You're headed to the middle of the hallway. Toward that gigantic hallway mirror.

There is no way you can do anything useful with no nails but I.

I have a bad feeling about this.

Okay, now let's pick it up from the perspective of the hallway mirror:

Here it comes. The face. That twisted face that so often gazes on me. Stares at me.
Grins at me. That pathetic, twisted face.

Now it's saying something.

"Mirror."

Yes, I reply. But, as always, it doesn't hear.

"There are just too many of you."

One hand falls from behind its back. And now I see that it is holding something.
Hammer. Dry wall hammer from the bottom drawer. This does not look good. Not one
bit.

Hammer: Oh shit, I get it. What a waste of glass. What a waste of me.

Mirror: The arm is swinging hammer back. That stupid twisted face. I hope it gets the
full seven.

Hammer: Here goes. Mirror, what the fuck did you do to deserve this!?

Mirror: Twisty faced bastard!!!

Hammer: Nooooooooo!!! (is it over?) What a mess. Now there's a million mirror
fragments to clean up. Stupid fucking face.

Mirror fragment: Tard.

Mirror fragment: Star.

Mirror fragment: Bast.

Matias: Busted.

Five histories of beauty

A writer and a stranger conversing aboard a plane:

1.

The stranger is sipping his wine, twisting his beads around his fingers. “A beautiful young atheist kissed him as he died. How do you explain that?”

“Secular forgiveness. Reprieve for a life guided, dictated even, by manuals.”

“What have you to say about other books? Novels for example. Do they not have the potential for guidance?”

“But novels are fictions. Not religious histories, which in turn are claimed as realities. And there is no mass army of Milan Kundera followers demanding that you heed his words, follow his directions, as with your so-called religious texts.”

“And if I told you that the terrorist, the one she kissed, had in his jacket pocket a copy of ‘The Joke’? What would you say then?”

“You are implying that a work of self-confessed fiction prompted his actions. But that is a misreading of the text. There are no urgent commandments to be found within, implied

or otherwise.”

“But then I ask, when does a reading become a misreading? If it can happen in fiction, it can happen elsewhere. So, I challenge you, show me the text that created the terrorist. Show me this, and I will show you the misreading.”

2.

“She kissed the terrorist. As he was dying. Do you not see its beauty?”

“Yes, but you misunderstand me. It is a more than a remarkable symptom of the circumstances. Her lips became an agent of closure, a tactile seal of forgiveness. Now you might understand my goal.”

“You don’t mean your secular crusade?”

“Crusade is historically loaded, but you’re on the right track.”

“They are laughing at you. Your modern day Philistines.”

“Again, you’ve employed a loaded term. I merely wish to break the link between devout textual directions and an authentic purpose. Who could laugh at that? Simply put, we could all do with something a little more tangible. “

3.

“A kiss, then he died. At sunrise.”

“Insignificant. The sunrise means nothing.”

“He died facing the eastern sun. You can’t see the significance in that?”

"It is not significant in any other way than it suggests a pretty picture. I want to know more about the young woman."

"She appeared, kissed him, then disappeared. A gentle apparition."

"But what were her motivations? What guided her? Her self? Or, had she no guide?"

"God was her guide."

4.

"There is beauty in death."

"There is death in death."

"He saw his angel."

"He saw a woman."

"She kissed him."

"Yes. But why? I need to understand the kiss."

5.

"You don't believe he has gone elsewhere? A heaven of some sorts?"

"He is gone. Vanished except for his shell. And that has gone wherever, however his people dispose of the body."

"I am believing you lead an empty life."

“Empty because I don’t believe in here and forever after?”

“Empty of faith. A depleted moth.”

“What if he’d been kissed by a moth? Would he still go to your heaven?”

“He goes on regardless of what happens down here. Despite misjudgement.”

“You are calling what he did a misjudgement? A misjudgement of what? Of life?
Or his impossible afterlife?”

“You challenge salvation. No, it is not salvation you question, but faith. Am I correct?”

“Inauthentic faith. Faith that must be taught, dictated, frightened into us.”

“So then, if not the faith of salvation, of a heaven here and forever after, then what?
What kind of faith is possible for someone like you?”

The writer, briefly silenced.

“The faith of a child.”

The stranger, ready to play.

“You wanted to know more about the woman with forgiving lips?”

One short history of memory

Teal, I’ve imagined our brief conversation going like this:

“What were you thinking, kissing that terrorist?”

“What would you like for me to think?”

“I’m not sure. My image of you keeps changing.”

“You mean your memory of me keeps changing.”

She’s right, of course. The history of Teal began as a kiss in the piazza. But the moment merged with the face (which remains a blur) of another woman on the coast. And now this memory has been challenged by her unforeseen reaction to an event, inadvertently invited. A gesture that’s lead Teal onto the same plane as our two faith debaters. Whose conversation continues:

“The kissing woman. She is sitting five rows ahead of you.”

“Where is she going?”

“Rome, I think.”

“Tell me, what do you know about the caress?”

“A small but significant event. A gentle reprieve for a dying man.”

“But in the end he died. What is the value of forgiveness in the face of death?”

“My friend, it arouses nothing less than the freedom to forget.”

They shouldn’t serve wine in plastic cups

Teal is sitting alone in an unnumbered window seat. She’s looking out over puffy clouds as the metal bird ascends, humming a tune that will never be written down.

"Miss Teal, there's someone who'd like to meet you."

"Am I a celebrity now?"

"No. I respect your anonymity. But he's an exception."

"He doubts my gestures?"

"He denies your actions. His spirit is hollow."

"Without hope?"

"None. Hope, he claims, is a deception, an invention. Responsible to no one, answering to nothing."

"Ask him to join me." Teal pauses. "And see what you can do about getting us some wine."

The wine arrives first, placed on the fold down tray alongside two plastic cups. The clouds are dissipating outside, exposing a pale blue sky.

He arrives shortly thereafter.

"This is a surprise," he remarks, leaning over the aisle seat. "I've been thinking of you. And then to finally meet you again, as the kissing bandit."

"That's not fair. Bandit implies cruel-hearted thievery. I think you've been reading too many magazines." She smiles. "I'd prefer you thought of it as liberating the flesh, bidding it farewell."

"Farewell? But then that suggests a journey."

"Not necessarily a journey. At most a lasting memory." She pauses. "Won't you sit down?"

Teal pours the wine, their conversation continuing along a familiar vein. He weighs in with his thoughts on finality. Teal, on the pleasures of tactile remembrance.

"Do you recall when we kissed?" she asks.

"Yes."

"It was a significant moment, part of my lasting image of you. A physical memory."

"What do you mean?"

"The farewell kiss."

"A simple kiss?"

"A lasting moment. A caress to carry you to your death."

"But it's a journey to nothing. To nowhere."

"To the unknown."

He empties the wine from the tiny cup, quietly crushing the clear plastic in his right hand.

"I'm curious about something too," he says. "Just how selective are those lips?"

“In what sense?”

“In the sense this is my final flight.”

Final flight. The words resonate. And time crawls while Teal watches, frozen, as the stranger takes a shard from the remains of the cup, and tears it deeply inside his left wrist. Placing the piece of plastic in his left hand, he repeats the same motion on the other side. The blood flows first from the left, then from the right. Two crimson streams, sliding down his arms, hastening to the carpet below.

Teal opens her mouth, but does not scream.

“Just how selective are those lips?” he asks again.

“You need a doctor.”

“No. Let me go.”

“I can’t.”

Teal leans over the armrest, and tries to stop the bleeding with her dress. She tears the ends off and begins wrapping his arms, his palms. Wrapping and tying.

He resists, overpowering her back to her seat. Removing the bloodied ends of her dress from his wrists.

“Why here? Why now?” she demands.

The writer smiles. “It’s time to forget.”

Click.

A young woman leans over a dying man, wiping his damp forehead with a scrap of blue cloth. A pool of blood collects at his feet, seeping into the aircraft, staining the carpet in two growing circles that meet, and overlap.

Speaking below the hum of the engines, the man requests no martyring, no weeping when he dies. Only a kiss.

She nods her head, eyelids lowered, and takes his pallid face in her hands. Gently placing her lips on his, caressing him as he dies.

Obliging his final wish.

Farewell dress

Her brilliant blue dress stained red, torn in tatters, Teal removes her lips from the lifeless face beside her. A picture of deacease.

“Tell me what you see,” the surgeon once asked of her. Inside her.

“I see death,” gasped she.

And now death’s face is here, staring past the clear oval window, as she removes her dress. Placing the fabric over the corpse in the adjoining seat. A fragment of blue red cloth drawn over a depleted shell, while her naked body shivers near. The trembling chills, except where a warmth remains on her tongue.

“Teal,” a stranger calls from the dark.

“Yes,” she says, a farewell touch lingering near her lips, spreading down the corner of her mouth. Past her cheeks, her neck. Around the curves of her chest, her hips, her flesh. Inside.

“Tell me what you see.”

“I see nothing.”

“Close your eyes.”

“I see...” says she. “I see me.”

A scratch on the new canvas

The stranger arrived at his aisle seat as I glanced up from the empty page in front of me. He caught my gaze.

“Would you like a window?” he asked me.

“That’s kind of you. I’d much rather look out at the sky than stare at this blank page.”

“You’re a writer.”

“Not today.”

I grabbed my notepad, and the remains of the newspaper, and occupied the space beside him.

“Okay, you’re not writing,” he observed. “May I ask then, what you’re reading?”

“Of course. Actually, it may explain my apathy.” I handed him a section of the paper.

“It’s an interview with someone who witnessed the West Hill explosions first hand. From her bedroom window.”

“Xanthippe. Yes, I’ve heard of her. She writes about herself.”

“Her favourite subject. Of course the Zoloft exposé has made her very famous. Her phone rings a lot.”

“As I see it did on the morning of the blasts.”

“But what I can’t understand is how she managed to sleep through the first one. And then punish the caller who finally woke her to give the news. What did Miss Zoloft say?”

“She said, ‘my main thought was (when I realized what had happened): What a pain in the ass.’”

“What a pain in the ass? No wonder I can’t write.”

“Honestly. Who really cares about what Girl X saw. I’d like to hear your reaction, what you saw.”

“Nothing and everything. Empty and overflowing. I couldn’t make sense of it. So I simplified it. I simplified it, so I could absorb it.”

“But not with words.”

“No. An image.”

“Let me guess.”

The stranger leaned over and placed his beads around my neck. Beads I hadn't seen a few minutes ago. No. Beads I wouldn't see.

"Pieces of blue sky."

The freedom of influence

"Ian my boy, it's time to leave."

The old man helps Ian to his feet, leading him past the ordered departure gates, to the sea of tarmac outside, an expanse of black where a single twin engine craft eagerly waits. Her propellers spinning fast atop tiny metal wings.

"There it is. Our flight home."

They board the tiny craft. The old man with a beige bag slung over his shoulder. Ian with two eyes under one arm. A purple folder under the other.

As the twin engines idle on the runway, a broken cityscape shimmers behind the overheated tarmac. A blur emerging, as the solitary plane takes off.

"What's in the folder?" he asks Ian, inside.

"A manuscript from a friend. A story unfinished."

"I know a thing or two about being unfinished."

"Okay, so we'll finish things. Your story, and his."

"But," the old man considers. "How does it all end?"

Ian leans forward, grinning. "Any way we like."

Pan the camera

1. The commotion on the plane has ended, and the passengers are filing out. The body bag long since disappeared inside the terminal. There are whispers, but no one seems to know how it all happened.

"A faceless suicide," is the uninformed consensus.

The plane is mostly empty when she appears at the front of the aircraft, wrapped in blankets.

Teal.

She clings to her cloth sheath while a lone Italian constable escorts her away. I want to stop her. Shout her name. But I say nothing.

2. I can't understand it. You are young, so beautiful. Why were you with that shell of a man, that death? Alone and naked, shivering beside him. Were you lovers? I don't want to believe it. I can't believe it. But you don't look at me. You don't see me. You see only a uniform, the sign that death has come. I am nothing to you but the symbol of your lover's death.

I imagine you are thinking of him. His smell. His taste. His death. You are thinking of the dead man who has taken something special with him. Taken something of you, which died when he did. The part of you, that might have looked at me. Seen me. Wanted me.

I know this. Because I see you.

3. It is late afternoon at Roma International. Taxis and vespas swarm about the terminal like insects. Crowds of travellers surge forward, across the arrival ramp, toward unknown destinations at every green.

At the foot of the ramp a police officer is speaking to a young woman in blankets. She is looking down at the cracked pavement, her arms folded across her chest.

The police officer hands the young woman a business card, and some money, before she enters the waiting taxi.

“Senorina?” the driver asks.

“The central piazza,” the young woman says, wrapping herself tight.

Kin scene (with excerpts from Sigurd John Digree’s *An Ill Wind*)

Sig and Ian are in final descent. The tiny airplane weaves its way around the outer islands down to a snow dusted landing strip on the western edge of this north pacific archipelago. Poulsbo. Named for a Norwegian fisherman who, at one time, answered to Paul. But that’s all anyone remembers.

Paul’s place. Where history hides with forgetting.

The aircraft pulls up near the solitary hangar. A hand signal guides it. A gesture returned by the pilot as the propellers quit, ungracefully. The plane sits a moment in silence when the side door swings open. Two passengers disembark down thin metal steps, into a light blizzard.

Sig speaks first, “Strange. This blowing snow, in September.”

Ian replies, “Nothing is strange anymore. The fantastic has become... predictable.”

Sig, "And here I'd always relied on the contrary."

A water taxi awaits them at the edge of the landing strip. The two men and their baggage load into the tiny vessel which points west toward Duffy's Cove. And home.

A warm breeze melts the flakes into a clearing sky. The water taxi pulls out of the small wooden dock, and deep into the surrounding bay. The wheel is offered to Sig, who takes it, confidently.

He regarded this trip as special since he was going into unfamiliar waters. With the Pacific Ocean's built-up energy, its waves battering the jagged coastline, the area had a centuries old reputation for foul weather, sudden unpredictable storms, cross-currents that resulted over the years in shipwrecked sailing vessels, power boats, smaller craft.

Two giant eyes stare into the sun, fading in the light, as Ian tans a blank face. Sig, hard at the wheel, hums quietly as they round the first point.

Ian comments, "I recognize the tune."

Sig hesitates, "'Reflections in Water,' I believe. That's if memory still serves me."

Ian replies, "It's the very least she should do."

Clearing the point Sig suggests a round-about route. The captain nods. And Sig continues his tune.

He had read somewhere that it was possible to cruise the surrounding waters an entire lifetime and never enter any of its

bays or inlets twice. He looked upon the pacific northwest as his kind of country.

The rocks along the island's edge creep ever closer as the vessel enters a thin channel. In some places branches reach clear across the waterway, forming a woven canopy that shades their passage.

Ian comments, "I've been thinking about your story."

Sig responds, "There isn't much to go on, I'm afraid."

Ian, "There's enough. What do you want for your characters' trials? What sort of reward?"

"Originally it was the discovery of something new."

"And now?"

Sig considers, "Now I want them to discover what's been overlooked. Discounted. Forgotten."

It was his love of the sea and boat handling that motivated him into ventures such as this. Daring in nature, yet far from reckless or impulsive in his actions, he took what he called 'calculated risks.' Here is where the quixotic nature of his makeup became most evident. On the sea.

Sig steers the boat out the other side of the channel, and around the islet clinging to the second point. When they clear the point the captain gestures toward a small buoy in the distance. The first marker for Duffy's Cove.

Ian, "You're writing a story about rediscovery."

Sig, "Yes. What's been lost."

Ian, "But is it renewal? Or recovery?"

Sig minds the wheel, steering the boat shore side of the first buoy. The second, and final marker appears on the jagged horizon. And, in the distance, the homes of Duffy's Cove.

Sig, "Sun will be setting soon."

Ian, "I can feel it weakening."

Sig, "Only a few minutes now."

He was never known to shy away from an adventure, especially if there was danger involved. He wanted to put his resources and skills against a sometimes calm, sometimes violent sea. It was this uncertainty that was a magnet that drew him away from the comparative safety of shore activities. It was the stimulant that made him come alive.

The sky gem, as distant northerners once called it, slows at the end of its arc. Soon, another day forgotten.

Sig grips the wheel as he approaches the final buoy, pointing them toward the cove. Slowly turning inland, before the open water. Cutting short a sea date with dusk.

Ian calls over the captain who, after a quick discussion, quietly steps below. The captain resurfaces a moment later, whistling. Ian nods in return.

Sig, “Only a few minutes now.”

The marker approaches.

“Sig?”

“Duffy’s Cove coming up.”

“Sig, let’s carry on. Due west.”

“Due west? But that’s open sea.”

“I know.”

“The boat’s too small.”

“It can handle it. I’ve cleared it with the captain.”

“Cleared what?”

“The rest of your story.”

Sig pauses, watching the marker drift closer. He steadies the vessel a moment, waiting, and then pulls sea side of the buoy. Clearing the far edge of the archipelago. Clearing Duffy’s Cove.

The horizon quickly empties on both sides, exposing a vast canvas of open water.

“Okay then, west it is. Let’s see what this little boat can do.”

Zoom loupe

The body bag is carried across the tarmac into the baggage area, in the far corner, under a picture of a suitcase with a line drawn through the middle. The bag is laid flat onto a table by two baggage handlers who leave it to return to their regular job.

A woman carrying a clipboard enters the area and makes some marks on a form. She looks up at the bag, marks it, and then calls for the vehicle that has been waiting since the flight landed.

A car pulls up and two men in suits hoist the bag into the back seat. One of them signs the clipboard before he joins the other in the front seat. With a nod from the woman, the car pulls away.

The bag rolls back and forth in the back seat as the car twists through the streets. The ends bang into the back doors at hard turns, causing bends in two places that will be difficult for the men to flatten when they arrive.

The car slows down and eventually comes to a stop in a half-lit driveway. The back left door of the car opens and two hands reach in to grab the end of the bag. It is pulled toward the opening, but jams inside at the first bend in the bag. Another set of hands arrive to assist the first.

Eventually the twisted bag is removed from the car, but no one attempts to flatten it out. Three sets of hands now haul the bag across a gravel path into a small brick building. Another woman with a clipboard greets the three men as they carry the bag through the door. They rest the bag on a thick glass table, and then everyone heads toward the door, the last hand turning off the light as they leave.

Sometime later the light is switched on, and the zipper on the bag is drawn down and around the stiffened bends. The gloved hands remove both ends of the bag and pull the

contents out onto the glass, cautiously, meticulously flattening it out. Then, the probing begins.

The fire that eventually reduces the contents to ash is raging before the final examination is completed. Clipboards are returned to their hooks, forms to their folders, as a switch is tossed, sending a metal slab sliding toward two iron doors. The flattened contents of the bag are set onto the metal slab as it slowly approaches the doors, which come open, revealing an intense fire behind, and beneath. Once the slab enters the flames, the doors swing shut.

The ash is eventually collected in a silver cylinder which is presented to a young woman the following morning. The cylinder travels beside the woman all day by train, and then by car, to a tiny fishing village on the west coast. A small boat is hired and the young woman steers the vessel away from the village, in the direction of the setting sun.

At sunset she kisses the silver can and removes the clear bag of ash, ripping the plastic with her fingernails, shaking everything out the punctures, into the sea.

The white ash spreads like a blanket on the water. The boat turns back toward the shore.

It takes some time before everything sinks in.



Memory/Replica

I spent part of yesterday afternoon in the graveyard behind my building. I was taking pictures for Francesca's farewell fragment, and it reminded me of a similar situation from last summer, a superb late August day in the rolling hills of northern Norway, near where Sig's mother was born. I was in the cemetery adjoining a small church atop one of the hills, overlooking red roofed barns tucked between the green rolls below. I had gone there with my cousin to locate her gravestone. We didn't find it. Yet I took a picture anyway.

When I returned home to show my mother the picture of the pretty cemetery, she wept. The picture, she told me, made her think of home, of family. But, I said, our family isn't buried there, the distant red barns aren't even on great grandmother's farm.

I brought over a portrait of her grandmother from the window ledge. Why, I asked her, have I never seen you weep over this?

My mother held the picture in her hands, a black and white photograph of a fair young woman in black rimmed glasses, donning a dark blouse. Her dark eyes staring deeply into the camera. Staring hard through the glass.

Because, my mother finally said, it means nothing.

I was recalling my mother's words while writing Francesca's fragment, when I noticed the perfect gravestone for the funeral piece. It was the grave of someone named Viseur, Francesca's likely surname. Perfect. I aimed my camera at the stone (carefully raising the lens to avoid the inscribed dates), lined up a precise row of white crosses in the background, waited for the just the right light, and took a picture.

My mind races back to my mother after my return from Europe. She said the picture of

great grandmother meant nothing. And yet, the photograph of the anonymous graveyard made her weep. She found meaning in a memorial of strangers.

My mother, the *trouvere*? And if so, what does that make me, the author of that picture? The *scop*? All of a sudden that word sounds harsh. Cold.

In that same summer of 2001 I took my camera out for a walk through the streets of Rome. I was hoping to find some inspiration to complete Sig's unfinished novel at, of all places, a protest demonstration.

A young woman in a blue dress met me first.

"Hi," Teal smiled, from the street side café counter.

"Hi."

"Out shooting models?"

"Not exactly. I was hoping to catch a protest."

"The worker's festival? What makes you think it will be a protest?"

"Check out the police line."

I gestured toward the other end of the piazza. A row of dark blue helmets stood near the entrance of the state building. Another row was positioned across the street, next to a pile of metal fencing. Waiting.

"Are you sure you want to be part of this?" she asked.

“Just long enough to shoot some faces. Then I’m out of here.”

She smiled. “Faces, you say?”

It turned out she was a studio photographer, and faces, as she put it, were her gig. We exchanged names, she gave me some tips, and we agreed to meet back at the counter when I was done. She had no interest in encountering conflict, and was happy to sip her espresso from a distance. And watch.

I walked toward the state building. It was noon and the workers arrived in the piazza, as expected. They were noisy, numerous and, I could sense, more than a little agitated.

The piazza was soon awash in colours. A solid blue border pressing against waves of greens, whites and reds. One dark red banner, in particular, caught my attention. It was composed of one word, Soul, above two wide open eyes, hoisted high above the crowd, in the middle of the piazza. I aimed my camera.

Click.

It would be the only picture I took that day.

I was only a few meters behind the crowd when it happened. Two young protestors tossed a stuffed dinosaur, a pink brontosaurus, over the metal fence in front of the state building, striking a blue helmet square on. One of the police officers mistook the toy for something else and shot a tear gas canister into the crowd, which struck a little boy in the face. And, the bloody carnalé began.

Chaos quickly spread throughout the piazza, and I retreated with a group of frightened tourists back to the café. As we ducked into the restaurant, a line of police cars sped past us into the piazza, sirens screaming. Teal was standing inside, staring out the

window. I saw myself in the reflection, standing behind her, gazing at the escalation. Then, the fires began.

"I've never seen anything like it," she said. "It's like a dream."

We stayed inside the café as steady streams of battered protestors retreated from an ever expanding sea of blue. The police lines cleared a path for a solitary ambulance, then continued to clear the piazza of protestors. News crews darted around the perimeter, hoping to catch sight of the casualties inside. The blue helmets parted once more, and the ambulance wailed out, past our gaze, behind the glass.

The fires burned on, but the crowd was quickly dispersed. Two fire engines stopped in front of the state building and began extinguishing the flares one by one. The fire fighters were quick and effective, spraying the piazza with streams of water. When the last fire was doused, the fire crew rolled up their hoses, packed their engines, and drove off. By that time, all that remained of the protest were a handful of blue helmets, some torn banners, and a thin smoke. The city cleaning crew soon arrived, and the last police car drove away.

People who had been watching from the perimeter began to slowly cross back through the piazza. Nearby shopkeepers who had closed their doors, reopened them. A few vendors set up their tables under the statues. The tourists weren't far behind.

The entire event, from brontosaurus to brooms, lasted two hours. And, when the smoke finally cleared, it was as if nothing had happened at all.

Teal and I walked together into the piazza, past the tourists posing in front of dripping monuments while pigeons pecked at the wet ground.

"Dream's over," I said.

“Did it even happen?”

“I’m not sure, I only got one picture. Before.”

She looked at me. “Take my picture then. That way you’ll know something happened.”

“Like what?”

“Like this.”

And she kissed me.

I wasn’t sure how to respond. So I stood back, and removed the camera from my bag.

Teal was standing directly in front of the massive state building, an imposing structure that obscured all but a fragment of sky. I aimed the lens to position the blue streak just above her face inside the viewfinder. But some rolling clouds drifted overhead, and a little boy skipped by.

I stood patiently. Waiting, wanting, watching in the camera for a picture to appear.

“Smile,” I finally said.

And she began to cry.

Vita Auctoris

John Sigurd Gudmundson was born in 1966 in Vancouver, B.C. He graduated from University Hill Secondary School in 1984. From there he attended Carleton University where he obtained a BA with Honours in Psychology in 1991. After much globe trotting and academic tribulation he is planning to graduate with his Master's degree in English Literature and Creative Writing in June of 2003.