Nervous Habits (Original writing, Short stories).

Lia Louise. Barsotti

University of Windsor

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UMI®
NERVOUS HABITS

by

Lia Barsotti

A Thesis
Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
through English and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1999

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0-612-52722-0
AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to James Laing for encouraging me after I showed him my first real story. Thanks to those who have taught me the fiction writer’s craft: Di Brandt, P. Scott Lawrence, and Steve Luxton. I am grateful to the young writers who workshoped their own and my prose, especially Dean Serravalle. Thanks to Laura Chicharo, Hirem Desai, Lee Gowan and George and Eileen McCallum for inspiration. Thanks to my committee members: John Ditsky, Susan Gold-Smith, and especially Tom Dilworth.

Thanks to Microsoft Corporation for permitting to excerpt from the Enkarta Encyclopaedia.

Thanks to Stella’s café in Flesherton for an atmosphere always conducive to thought and word, and to Richard Spandlick. And, finally, my deep gratitude to my parents, Claudio and Louiseanne, who have provided me their home to write in, rent-free, and to my sister, Angela.
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The restaurant is just off the bar. It doesn’t seem to have a name, but half of Levanto has gathered there. They eat for four hours—smoked meats and fish, seafood risotto, tortellini in brodo, gelato and vodka, beef in Madeira, potatoes, port fogatto, pannettone, champagne, and litres of wine. One of the courses near the end is for luck: cotechino and green lentils. The vile fatty sausage she tucks to the side of her plate. The lentils represent money or fortune for the New Year. They eat as much as they can. No one finishes. They are all happy except for Vivian’s mother who has a cold.

Just before midnight, Vivian and her parents leave her sister and brother-in-law at the restaurant to finish off the bubbly, and stroll home under the garlands of light strung between buildings. The pink-, yellow-, orange- and lime-painted walls are dark in the night that swirls above them. Dark figures rush by, their smiles generous and white in the excitement of midnight. Vivian, her sniffling mother, and her father walk separately in unison towards the apartment building, contemplatively drunk.

Her parents go to their room for bed. Vivian imagines them settling into sleep, her mother’s stomach to her father’s back, the way Vivian used to surprise them as a child. In her coat and pajama pants and slippers, she steps from her room onto the terrace. The highest buildings in Levanto are five stories. The terrace wraps around their top-floor apartment on two sides. She stands in the centre of the terrace to avoid the vertigo of the edge, gazing around her at the sweep of roofs, mountains, and sea.
At the end of a nearby street, people set fireworks off at random, themselves invisible. Vivian sees only the prism of lights flaring across the walls of nearby buildings after each small explosion. Elsewhere, odd comets of orange or yellow fling themselves above the town buildings and shatter across the black sky. Shapeshifting waves carry faraway laughter to the shore.

At midnight, the night's muffled celebrations explode. A civil war of firecrackers blasts from the close mountains—some like machine guns, others like bombs. Sparkles of sound stipple the mountains as visible darkness, and drunk, her striving heart bursting, Vivian stands in the circle of mountains as Italians tell Italians of their valiant and passionate hearts. Her soul within her sinks to its knees in praise.

II

The neurologist, normally a reserved individual, settles uncomfortably into the black plush, resigned to the usual lengthy and desperate discussion which does not in fact occur. The patient glowers with her good eye at a point somewhere between the doctor's bushy moustache and ear.

"When will you be able to diagnose me?"

He can answer and quickly responds.

"When you have the MRI."

Then he explains that the disease is diagnosed by the sum of two attacks, and that the MRI indicates that a patient does have the disease, but not if she does not.
Vivian stands up. Her blue skirt swirls, almost catches a chair leg. She raises an eyebrow, as if to say—are we done here. Unconsciously he relaxes; she speaks his language. Abrupt. Precise. He writes out a prescription for her eye. They leave the room and its charts, the bed and its crisp paper, instruments, relief brain diagrams, vacant.

In the pharmacy downstairs, the pharmacist, name tag Sheila, wears too much eyeliner. The cashier is fat, healthy and middle-aged. Vivian is very angry with the pharmacy employees. They are slow.

Eventually she has navigated the parking lot. It infuriates her that patients have to pay for parking, as if they are customers, even though she recognizes that they are customers. Once in the driver's seat, she forces herself to breathe slowly. In her mind, everything saws to the side like a fish flipping over. When the dashboard rights itself, she puts the car in gear with a snap of her wrist and exits the parking lot.

That evening, Vivian reclines on her blue settee with her feet up on the carved armrest. She rummages with a free hand in the mess by her side in search of her homework. During the present medical mess, refinishing her coffee table and other projects are gathering dust. She suffers through a page or two of something unimportant and cannot concentrate for the blind spots in her eye. The spots are immobile but appear alternately as sparkles like brilliant, faraway suns, and areas of gray. The net result is the same; Vivian covers her left eye with her hand when she reads and a line or two later it transforms into a frustrated fist.
This night differs from the others, however. The sparkles began a week prior and landed her in two GP offices, an ophthalmologist's, and a neurologist's—bites in a sour apple. If one added the Emerge doctor she will consult tomorrow, there will be enough for every business day of the week.

Tonight her feet are numb and tingly. This is a symptom of MS and tomorrow, when even her hands are going wrong, she will lie in her afternoon bed staring at the flickering eggshell wall. She will visit Harvey's, eat a chicken burger and trash the vegetable soup; she will park by the frozen Detroit River for five minutes. And then, Vivian will drive home, pack a bag, and call Veteran Taxi.

The taxi driver is foreign and defensive. Nervous, he needs Vivian to confirm that it is not in fact an emergency though she has instructed him to take her to the nearest ER. Then, he distracts her for an entire fifteen minutes with stories about his pet hobbyhorse, the local homeopathic treatment clinic. He insists that she not judge him on his occupation as a taxi driver; he is, in fact, a member of the healing profession. Casually, she informs him that half the country's best talents drive taxis because of immigration laws. Usually she would get very passionate about these things. It is odd, she thinks, that when she, now a patient herself, might need people like him, she is so uninterested. At the end she forgets to pay and he reminds her as she steps out. She flashes back to the parking lot toll booths of the Windsor Health Centre, and, taking his proffered card, vows to boycott his company. Still, this self-absorption of hers irritates her.
In the Emergency waiting room, Vivian watches *The Simpsons* on television, and the security personnel, while she waits for the nurse to page her. The guards behind their desks are not really security guards; they laugh too much and are too young. Whenever they notice that she is watching them their smiles wane. She wonders where they think they are. It’s a fucking hospital. Get used to angry- and scared-looking people, she wants to shout, hating them for the tiny guilt springing open in her chest.

Eventually, she is led to a bed. Vivian dons the gown but remains standing. She has intuited the difference between those patients who sit, and those who lie. Furthermore, she resists soiling linen for nothing. At the same time, she knows that they will launder it whether she lies on it or not. Her mere proximity is reason enough. There does not seem to be any way to make her clothes seem tidy on the wooden chair, though she tucks her brassiere and underwear under folded pants. After a minute or two, chilled from bare feet on a marble floor, she sits on the bed.

The nurses are gentle, especially the one who takes some blood. Vivian receives the usual compliment on her elbow vein. As with the triage nurse, this nurse’s eyes slip sideways when Vivian tells her about the eye problem and the numbness. Vivian is sure that they know she has MS and will not tell her so. Then, as usual, she chastises herself for being paranoid and suspicious. When she mentions the possibility of the disease to the ER doctor, he agrees that no one likes the prospect of being a cripple in a wheelchair, that the anguish is the most difficult thing. He leaves the room when she starts to cry. Vivian avails herself of the edge of the hospital gown, a checked blue, when the trip to the paper towels across the hall seems too exposing. It occurs to her that
if there were not a curtain between her and the next patient, a middle-aged man surrounded by family, she would be crying in public.

Reflecting on the doctor’s performance, she decides that she likes him. Though gruff, and with the delight in crassness that she is learning is characteristic of all ER staff, he has communicated to her that he understands her. The word ‘anguish.’ Yes.

He sends her home, after relating to her through a nurse that her blood looks good. Its sedimentation is high, but normal, unlike that of victims of MS.

In bed, clutching her cold arms, Vivian wonders if she is eroding.

Multiple Sclerosis, disease of the central nervous system in which myelin, the white, fatty, substance that sheathes nerve fibers, is gradually destroyed, and multiple lesions develop in the brain and spinal cord. The cause of the disease, which chiefly attacks individuals between the ages of 20 and 40, is unknown. Symptoms vary according to the sites of the lesions of the nervous system; the commonest symptoms are blurring of vision, loss of vision or double vision, tremor of the hands, weakness of the extremities, sensory changes such as numbness, tingling, or pain, slurring of speech, and loss of control over the urinary and anal sphincters.

The disease is intermittent in most cases; the initial symptoms are usually transient and may only last several hours or a few days. They generally disappear after the first attack, leaving the person symptom-free, often for many years, only to recur and disappear again, fully or partly. This waxing and waning of symptoms, which may vary from relapse to relapse, may occur repeatedly over many years, leaving few aftereffects at first but eventually producing permanent disabilities. Thus the person often becomes
clumsy and progressively weaker. Occasionally the disease is slowly progressive. It is rarely present as an acute or subacute condition running a progressive course of only weeks or months. Multiple sclerosis is in most cases eventually fatal; and no specific cure has been found. Physical and occupational therapy and several drugs may provide symptomatic improvement.

—Louis J. Vorhaus, Microsoft Encarta, 1994

Certain words are difficult: must be discovered in the dictionary. Happily, this description of the disease omits degenerative. Vivian rolls over and starts to correct the grammar on the print-out. “Commonest.” Vorhaus must have a Ph.D. Can a man who misuses semi-colons be trusted? But how incidental, trivial, punctuation. The conceit of poets, their likening of death to a dot. No. Here—here words are definitions, and the doctor knows this. He can be trusted, though his vagueness maddens. “No specific cure”—could there be many cures? Silliness. Don’t deny it. What he means is that there are better deaths.

Tonight, the bare branches of the tree flickering across her midnight curtains are like so many worms burrowing. Oh, poetry. How I want poetry.

Vivian discovers patterns in her stucco ceiling; her eye like her sixteen-year-old eye, on LSD again, suddenly. White fractals break across her cornea. Odd that the fractal, so preciously repetitive, belongs to a theory of chaos.
Barely more than water, the cornea can be repaired by surgery if ripped. But nerves, deserted by suicidal myelin cells, are useless, frayed ropes.

The ceiling appears to have separated into two layers: a raised portion that melts hypnotically from one pattern into another, and the regular ceiling that supports the fractal drama. Vivian blinks repeatedly. She has always hated hallucination.

Tomorrow, a visual test for her eyes. On her last visit, the neurologist handed her a requisition with his name and work address at the top. On the sheet are several dozen medical diagnoses arranged in list-like fashion, with boxes next to each in the left margin. Looking at it now, she is very thankful that certain diseases, such as Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, have been ignored, but glances ruefully at Carpal and Tarsal Tunnel Syndrome.

Her doctor has checked off

[✓] Evoked Potential (Multiple Sclerosis) VER


Vivian knocks on the translucent window at the neurologist’s office and waits. It slides away after a blurry commotion behind the glass. The nurse greets her with the unnaturally loud voice of those accustomed to conversations with the ill or befuddled. Vivian hands her the requisition, forcing out a ‘hello.’ It is not that she is impolite. The nurse takes the paper and tells Vivian to sit back down until she is called. The window clips closed again.
Seated, Vivian observes as usual that most of her fellow patients are middle-aged or younger. The neurologist’s is the first doctor’s office she has visited where the majority of patients are not old. A trio at one end flip loudly through magazines. The youngest, a boy of perhaps five, fidgets and asks question after question about the pictures to two women. One of the women has her feet tucked under a walker, the kind with wheels and a small seat. When all the chairs in the room are taken and an elderly man enters the waiting area, the two women transfer the boy to the walker.

“Oh, it’s okay, go ahead. He likes sitting in it, don’t you, Billy?”

Billy spends the next half hour driving the walker back and forth across the room, while the friend of the woman with the walker, alternates between telling him to settle down and perusing Cosmopolitan. Vivian envies her, all the best magazines were taken by the time she came in. She was left with Windsor Life. She keeps her head down when she is not watching Billy, because a middle-aged man appears to be trying to make time with her with his eyes. Does he really think that she wants to be picked up at the neurologist’s? Doesn’t he realize that something is wrong with her brain?

A young man bursts out of the door to the doctor’s office. Vivian instantly names him Stuart in her head, for his brown curls, round freckled head and black spectacles. The nurse must have told him what she looks like, because he stops in front of her and asks her to accompany him down the hall. He has no name tag but informs her that he is a technician.

Down a short hallway, and through an anonymous gray door: he asks her to sit down in the one wooden chair and then he leaves the room through another door. One wall of her tiny room is lined with metal gray cabinets marked “Patient Records.” The
keys to the cabinets are still in their locks, and her brain's secrets shiver temptingly in the little closet. But good patients allow their doctors to proceed at their own paces. Conformity is not desirable because it promises a happy ending but because it circumvents chaos. Vivian decides to wait for the doctor to give her the news. By her right arm, a monitoring system of some sort rests on a metal cart and several coloured wires extend from its back. There is a television on a table in front of her, and, stuck to the wall above the television, several charts in large print explaining various sorts of epileptic fits. All the medical terms are in English except Grand Mal.

Stuart returns and begins putting spots of adhesive on her head so that he can attach electrodes to her scalp. Vivian finds it odd that he can put them anywhere and still obtain workable results, for at one point he cannot find the goop that he has placed in her thick hair and has to make a new spot. Even the skin on her head bolts out her defect. He attaches a wet band—for grounding?—to her trembling arm and switches the television on. After a few adjustments, he puts a patch over one of her eyes and asks her to remain as still as she can, and turns off the lights. He presses a button on the system to her right, and a checkerboard appears on the screen. The squares change from black to white to black over and over for a minute or less while Stuart paces behind her.

Her eyes flood with tears as she concentrates as hard as she can on staring at the little dot taped to the centre of the screen. Chanting silently—body, don't betray me, don't betray me, don't betray me

When they are done, he says, chuckling,

"I bet this is the most boring test you have ever taken, huh?"
Her neurologist sees her immediately and confirms that she has optic neuritis, which means that her optic nerve is inflamed. He arranges with the hospital for a course of steroid treatment to combat the inflammation. He admits that the inflammation is a possible symptom of MS, anduncrosses his legs and leans forward when she tells him of her hospital visit and accompanying symptoms. Vivian also mentions that the numbness and tingling vanished after only a couple of days, but his only verbal acknowledgment of the new developments is an incomprehensible grunt.

Like a policeman, the doctor has encouraged his mustache to grow over the top half of his mouth so that it obscures much of his expression. His visible bottom lip is a flushed red, and appears soft. Perhaps he speaks more frequently at home, his speech loosened in his native Punjabi. Vivian doubts this. She intuits that the doctor withholds speech because he refuses to supply answers that do not exist, and for this stoicism she admires him. Yet she knows that her evaluation of his reticence depends upon her perception of him as caring. Perhaps he does not care about her. His own brown eyes are round and beautiful, without flaw. And perhaps without pity. His reserve is the indifference and subtle disdain of the perfect for the broken. She intuits that she and the doctor are rapidly losing their understanding.

Alone in her room sometimes she imagines touching him, a soft press of fingerpad on his knee, a smoothing of his pants crease. Her desire is for his embrace. When a person is held in someone’s arms, she is sheltered from his assessing eye and Vivian cannot bear these conversations, in this gray room, without touching. If she is sick, no one will want to touch her. Usually when people are silent, they are touching each other. The one brown eye and its twin, if she falls silent, simply stare at her, silent.
Sitting there in front of him, her hands gesture without meaning. To him, perhaps, the outline of her broken nerves is like an upside-down rampike under a translucent blue skin.

There are three days between her appointment and her first day of steroids and on this day, her school holds a large fair in the student centre. Several student health organizations are represented along with some from the city. Most of the other students mill around the exercise and nutrition or drug abuse kiosks. Others stand by the STD awareness booths, defiantly filching condoms from little wicker baskets. The mental health awareness and Canadian Mental Health Association tables are empty, save for the quiet women who stand at ready, hands clasped behind their backs. Vivian visits one, then the other, asking uselessly about MS support groups. The women cannot hide their concern, though they do not express it beyond an intensification of their eyes. There is something about Vivian that tells people that sympathy will hurt her more than anything though it is what she wants most. She is only too aware of the picture of stricken youth she presents. It humiliates her. It does not elevate her as one would imagine it might. She is beginning to learn that there is nothing dignified about disease.

Once, she believed that the greater pathos directed towards sick youth versus the aged was unfair. Now she realizes how true it is that she has not lived yet. It is not a death sentence, this possibility of disease; it is death showing her its cards too early. Of course, it is also a blessing; she knows how she will go. She can prepare. Watch, she thinks mirthlessly, I’ll get hit by a bus instead.
Once, she hoped for disease or disability in the belief that through adversity her life would find purchase and purpose. For, if she had some inner flaw, she would be an imperfect thing trying to be a perfect thing. But, without it, she was only a perfect thing waiting to fail, to reveal itself as the unrealizable potential she always secretly believed she was—like the way that in a perfect system, kinetic and potential energies always add up to zero. At twenty-three, she had only just grown up enough to appreciate life when her eye went funny.

If you can make it past the years between seventeen and twenty-two, her mother used to say, before they left the country and stopped volunteering advice, you’ll be fine. You’ll be fine.

Someone from a health group allows visitors to try out a new, state-of-the-art rowing machine. The students step into the contraption while the demonstrator cracks jokes. One young volunteer rows energetically, and his skin blushes with exertion. He concentrates very hard on his hands as they pull and push on long, metal levers, but looks up suddenly and catches Vivian gaping at him. He grins a little and his panting breath is almost visible as it plumes from his innocent mouth, clean as a baby’s. What she would give to walk over to his swift body and pull the hard shell of his torso around her, burrow her head under his sweatshirt.

She smiles at him and everything comes alive inside her for a moment, as if she has just stretched.

In the final analysis there are few people that one can trust. Sifting through her mental list of friends and acquaintances, Vivian cannot isolate a single person whom she
feels she can confide in. There is Karen, her stalwart friend of ten years, but Karen exercises at her gym frequently and with a hateful ferocity. Carol is less interested in bodily perfection, but always skirts emotional conversation. There are Jane and Terry, and Carly, but how does one second-guess a friend? The next time they learn of a job opening, or make conversation with a lonely single male friend, will they suggest Vivian? Or will they pass over her with a slight indecision. She remembers a conversation with an older friend whose fiancé was sick with cancer. The bulk of the discussion surrounded his genes, the young girl unconsiously rubbing her belly.

There are her parents, but family conversations, now that the family has scattered across the globe, are conducted on her parents’s staticky speaker phone, her father repeating, “Pardon? Pardon?”

Created in Spain, it is a classical guitar, and, a year since she bought it, still reeks of cedar. She presses her nose to the body, breathing it in. A fine red line follows the guitar’s curving edge. Like lips shining through gloss, the darker, grainy wood of the neck shines under a clear lacquer. The man-made ivory seems a travesty on the stock of the beautiful instrument, though of course it is kinder. She caresses the swell of the body, so like a cello’s, but more ascetic. Its simplicity astounds.

She loves how it speaks. Plucking the strings over the hole produces an effortlessly rich tone. Yet picking them a little farther down, over the body, yields a more strained and pleading sound.

She is not yet proficient enough to write songs or even to sing and play at the same time though hers is a good room for singing. The carpet and macramé on the walls
soak up reverberated notes but the room is cavernous enough to allow the sound to build. Often she sings alone, urgently, allowing herself a sincerity not of this era.

The voice is one of few things that she can do by herself, without accessories. Like sex, it is something to treasure, she thinks. If she had nothing, she could still sing or laugh, the sound churning from a contracted diaphragm, through the degradable pipes of her body and billowing inside a wide mouth. The air transports best the song that arises from a relaxed body. The effort of singing so often brings a singer’s shoulders up, tenses her myriad back muscles and stiffens legs, as if all that reaching up could really uplift. The ascension comes from letting go—like Pavarotti, those things emanating from his relaxed and exultant mouth, the strain of it showing only in the repeated application of a white kerchief to his wet brow. Breathe into it, as before orgasm. Feel it build, and sink into the song as a naked girl might relax into a clear, violet spring pool near the close of day.

She loves to sing the old music, remembers singing *Every Time We Say Goodbye* to herself at night, the passing men eyeing her on leaf-strewn autumn streets. All those moods.

She loves the way pretentious people in dusky jazz bars sigh, “Oh! Ella…” without any pretension, poignancy in their otherwise hard, excited eyes.

Even when she does not play it, caressing its simple lines gives pleasure.

She misses the hospital staff. Vivian can be frank with them because they know that there is something wrong with her. But at the same time she dislikes being the MS-Possibility in Bed No. 13. The little white band they attached to her arm at the Emerg
last week gave her a feeling of purpose and belonging, but she pulled it off as soon as she left the hospital. On one hand she felt like she was acting a little bit, for the security guard, playing the sick, angry young girl. On the other hand she very badly wanted it off and the sincerity of her need surprised her: because she is playing herself and only finds that out, really, during these little acting scenes that she improvises rather frequently lately. If only she did not know what was going on in her own head, then it would be easier. She could really get upset and go visit her parents or something. Drop out of school. Coping is hateful, and resignation is thankless because it is expected.

Vivian and the other patients in the Short Stay Unit at the Hospital watch Little House on the Prairie. Someone from the IV team comes to dig up a vein in Vivian's arm. The good elbow veins are unsatisfactory for long term usage and her white arms are irritatingly opaque. A young man (the nurses call him Cezar) sleeps in his reclined chair, his blood dripping into his hand. Vivian likes how nurses and patients call the blood in the bags their own before it has joined their bloodstream.

"I'll go get your blood in five minutes, Holly. I've got something to finish first, dear."

Vivian feels a little left out. She wants blood, too.

"It's so pretty, blood, but sinister," Vivian exclaims, when a little bit of her own drifts back up the lock. The small, torpedo-shaped plastic device, the nurse informs her, shall remain in place for the five days of her treatment. This is so that they will not have to pick her every day. Her mother makes jokes about easy heroin access on the phone that night and Vivian gasps with laughter in reply. Her steroid, called Solumedrol, feels
a little cold on its first surge inside her. Chilled and weak from days of never hungering and sleeping, her blood pressure is low. Michael Landon solves all his ranch's problems while Vivian shivers under a blanket.

The only diversions in the swing room (the nurses' term for Short Stay) are the television and other patients. There are two women: a mother and daughter. Their tongues reveal them as members of the small French community just outside of Windsor. With the kind of face that has seen too much pressed powder and cigarettes, the daughter seems a bleak forty—her beauty the type of Blanche Dubois and others. She tries several times to force her mother's chair to recline as the sleeping Cezar's does. It will not surrender, even when the nurse attempts it. The daughter must be her mother's oldest, for this old woman who endures their good intentions is easily twice her daughter's age.

Vivian takes many surreptitious looks at the women and at the young man sleeping in the chair across from hers in the course of the morning. He is lovely, all bronze. Halfway through the next television show he wakes and stretches. His eyes glimmer languorously when Vivian peeks at him and he smiles when she stumbles over her IV pole on the way to the washroom. Mainly because he attracts her, she hopes that he will be there every day that she is, he for his blood, she for her steroids. Unfortunately, he is not. Every day the patients are different.

They give Vivian the steroid in Emergency on the weekend, when Short Stay closes. She spends about three hours both days simply waiting. There are: 33 seats in the waiting room; many people who really ought to go to walk-in clinics for their doctor's
notes, diarrhea or strep throat; two security guards; three vending machines; and, thousands of music videos on the television. The magazines are all old. Vivian gets more homework done these dog-eared mornings than all the rest of the week.

Her body begins to experience the effects of the steroid on her last day of treatment. As with every morning this last month or so, she lies in bed and tests her eyes to see if the ubiquitous sparkles have faded. Fewer appear this morning, especially around the focal point of her eye, and this relieves her greatly. Yet, upon standing, she discovers that something has weakened the cartilage in her knees. This makes circumnavigating the library stairs very difficult. Her heart quickens as well. The pulse speeds along at one and a half times its usual pace.

Crying does not relieve her as much as it once did; most daily habits eventually lose their effectiveness or appeal. The basement bathroom of the library stinks of urine, and an incomprehensible number of people are visiting the washroom.

On the second day, Vivian pauses in mid-sentence in her Sociology of Mental Disorder class. She stares at the faces of her classmates. She has endured the noise of her own heartbeat for two days and the second part of her sentence has been drummed out. They accept her apologies and do not notice her pupils become vanishing points.

After school, she spends some time not even assuming foetal position on her bed, and absorbing the whiteness of the wall. Her green-painted toes and her forearms are numbed again, and her wrists are a consistent ache, and her ten fingers behave as if they are going to stop working one by one at any moment and all of these things seem so
far away and unimportant because the central thread of her world has dispersed so that she cannot tell if she is tired or hungry.

The neurologist’s attitude appears recalcitrant during this emergency appointment with Vivian who has forgotten her scribbled list of symptoms in the car. The neurologist dislikes disorder. He must believe he is immune. She wants him to tell her lies. Perhaps those are what she gets.

“Just a case of anxiety.” This is what he tells the secretary, and double-checks the date of Vivian’s MRI. The secretary seems nervous and there is something more in her expression. Vivian notices this even though she leaves quickly. It is either sympathy for Vivian because of the doctor’s dismissal, or annoyance that Vivian called several times for this appointment only to have it be over nothing. Not since she was a child has she longed so for a gentle touch. The perfect patient is valiantly professional.

The perfect patient has her own support network.

The perfect patient makes no personal demands upon her medical team.

They did an EKG at the hospital but nothing is wrong with her heart. Vivian keeps some of the sticky things that they used to hold the ten probes against her in her scrapbook. They kept fussing over the curtain. They worried about her privacy. And a month later she had the MRI. It was not as interesting as it looked. The machine made knocking noises. For half an hour she made up songs to the knocking to distract herself from her itchy nose. Blindfolded and immobile. And she thought she would need a sedative. Instead, she was sorry to leave the tunnel with its music.
Space surrounds Vivian like a blurry halo. Men pass by on the street, weightlessly. They attempt to catch her eye, she sees this peripherally, in the night that is a hollow swirl. She keeps her eyes averted. Heading into the darkness she is both aware of the night and its details and remote, an astral traveler. Vivian began her wanderings when the whole medical business began, because there is something safe in the dark for those who are wary. These nightly moments, loosely connected, make perfect sense. They have the same deliberation and inevitability as the silence in the apartments she passes. Not precisely a tight-lipped silence, but an insane one. Exactly the silence between when a traffic accident is no longer just a possibility and when it actually begins—the moment before the crunch when the mind has imagined the totality of an accident and it is so much worse than the thing itself.

This neighborhood fosters people like her, even though she is new here. The buildings are old and their walls and floors are as crooked as the backs of the old women and men who live alone, one to each room. During the day they and their televisions and silent cats are absurd. But at night, as smoke curls out the windows from their filterless cigarettes and smacks the heavy air, they are portentous. Vivian is convinced that their pasts are sordid, that this place is a refuge for people who have done or experienced unspeakable things. Her own longing is like that of the man who asks his god why he was alone during his worst moments. Vivian does not believe in any god, but she feels the same lack. She tries to occupy wholly the space where he might have been, to erase it.
Vivian drives along the dangerous stretch of Airport road. The road is built up two stories above the marshy forest floor, but pine trees stretch above to tremendous heights. Their peaks twitch nervously as she careens by.

Vivian passes a crawling sedan. Inside, an old man drives along serenely. As she races past, sunlight reflects from her car and shines across his face, whiting it out.

Her sister Kelly lives on a farm with her husband. Twelve years older than Vivian, Kelly and David married when Vivian was thirteen. Vivian and Kelly are not close, but Vivian visits frequently. More to the point, Vivian visits their barn.

She does not exactly like, but desires for its familiarity, how all the dust from dried manure and straw and thick air goes hot around the eyes when first entering the barn. It makes sight dark and fogged: as if the thirty or forty cats and kittens running around all shook the dander off their backs and into one's suddenly stunned eyes at the same time. The beef cattle raise their own, blasé eyes to the apparition in the doorway and turn back to the feed trough. She talks little inside, except maybe to comfort the animals if she surprises them. This silence is oddly orienting, like getting one's earth legs but also the weirdness of losing the sea ones.

At night, in the fields, she has witnessed those same docile animals remember some more of the pack mentality, the sinister (if one is not in a pack) side of it. She likes how they start walking in a collective toward humans, staring fixedly, moving more and more rapidly as the intruder shivers and directs her body to somewhere else. It is no solace knowing they will all be dead within a year—the premature runts for not lasting the winter and the rest to the supermarket.
David always has one or two litters of kittens just born when Vivian shows up every once in a while. If she cannot locate them herself he is more than pleased to show her where they are: often in around where the ducks deposit their eggs in a bed of straw, or upstairs in the loft, where a little hollow has somehow formed between hay bales. The hole is only a fist wide so Vivian always reaches in not knowing for certain what is inside and finds her fingers full of damp fur and squeals. Sometimes she pulls them all out one by one and puts a couple in her pocket or if she does not want to separate them she just inserts them all inside her shirt. They soon calm down—all they want to do is sleep.

Just-born kittens are half the size of a human palm. Vivian waits, staring into a toqueful of them on her lap, wondering if anyone’s eyes will open this morning. Cats deliver a week too early, for their children’s eyes remain closed for the first week. She imagines their skin first forming in the womb. The little soft things, just masses of watery and bloody cells, drift in the heat of the mother, the quick splish-splash of their hearts reverberating in each other’s ears. This is why the still-young sleep in piles: so that they can re-attend the concert of the womb.

Their tissues grow perhaps smoothly and then slits and holes form to make the parts. Their lips are only flesh curling up at the edges of slices: so the kitten’s eyes, before opening, are like the littlest curls of lip. She wonders if the eyeball, that tiny, perfect sphere that pearls upwards with a black diamond-cut in the centre that is the pupil, has even formed yet, underneath. The shell of a kitten’s eyeball must be the thinnest thing on earth, she thinks.
David always tells Vivian to handle the newborns so that they are not shy with humans. They squirm trustingly in the cup of her palm. It would not concern them that the fingers into which they flatten their minuscule bodies are the same that punch walls, snap pencils in her rare fits of anger. The difference between examining the delicacy of a newly-formed bone and crushing it is merely a thought. Mature animals, wisely, do not fear weapons; they fear only certain minds.

Their young bodies are pliable but solid-looking, as weightless as bats. When a female kitten has grown into an adult she always thinks when she sees it bird-hunting that a bird is eaten by what was once bird-like and will someday birth more. The baby boys are usually one colour or two-colour and the girls three. She is glad one can generally tell so early because she would rather they drowned whatever sex they did not want before the kittens can see to understand. *They* being always the *they* that can drown kittens. Vivian has drowned mice that did not die quickly in the traps and screamed all night until she woke to hear. But the fact of the traps is enough. Cat and mouse. She does it by taking the grille off the barbecue and holding them down in the sink with it, their movements pantomiming themselves, until the little brown bodies swell up through the grates, images of motility fading in their minds along with the heart's pulse.

David does not drown anything that she knows of. He heals the sick kittens that their mothers bring to his front door. Kelly dislikes this, does not consider it *nature's way*, and Vivian agrees as does David but nothing will change. When lithe Smokey brings her dying kittens one by one and drops them on his doormat he will heal them. Smokey in particular despises everyone but she takes her tiny babies out of the hiding place that even David cannot find in the hay bales, holding the little pouch of skin on
each baby’s neck between her razor teeth, and leaves the child at his door. When they are better she carries them back to the barn.

When a country boy wades through the wrecked cars growing wild in the yard he knows someday he will just keep going—no stopping at the end of the drive. But then, maybe a threshing machine accident, or one of those car crashes after a field party or maybe just don’t know how to get out. Me, Vivian thinks, I’ve thought about how to get out of the city day after day after day. When I’m in the hay loft with my sweatshirt full of squirming kittens I think about that.

There is an adventurous little creature in every litter. This is the one who barely a couple of weeks old will silently squirm up one’s sleeves or peek up from between one’s breasts. This one, unless the eye infections this year are particularly bad, will surely not die. One or two usually buy it under a horse’s careless hooves or by infection or just for being too small and not making it to the food bowl ready to fight.

Sometimes they all die. The mother is always very strange forever afterwards, especially when she has another litter. Every once in a while an epidemic hits the barn cats and they are partially wiped out and that is just when a whole litter will go. David has a stretch of dirt under some trees and the animals are buried there. At any rate, only a very few ever last for more than two or three years and only one is male—he drives all the other mature males away or he kills them. The king cat in David’s and Kelly’s barn is Red. He is at least eight years old, Vivian knows, because he showed up in the barn when she was fifteen.

There was another male here ages ago, Vivian remembers. He was a sleek black, not the spilling pinkness of Red, and he materialised by the hand if one was alone. He
loved to be touched. He was silent always except for the purr like a mourning dove's. The sound came from an acute angle as he did, never where one expected. And always arising into the ears like an emotion unrealised for years until one draws the timeline of a life and joins the dots of experience that form a picture the child has been colouring in for years without telling the adult.

I would wait for hours by the cool river behind the barn hoping he would manifest himself for my pleasure. The texture of him was better than the skin of the bat I rescued from Red after it fell from the barn rafters. The needle teeth no defense against the lazy deadliness of a cat. I love cats for the way their fur smoothes my hands unsheathing them somehow.

I sit by rivers and in barns with these animals while they change year after year into their children without ever making that known. Only one or two of these little bodies curling against my belly will be here next time I come. The black cat lost an eye one year. Was Darwin a sad man when he discovered, perhaps unwillingly, what he did?

Vivian wonders if David feels for the animals as she does, but perhaps he always lives in that feeling because this is his farm. He wears the dark green Co-op collared shirts and black rubber boots and filthy blue jeans and she wonders if when he gets dressed in the morning if he is David the farmer. Saturday nights squaredancing in town with Kelly he is not in the feeling that she means. But she cannot be sure that he feels quite the same thing, the soundlessness because you are finally with ones who understand you. Not because he comes from the city, originally, as do Kelly and Vivian, but just that he must have it some other way. No one's is the same, Vivian thinks.
He would tolerate the question if asked. But the neighbours who grew up around here, on the other hand, would certainly ask Vivian what she could possibly be talking about even if they knew. Such as Wyeth, on the next concession, who quit high school early because he wanted to train his father's pacing horses—he probably does have the feeling. Maybe this is one of those cases where the person just leaves the thing be, unworded. But, in Vivian's experience, it is the country people who do not feel these things at all. This is their job and they do it, no romantic nonsense.

I wonder if the cats and horses and cows are afraid as I always am some way small and deep of the future that they cannot predict. That crazy brain of mine imagining always the Someone who will come in with a gun or an axe or worse a match. If they worry about anything it doesn't show as they swish their tails and crib the wood rails of their stalls but then it doesn't show for me either.

In her first appointment with the neurologist for many weeks, and her last, her doctor explains that her MRI results are positive but compromised. The MRI shows that her mind is utterly normal; however, because she had only finished her steroid treatment a week before the test, her brain might simply have been showing the effects of the drug. The MRI is most accurate when the patient is currently undergoing symptoms which, of course, is also when the patient is taking medication to alleviate them, thus reducing a piece of scientific excellence to irrelevance.

Vivian asks him what her prospects are, but he is evasive as usual. Since the MRI was normal, there is no reason to worry. The fact is that multiple sclerosis is a recurring disease, he tells her, and can only be diagnosed upon the second episode. She
has had one episode so far, the optic neuritis. She could get another next year, or in ten years. The disease is the only thing that reveals its presence. The MRI can only tell her that she had no sign of MS when she had the MRI done. He further assures her that young women who are diagnosed with MS are the group who usually have the mildest cases. He will not explain 'mild.'

She asks him if he feels that she has a moral obligation to inform others of this possibility, especially a future fiancé. He replies that he hopes that a partner would help her with it. In his leaning forward, in his round brown eye and suddenly soft mouth, she sees that he is kind. And she cannot be so strong as not to feel an immense gratitude to this man for letting her in to him, for an instant. Perhaps she should not feel ashamed for craving this agreement of sensibility, but she does, slightly. Still she swims in his praise, embodies the posture of gratitude. She also hates that her happiness is the product of gratitude. Still, she is grateful.

As with most things, there are many possibilities, some more far-fetched than others.

They are:

1. no recurrence
2. quick degeneration
3. early death
4. late death
5. discovery of cure
6. everything else
The mathematician of life considers all possibilities no matter how remote. Life, like abstract math, is fraught with uncertainty. When Vivian was only a little younger she spent nights considering the probability of stalkers, death by speeding car, and alien landings. These evaluations were accompanied by staring eyes, insomnia and sobbing.

Gambling is having the discipline to play odds. To gamble well requires a certain lightness of heart. One has to be ready to lose. In life, the gamble is less with the decisions one makes and more with one’s attitude. If you act like you are winning, you bluff death. If you act like you are losing, you’re a goner. No one, not even death, knows what is waiting in the deck. Death and the body are a usually random collision. Thus, planning for the future requires more a planning of present and future attitude than of happenstance. Still, an idea of the futurescape determines the present attitude to an extent. Every decision being ruled by a maxim thus requires a maxim. Is it: all energies devoted to present happiness? Or, all energies devoted to future security. And if the answer is, as of course it is, a combination of the two, what then governs the choosing between the formulas at the practical level? Alternation?

The gambler must plan for all possibilities without becoming an addict to the future.

Ancient morality dictates that virtue is a matter of knowing what is good for oneself. Modern morality argues that virtue is from struggle within oneself. Despair is confusion in the first, failure in the second.
Contingency planning is wearing seatbelts when the seatbelt sign is unlit. The girl next to the window is finally asleep, her seatbelt unbuckled. Vivian, buckled, investigates the KLM timetable for next New Year’s. The planes, tracked by GPS and projected onto the in-board televisions, continue across the skies. The televisions are all adjusted for slightly different shades of blue.

Some sociologists or psychologists believe that the story people make of their lives is one they alter at different junctures in their lives, at their convenience, with a willful disregard for the existence of other possible stories. The scholars disparage these attempts at self-creation or self-rehistoricizing, as if their own interpretations were somehow different. Old people often reconcile themselves to death by re-constructing the narrative of their pasts. This would be, then, the final narrative. Young people usually don’t worry about any of this, unless they are introverted. Only some of the young are concerned with contingency planning. These narratives of possibility, the landscaping of the future, are often unfortunately the product of external circumstance, such as illness, and less often a spontaneous efflorescence of an active mind and heart.

I won’t fixate on anything or anyone. I’ll grapple directly with you, death. I want to love you. If I believe that I can die now, right now, and believe I’ve lived, then I’ll forgive you. But what does it matter in what state I die, mentally? I don’t believe in God, or heaven, or anything. If I’m dead then it doesn’t matter how I die to me. That would be fine if I was going to die right now, but I’m not.
I’m not past desire or despair. I want cigarettes and meaningful or meaningless experiences with strangers. I want, I want. My cold cheek on a stubbled jawline, my toes curling in their shoes, my skeleton twisting in its ache.

In a dream, Vivian and her family stand in snow on a narrow road above a vast town. Her mother and sister are unsure in which direction they must walk in order to find the car, or train station, or whatever it is they need. Her father sets off along nearby train tracks.

Vivian follows him and eventually so do the others. The foothills of the Apennines are snow-covered white. Vivian slides spiraling down hillsides, navigating valleys and tunnels so that she can catch up to him. Once she falls off a little cliff and lands in a wave of snow, barely missing a train charging from the mountain’s side.

Her sister calls down, laughing, “It almost got me, too!”

Vivian’s laugh breaks across the clear sunlight. She dives down another mountain and surfaces at the edge of a train track. Her father stands, smiling, across the tracks. The others are not far. They wait while a blue and silver train shoots by between them before walking together into golden, greenglowing Spring.
LABOUR
for my mother

The aging mongrel shivered under the eldest daughter's writing desk because he feared thunder. Or lightning—there was no way of knowing. A braver cat sprawled at the summit of the girl's spine, licking her cheek. Drawn across acres of rain-silvered air to the small light, a black moth sputtered against the windowscreen. Light from a pair of candles pressed into wine bottles converged on the page where the girl wrote letters to a friend, hoping that one would take root in truth. The girl's mind swelled with possible words, their connections all obviously arbitrary.

The rest of the inhabitants of the small Victorian farmhouse either slept or located extra candles and flashlights. One nostalgic soul yearned momentarily for simpler days, forgetting the simple fact of candlelit household drudgery and dwindling vision of squinting housewives. In the transition from light to light, the others asked themselves questions usually whitened into oblivion by their electrified worlds.

Housecats took advantage of the storm and begged from the awake easily-granted strokes. Much as power failures were disliked, most people enjoyed them once their inevitability was assured. They liked the altered, finicky light sources, the thoughtful cigarettes lit from a candle, the blankets, the conversations that would never occur otherwise: how everyone tells a sad story, or the story of their first memory, their first time, or the memory of their keenest joy.

All accessories located, the son and mother knelt around the coffee table beneath the blackened ceiling of home. Tyler leaned forward over his crossed legs and pushed
his long hair back. He was the youngest of Marjorie's two children, and they had still had power when the family had celebrated his birthday that evening.

"So what was it like giving birth to me, mom?" It was an unusual request, Marjorie thought, for a boy, but Tyler always surprised her. The passion for basketball and cheap television that overlaid his thin-skinned spirit was mainly nurtured for his rough-house friends, she thought. She only realized by her own surprise in moments like these that even she had been taken in.

"Well," she murmured, and laughed a little, drawing her knees to her chest self-consciously. "You and Margo were both Thursday's children—you know the old saying. Margo took eighteen hours. She was a morning baby. But you were very quick, Tyler. I wasn't at the hospital very long with you. I don't know how long, but your father and I spent most of the time just waiting in the interim between when we came in and when you actually came out. My water broke in the night—no, was that your sister? At any rate, we went to the hospital after I had several minor contractions but they stopped as soon as we got there. We thought it was just a false alarm but the Doctor—now, Doctor Livingstone. I really liked that man.

"After I had you I experienced a bout of post-partum depression. I went to the hospital with you for a checkup one day, and afterwards when I was on the elevator Doctor Livingston dashed in after me. I was crying a little, holding you in my arms. I remember thinking that you seemed so much heavier than Margo had. All of a sudden he cried out—you know, we weren't alone on that elevator. He shouted, "fair is foul!" and that did it. I said, rather weakly, "and foul is fair," and the rest of it and so we recited Shakespeare lines the whole six floors down. My English degree never did me so
much good, I can tell you. The elevator stopped at every floor, people getting on and off, staring at this crazy mother and a doctor belting out Shakespeare at each other. But by the time I got to the ground floor I was laughing. He was a good man.

“So anyway, Dr. Livingston told the nurses to prep me for delivery and to watch me very carefully for any changes. I remember the nurses wondering why since I hadn’t even started really dilating yet. I was just going along with it all. It was, of course, my second delivery but I was still frightened. Then after an hour or I don’t know how long, all of a sudden the nurse saw I was ten centimetres and they rushed me to the delivery room, yelling for my doctor. You came out so fast they forgot about the local—“

“You didn’t remind them?”

“I didn’t on purpose. With Margo the labour was really difficult and it took her a little while to start breathing after the delivery, and I’d always wondered if it had something to do with the anaesthetic. But you came out so quickly afterwards that I went into shock. I was shivering uncontrollably and they had to pile blankets on me.

“After your father saw you being born he wasn’t about to let me have any more kids. He had carefully avoided your sister’s birth but he accidentally got roped into yours. After they brought me to delivery, the nurse came out and asked him to come get some scrubs on. He’d barely started the first section of the newspaper. Roger only meant to wish me well when everything started happening so he ended up staying.”

“How could he just, just try to abandon you like that, mom? That’s awful.”

“Oh, Tyler, things are different now. The whole family gets involved and you have videocameras but it’s better I think when a woman can break down and fight without anyone watching.”
"I think he should've been there to support you."

Marjorie smiled and replied, "It's an awful thing to watch, labour. Your father could never stand to see me in any pain."

"It's a wonder women have more than one kid, eh?"

"Well, we forget, you know. I think that's why some women have a whole brood of kids, because they forget. The man doesn't have all those hormones kicking in after to help him deal with the trauma. No, I don't think men should have to watch it. It's very hard, Tyler, you'll find this out someday, to see the one you love in pain and be completely unable to help them, and also to know that you helped cause it." She raised her eyebrows suggestively.

"If I'd seen Margie being born, Tyler," Roger said, coming out of the stairwell, yawning, "you wouldn't exist. There's a reason there's only two of you. There wasn't any way I was going to ask her to go through that again."

"Did we wake you?"

"No, Margie, the thunder or, well, actually the kitten jumping on me in terror did."

"What's Margo up to?"

"She's in bed," said Marjorie.

"I saw candlelight under the door as I went by just now."

"I don't know, then."

"No offense, Dad, but I want to be there for my future wife. If I'm going to impregnate someone then it's also my responsibility."
“Supporting someone is not always a matter of responsibility, Tyler. But you can make up your own mind when the time comes.”

“Some women have a harder time than others,” Marjorie interjected, reflectively. “Not just if they are unprepared. I took all the classes and read the books and they helped, but sometimes women panic and fight it and they start crying and carrying on. They just can’t get the rhythm of it when they’re that upset.

“I had a real guardian angel when you were born. I lost my rhythm. There’s a rhythm to it, you know,” and she rocked lightly from the waist as if she was rowing a canoe. “Giving birth is like a really fast rollercoaster, out of control, that goes on and on and you can’t stop it. You just have to ride it out until it’s over. But I had lost my rhythm and was starting to get really frightened when out of nowhere this nurse came and put her arms around me. She rocked me back into it. I tried to find her after, to thank her, but I couldn’t find her.”

“That’s amazing!” Tyler said, his mouth dropping open. “How did she hold you? Did she go around from the back with you sort of leaning on her?”

“No, she was facing me and gripping me very firmly, chest to chest, as if she was my lover. Later, some other women who must have seen me in labour, I don’t know if nurses or other mothers, all admired me and asked me how I’d managed to keep so calm. It was because of that woman that I did so well.”

“Did she even say anything? She just walked right over and hugged you without a word?”

“Well, she was a nurse and saw I was starting to get into troubles so she stepped in.”
“Did you know you were twenty-four inches,” Roger said, proudly. “Most babies are twenty inches.”

“So I was two feet long!”

“You were so long that sometimes while I was pregnant I could feel a little bump on my rib cage and my weezie was round from your head.”

“You mean that my feet were sticking out over your rib cage? Boy, I was really swimming around in there! I should’ve stuck an arm out and waved hello.”

“I think so. I can’t think what else it could have been.”

Roger reached over and stroked Marjorie’s shoulder. “There couldn’t have been much room in there to swim in.”

“That’s for sure,” she said.

“Wow,” their son said.

In another part of the house, Margo struggled. A month previously, too many times careless with contraception, her best friend Judith had gotten pregnant and called Margo for support. Margo uttered rather incoherent replies, too flabbergasted and sleepy to be the two in the morning life-line that Judith needed. She murmured several embarrassed apologies and sincere, though false-sounding, offers of help. Judith exploded and barely wrote to her for the next few weeks, despite many letters and cards of love and apology from Margo.

Judith remained angry with Margo although she terminated the pregnancy with very little “emotional residue,” as she put it in one of her curt messages. Much as Margo attempted to suppress her confusion, she knew that part of her own ire was the result of
Judith’s unromantic choice. Yet she could swallow that (given her track record with men, she knew she could tolerate just about anything), if she wanted to. But this one criticism of Judith’s—this injured contempt for Margo’s disoriented failure to uphold what Margo now realized must be Judith’s law of friendship: the responsibility of saying the exact right thing at the right time—this Margo could not stomach. One apology would upset Margo’s resentment, but at this point she could assume there was little hope of that. She wasn’t Judith’s mother; there was simply no way, she decided, that she would stoop and allow this indignity to pass. She had lost her self-respect too many times by fielding blame that was not rightfully hers in order to protect someone else. Had she been a Christian, she realized drearily, this change might have represented a significant loss of faith.

In a tight voice, Judith, closer to twenty than her friend’s thirty, had said that night that she might never want to speak to Margo again. Of course, her terse replies to Margo’s many letters meant that she had changed her mind. But the threat was enough for Margo. Could she live with it hovering over her head the next time Judith needed something? Would Judith even turn to her again? Friendship took so many years of effort. She wasn’t up to recovering all that old ground. Had Judith only really loved her for her ability to express herself? Was the eloquence and tact that failed Margo rarely and that had taken years of blundering to hone, was it that that Judith loved, and not Margo herself? Was it the representation of love, that could so easily be manufactured by cons and the insincere, what people loved in others?

For Margo, language was an awkward thing, forced with judicious effort into an always clumsy and pale imitation of the fund of love behind it. Maybe for Judith,
lecturer at the university and always on demand for her erudite presence at parties, it was easy to translate fragile things through the awkward biology of lung, throat, and tongue without losing their poetry. Margo's body was neither so gifted nor well-trained. Her own gift of communication, she asserted to herself, did not come from any acting talent.

Perhaps she was verging on harshness. Yet it struck Margo that Judith’s plaint signified that for Judith, expression was an artifice easily constructed when emotion demanded it, whereas for Margo it was a thing to pray in gratitude for: a privileged, accidental union of urgency and love that one might practice conducting, but never take for granted. And, truly, the intuition of a friend's love had little to do with their spoken words but with the happy intervention of a god she could not believe in, if he was also capable of destroying so flippantly that understanding upon which friendship is grown and of which he was the originator.

Margo hadn’t said the right things to the other’s cry for help. Her friend now despised her for it, she imagined, with an ungrateful calculation capable only of those who feel entitled to love. Her reaction to her friend’s contempt and withdrawal was to reject her in turn. This exchange of hatred between two who had formerly loved one another shocked her with the weakness of human bonds. She might accept or retreat from this frailty into hermitage and it was this decision that she faced there in the natural dim.

The little cat reared up and stretched, rubbing her slender face against the girl’s hair, and jumped to the desk. She crushed a pair of gnats with her closed mouth on the tabletop and ate them, then crept onto the windowsill and batted futilely at the moth
behind the screen. The girl observed the cat and noted that her fur gleamed black on the surface with a soft underlayer of brown. She had no other colour but her large, green-tinted yellow eyes. A cool wind lifted the hairs on the girl’s arms. She felt a pleasant chill and then caught the cat stalking her glass of milk. She snapped her teeth at the cat who murmured a quick noise before arching her back for a caress.
COME

This new thing—I haven't written about it yet, just once. I made it funny. It's hard to get to the point. Bear with me. It was hard to get to the point my whole life. That's what I'm trying to get at. Gawky geeky twelve-year-old always talking about sex. Read The Hite Report. Anything else Mom kept on the shelves of the library. Then I started sticking anything I could find in myself. My favourite was the pen with twenty or twelve different inks in it, but with the inks taken out. About the size and shape of a penis. I knew from my mother's books that I was supposed to feel something in my clitoris (—I couldn't even say the word masturbate out loud until a couple of years ago). I knew that if I rubbed it I would have an orgasm. I also knew that it took time, that some women couldn't do it. I never thought that I couldn't do it. And then I couldn't. I felt nothing.

Now I think it had something to do with being the social reject which might have had to do with my mother's yearly visits to the psych ward or my father's fists. My dad said that kids were jealous of me because I was so smart. Some days he'd whack me in the arm for not holding my elbows close to my body at the dinner table. It embarrasses me to tell these stories now, post-therapy, post-coffeetalk days. As if I should be stronger, now that I'm so macro as opposed to micro, so social as opposed to introverted. I was always weird, and kids beat me up for it. Now they praise me and I don't trust them.

I wish I could blame someone for my constant fear. It's died down, but it was only a couple of years ago that, at night, I was afraid to shut my eyes because I thought
monsters (monsters!) were going to get me, specifically gargoyles. I was so scared I thought they'd come through the walls, so I had nowhere I could go. I just cried with my eyes open. I wouldn't even duck my head under the water in a bath. I imagined a half-dozen garish accidents every time I was in a car. Whenever I crossed the street I thought Mack trucks were aiming for me. I was even afraid to sleep with my legs spread for fear of insects or snakes sneaking up from under the bed, into me. And the legions of men, lying in wait in my closet, behind any open door, in the pool at night, over the fence, in the back seat, even under the sink, on the roof...

And so I'm afraid of this new happiness. I'm waiting for my father to erupt, as he hasn't in years, for my mother's voice of long ago—you could only hear the s's, talking alone in the kitchen, her dumb blind look of guilt when someone caught her, her zombie walk in the depressed stage—for my sister's stories of carnies and crystal meth and doms, for my own brittle terror to rage again.

So for years I had sex of a sort—oh, it's okay, I never do, it's not you—I liked sex but what was wrong with me? I read books, I tried to be wild (which for me meant what people used to call 'doggie style'), but I was never horny. What I recognize now as lust would build in me for people on the street: slick, cruel-looking men, 'exotic' women, and I always had a crush on someone, I was always wanting a boyfriend, wanting my best female friend, but it was never desire like I know it now. It was desire that never knew itself as desire. Or if it did, it struggled because there was no pleasure in touch.

A man helped me through it. (A man who, when I was writing ecstatically in my diary about my first, complete orgasm, insisted that I write in there that he was the
because. Oh, all the men and women who have told me they'd be the ones to make me come. I can make you come. I can make you come.) I started trying, and yes, it was with his encouragement. I asked a friend for techniques, a female friend, in full-colour detail. So then where do you put your finger? Do you do it in a circle, or your whole hand. It didn't happen but he pushed me to keep at it. Did you masturbate today? Stop fucking asking me that it's my body I'll do it when I want to leave me alone. Did you? No, I didn't m. m. mas. I can't say it. giggle. deep breath. mastrfbayt. There.

Eventually I put myself on a schedule. Three times a week. And then I finally allowed my counsellor to ask the male sex therapist for help and thank him thank him he didn't ask to see me yet another man trying to make me come he just gave me this one book. With step-by-step instructions. Learn to like your body by mirror, touching this and that, stay away from your clit until you like your body. I was proud. I'd already done those kind of exercises (three times a week). And when ready try this way of holding your hand or this one, and this way of touching your CLITORIS and this other way of touching your CLITORIS and your ANUS and touch your BREASTS (oh, it's okay, you don't really need to kiss them they're not very sensitive my skin isn't sensitive only ticklish). And I kept reading. I did all the questionnaires in the book and read every chapter all in one day and it was called A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WOMEN'S and you know? I just kept stroking and stroking it long past the little sharp feeling that had always stopped me before—is it supposed to sting?—and I realised dumbstruck that the sensation stops if you don't speed up and if you stop the rhythm oh the rhythm and remember to keep breathing and oh. OH
Nothing I'd ever imagined.

Not pleasure like jam or wet sprinklers on hot days or roller coasters. Not happy, exactly. But like in between shifting gears or the letting go of falling asleep or pure pure violet lakes and me all alone swimming without fear of slimy fish or evil watching men. I never knew. No one ever ever explained how it could feel. So much Power. And I did it. Me. All those years of being terrified of someone watching, even with no one in the house and all the doors and blinds closed. All those years of terror of seeming Slutty. And now, I'm audacious like I never was all those years of being the crazy one.

You want to know something? Here it is. In print. Now I even like pornography. Hell, I love pornography. Give me a good cock and ass and pussy and finger toes and skin and skin story any day. Now I love thinking about the way people look when they are COMING. I love that word. I'm COMING. Those slack lips, closed eyes and the strain of it. Flushed lips, blood-drained face and flushed flushed lips. The selfishness of it. That's what I love to see on people's faces, to imagine that look in those I'll never see it on. That's what I never knew. Or knew but wouldn't. That it is the most selfish thing. And everyone can do it. Everyone has a button to transportation that they can press on them somewhere.

And then, of course, there's the idea of having someone else, a whole someone else with a story and that whole exploding possibility within them, in my bed. Me with everything in me and then someone else with everything in them—coming to that wonderful thing with someone else, being selfish together and revelling in each other's separate glories.
But I don’t want that now. Because this is the first time that I haven’t thought about the robber in the closet since I was born. I want to finally be alone alone alone, with this inexpressible joy that I can make in me. All alone, no clothes, no accessories, me in a cave. Now I can do so much.

Listen, this is my list of skills:

eat
shit
sleep
dance
sing
cry
come.
NOTES OF AN INFATUATION ADDICT

Composed After Regarding the Author Photograph
on the Back of Mr. Rick Moody's Purple America

He is every inch the modern cowboy. Loose threads fringe the edges of his worn-out jean jacket and a necklace of leather and bone is partially visible at its collar. The famous author’s eyes are hidden by Armani clip-on sunglasses, and Howard Stern-style hair obscures most of his large forehead. His mouth and jaw show quite a bit, though. He was over thirty when the picture was taken as there are the tell-tale paired lines at both sides of his closed mouth. It is quite a sensuous mouth, for the lips are a bit thick and rubbery in a nice way. You can’t judge him by that mouth—this is clear from the presence of sunglasses. It’s a mouth that seems amused and a little contemptuous and bored at the same time. A mouth that might love you but that will love only the kind of person who is too insecure to believe it. It’s a tired mouth in some ways, and if, for once, you are looking at it without the usual fear of men, a very shy one. He must be a man who fears a knife in every shadow.

The lean muscles of his legs and chest shape jean and white shirt. These things are specifically there for your arousal, whether Meredith Moody, photographer (you aren’t absurd enough to hope she’s not a wife), intended them to seem so or not.

The only limbs still his are his two hands. Gloriously beautiful with their thick veins and lined palms, one clutches the other. You can trace with your own finger his miniature ones back through palm and forearm, to the jutting elbows whose insides hug
loose knees to his chest. His posture is so pathetically defensive that you are tempted to write him your first fan letter, perhaps with an enclosed pair of used underwear. Ah! Mute adoration has never appealed to you so, because of the hands (or in spite of them), the emotion governing their position being either fear or resignation, or something else.

You've read the other books, seen the movie. He has an obvious familiarity with the sexy illicit, the sublimely rotten underside of every city of more than modest size. No matter what he's sheltering in this picture, his imagination has revealed its sultry wares to you and you have your wallet in hand.

Portrait of a Fan, Part 1: Upon Fatigue and a General Need to Fulfill a Writing Quota

This is you at your computer, developing ambition at an exponential rate. It brings with it certain nouveau desires, like wanting to screw famous authors or make friends with people solely on the strength of their literary talent. You spend quite a lot of time these days trying to decide if you care about the integrity and idealism that propelled you in your younger years. Visiting authors stir up something potent in you and you wonder if you ought to start coupling the hero-worship on your face with lust instead of respect. At the same time, you remain patently humiliated by your childishness and striving for attention, but cannot imagine how to dismiss your urges with the indifference that seems to be required by maturity.

What is really going on is that you are depressed and bored and even though lots of terrifically bad things have happened to you, you can't imagine how writing your resulting ideas out in story form can be any more powerful than simply saying them.
You like words, sure. But you know that you could really make more of a difference standing on a milk carton by a park like they do in Europe and shouting from your heart. You’re beginning to think you don’t want to make a difference.

And so along comes this picture of this famous author on the back of his kick-ass book and he doesn’t look bored and depressed. Well, he does. But his bored and depressed is still different than your bored and depressed and you would love to hear about it over a very large drink. It’s not that you are attempting to fill the usual role of the groupie or writer by getting embarrassingly wasted. You don’t know what it is you’re trying to do but it isn’t that.

Ice Storm: From a Photograph of Patrick Lane on his Award-Winning Winter

This one seems profesh, not like Moody’s: Patrick Lane, every Canadian poet-partier’s worst or favourite nightmare, caught mid-word. You read an anecdote about Patrick Lane once. He went up to the anecdote-writer’s mother, described as a dragon-lady by her obviously cowed son, and said, “You have very beautiful breasts.” The son, standing next to her, was aghast. Instead of swallowing Lane whole, though, she smiled and thanked him. Lane and this woman went off into a tête-à-tête for the rest of the party. How do you suppose the conversation started?

The picture on the Selected Poems (not the one that got a GGA), well, that one wasn’t so hot. The grainy and greyish Lane examining a pool table. Who cares. They put THAT one on the front cover. That’s Oxford for you. This picture, while a conventional frontal portrait, is at least in colour and motion. Lane’s skin is a creamy pink, his eyes
behind thick lenses squinched and warm. You wouldn’t want to stare too long at him, though. Smiling faces always look grotesque and aggressive after a while. The cop moustache doesn’t help.

His collared shirt (it’s too close up for the viewer to identify it as long-sleeved or short) distracts with its candy stripes. On someone else it might call up tangential allusions to lollipops, but after a year-long thesis on Lane, you’re way past the bon-bon stage. It’s a soft look for the writer of Winter. You never did send him a copy of your paper, after that dismal grade.

Visiting Author: Lee Gowan Visits the University and Wins a Secret Admirer

People who arrange their collars like this invite fantasy—that expanse of smooth neck, pie slice of chest, all exposed. He flounced around the English department. Ubiquitous black jeans and sometimes a blue sweater covering up the two empty buttonholes. Handsome, in a bizarre way.

What is it that intrigues you? Is it the eight or nine awards? The ease? There are hardly any Men over twenty-five around, except the new Cultural Studies professor. (He, unfortunately, feels compelled to interject the word multiculturalism into every conversation, whether it be in the photocopy room or on the street.) This man holds your gaze. The maleness of it: all of that brain and sex appeal just wandering around, reading bulletin boards, leaning over tables, shoving hands in pockets, expounding on various things without being ungenerous or too conceited.
His humanity was easily apprehended, though not as easily accessed. Somewhere in this world, there are people like him waiting to be your friend and you know that you have all the friends in the world like him already, but they are not in their thirties or forties and hitting their stride. Something about being in prime. Nothing more frustrating or silly than youth, when all the seductive certainties that are really compromises await. And the not quite old or not quite young bemoan their lost freshness, without savouring the splitting of hairs and detection of dissimilar grays that is the special province of aging.

His eyes were so very blue.

You did not want to be his friend.

Mentor, Part 1: Academic Crush

When the two of you are looking at each other from opposite ends of the table, you know that you are ridiculous. You know that with the impossible suspension of desire that you are in love with power and conviction, that surely this cheapens you. Your friends are right; he is a man masquerading as a boy. If he fucks young girls it is because he can, because they make themselves offerings over the altar of his desk, because they desperately want not to be alone, because he wants desperately not to be alone, because he is afraid of the grey spreading across his chest, because of the way a girl’s nipple rises to the mouth of need, because he prefers jeans, because the self-deception of their desire convinces even a brilliant man.
You've fallen in love with him so many times you've stopped counting. The implosion in the chest at the sight of him. Sharp eyes, laughing corner of mouth. The caprice. But this one's a little different than the others, mainly because he challenges you when things have stopped being challenging. When everything you read is thoughtless, when almost everyone you know is smart, yes, but thoughtless, he is a man who rewinds life, thinking it, emoting it, questioning arguments, disagreeing, synthesizing, creating systems, welcoming and making meaning. You are in the throes of discovering a philosopher, an artist, oh a writer. He is the original old white man and you want him so much.

You go home right after you run into him wherever that may be, thinking about him rabidly, gleefully. His intellect arouses more than the mind. (How redundant.) The lusty girl. You fear that people smell it, and know you for the whore you really are, want to be, love and fear being. There was a movie about a courtesan you saw once. She was the most educated and fascinating woman in the film and you wanted to be her. She had joined her sex and her mind, and her allure was immense, to you, to men.

Can you fuck him without hating yourself, without being hated? Lust is not dehumanising, though centuries of disagreement clamour at you. Elizabeth Smart was not afraid. She pursued the object of her adulation, bedded him, they loved, bore children and poetry. You just want to swallow his seed.

Let's suppose for a moment that you scramble to the library, chortling your way through the stacks until you uncover his small tokens from the stacks, and suppose you engineer a moment for yourself, all angles to an orange plastic chair, wherein you
discern through the knife-life, erotic trajectory of his poetry a categorising and associative mind—an incisive, perceptive mind—a mind into which you yearn to pour your sparkling energies so that they emerge formed, pointed, convinced.

Let's suppose that he is your illustrious though unrecognized mentor, and let's suppose that it is possible for your sapling spine to rise healthfully to his whip hand. Let us suppose that the configuration of your respective astrologies is a grand air trine of infinite energy. Let's suppose, just for the sake of argument, that the intelligent curve of his lip is a gateway to your beckoning future through which all of your brilliant and embarrassing parts can flow without the discrimination of value. Or would he envision this schema the opposite way?

If only he would tell you what to value. Is it Love—the love of great and artistic proportions for which you must stretch and experiment? Or is it Art, a discipline to which you must submit even your hungriest desires, just as you do already your thoughts, your decisions, your behaviours, your soul—whose spirit you protect fiercely and nurture smotheringly but whose originator you deny.

You will suck the juices of your so-far unlicked hours with him to feed the gullet of purpose, for it has lost itself.

A Fan Letter to James Joyce

Dear Mr. Joyce,

A long time ago it came to me that there are many good and sometimes even great works available to us artists and that some of us are granted more than others are.
You could say that so-and-so’d been given a good poem or two, for example, whereas the next person got two dozen. Recently I realized something that contradicts this or illuminates it and that is that greatness is having a large quantity of quality because there are all sorts of ways of being good at something. Also, there are also all sorts of different subjects, and viewpoints on those subjects, philosophies and feelings. I realize that you are really good because you are good at everything and because your heart and mind were completely comprehensive. It’s obvious that you set out to show that in your book. Beyond that, great artwork has to have some kind of message or else it’s crystal system and vanity—and in order to set forth a theory or principle or philosophy or whatever, one must have a subject to exemplify that thing. You used Ireland.

I admire how perfectly adept you were with language so that you were able to speak through it. An artist can move from one medium to the next after they realize that the art and the artist is within him or herself and after they train themselves to the highest skill. I wish that I was a genius like you. Then I could come up with something really terrific and be able to communicate with your works somehow. And I wish that you and I could be friends but it would be a one-sided conversation, either because you’re dead or because I have nothing to say. Besides, all the questions I could ever ask you are answered in your books. There’s really never any reason to ask questions anyway, I find, unless it’s to get a conversation going, because I usually know the answer. It’s when I don’t know what the problem is that I can’t find the solution. The people that have the most to offer me in particular are the ones I have nothing to say to. It would be nice to hire them, all two or three of them, to give me private lectures on
subjects of their choice. Then I wouldn’t have to go through the whole bother of pretending to relate.

I wonder if you were very lonely, with hardly anyone around who could even understand your work, much less even begin to communicate on the same level. The farther a person gets, the lonelier. It seems like the only things worth living for are those exquisite moments of understanding or bliss or forgiveness or love that usually come when I am alone. Actual people get less and less interesting the more fascinated by and understanding of humanity I get. It’s hard to keep believing in the equality of people and in the point of communication unless it’s for its own sake. That’s when, I suppose, a person needs to decide if she is a people’s writer or a writer’s writer.

Yours truly,

L.B.

P.S. I know that you can see through this letter and see that I am despairing. I don’t have religion or love. I have art, purpose, and everything, but I don’t, perhaps, have hope. It’s a recipe without yeast, where one gets either manna or a hockey puck.

Portrait of a Fan, Part 2

Finally, after only three or four months, your ambition has reached its peak and you have decided that you’re a failure if you can’t top Ulysses, never mind The
Odyssey. You’re even considering joining Mensa, after doing an I.Q. test over the weekend that informed you that you are a genius—which happens to be what you’ve wanted to be all your life. You still don’t feel smart enough. Still the book beckons, its evil plot still nonexistent. And you know, you know that you need to live in all that uncertainty so that you can be creative when you eventually and unpredictably emerge from it, but you just want to make order. You want to make a list, draw up a graph or come up with a formula so that it’ll all be fine and pinned down on the ground under your heel so it can’t grab you by the throat. And you’re tired of challenging your deepest fears so your writing will be strong; you’re tired of humiliating yourself. You just want to toss out all the dreams and the pressure and the stupidity of just trying to make something from nothing. Why is it that as soon as you figure out what you want out of your life it seems pointless? In a way all that uncertainty is nice. Because if you’ve got things to deal with, you don’t have the worse thing of coming up with new challenges.

Mentor, Part 2

Maybe it’s got something to do with all that boyish charm. He leaps out with his feelings as if they surprise even him and then grins around the table expecting delight like a reward. His smarts are even boyish. An observation jumps up and smirks and he chases after it, piling thought upon exuberant thought. Even his approach to God is boyish—no father wants to punish his children in a boy’s mind, and so to him He doesn’t. And, you suppose, He wouldn’t want to punish you for your wants, literary and
otherwise, for the cheek of pushing yourself into people's lives so that they'll notice you, and hell, even love you unabashedly.

It's all you want—to stumble in front of the world pigeon-toed and flushed, smiling pleadingly and irresistibly for a pat on the head and a "you're wonderful!" to hear your name shouted over the heads of strangers, to giggle and shake over the rejection letters that mean you have finally written enough to warrant non-multiple submissions, to tell to him and to the others in words that can finally signify the great, great gratitude that fills you when you consider how your life has been spent fed at feasts of praise and wisdom.

This poem about him is poetry about poetry. His beauteous book-lined heart! He cured you of infatuation with Love, with his fine eye and lip, loci of intelligence and holism and joy. The greatest kindness is that of the wise to the ignorant. This moment of utter communication that you shared with him, in which you became an Adult and an Artist, was him loving you gently, priest-like, not fatherly or brotherly or even loverly: Love without qualification: the love capable only of those who forgive God and themselves. This thanks to him betrays the union of a pair at the centre of the universe that day but you are compelled to do it, for you feared that the beauty that breaks across you was false. You feared that your thankfulness was for a thing you do not deserve. You felt unworthy. You don't believe in angels, but you believe in their singing again. He recovered in you the courage to be an artist. You are approaching beauty and finding peace instead, as a tangent line, holding a dream in its movement, finds eternity instead of resolution.
Let's suppose that a bird siphons scatterings of sustenance from a gentle hand and soars, satiated, to the arch of a streetlamp to muse on the generosity of fathers.
SELF-DISCIPLINE

I was late for the first lesson, five minutes, and my new music teacher, Mr. Varney, held a leather strop up to his eye and said, "the first thing you must learn in order to be a good musician, Laura, is self-discipline." He lectured me about it, patiently between pants, during the entire spanking. He also explained that the reason he repeated the word discipline so much was because repetition develops habit, thus accounting for, in his mind at least, the existence of beats, metronomes, and time signatures in general.

During the two months I studied under Varney, I played Chopin almost exclusively. My teacher was praised throughout Toronto's music community for the stoicism and sobriety of his Chopin as evidenced in his students' playing that hinted, they mused, at a profundity obscured by more emotional playing. The bodies of Varney's students hummed under a self-control that exposed the composer's more heart-breaking passages as savagely oppressed at their root, and the more anguished because of it.

I still play all my favourite Romantic and Impressionistic composers in this telescopic manner. In the skeleton of every nocturne and mazurka, there curves a militaristic spine through which is threaded even Chopin's most yearning melody of hope. Approaching these songs with calculation and restraint pressurizes the spirit of the music so that it is pushed to its highest awareness of worship. After each performance, however, the force splinters because I have no god to offer it to, though audiences seem to go home purged. I am never sure that it matters to whom I target my offerings, though the question preoccupies me. I continue to play and also to perform regularly after my
consultations with Mr. Varney, and I know that my playing improved dramatically because of his streamlining and forging influence. I hope I am honest when I say that it was not Varney's methods that taught me what I know, but my own resistance to them. I cannot believe that gratitude and beauty can only come from suffering.

In an English elective towards my Bachelor of Music at the University, several students and our teacher discussed the value of the good with respect to Milton's epic, Paradise Lost. Our teacher held, and the students agreed, that evil was more interesting than good. I disagreed on principle, but the teacher argued that there were so many ways to be evil and only one way to be good, and that stories were always constructed around the infinite manifestations of evil. He said that consequently, or perhaps not consequently, but still, that good was a function of evil. That is, that one could not know good unless one knew evil. I don't know if it is my logic or my instinct that resists this reasoning. But against my own argument, I also know that when I play and especially when I am in touch with music in that almost indescribable way, that that experience is called gratitude. Or, that being able to have that experience yields a gratitude in me so complete that there is no grief or love keener.

I first entered university for mathematics, what I consider the script of music. No one I met in that department saw math that way except perhaps the most brilliant students of whom I was not one. The rest of the students complained bitterly about foreign tutors who could barely speak English. But I liked them because we communicated in math, a language, like sheet music, explicable only on paper, or through the mind or another instrument. In these scripts of symbols of endlessly variable patterns, the most common phenomenon of each (or deliberately excluded in others) is
the resolution of harmonies that is communicated to the listener as anything from serenity to orgasmic euphoria. Even there, in that perfection, however, I am afraid that the English teacher was proved right. I did not then, nor do I now, have the originality to invent a music that does not depend on such pessimism for its optimism—on the existence of distortion from the tonic for its yearned-for return. Or maybe I am the blind one, to believe in an unconflicted good, a plotless story, even a guiltless love.

Mr. Varney never spoke of such things but perhaps he understood them—certainly he did, in some other form.

I was twenty years old when my teacher of eight years, Ellen Page, announced that I had advanced beyond the scope of her teaching abilities. It was not a difficult parting. Yet it was awkward, in the sense that I knew that as her student she knew me too intimately, and I neither rejoiced nor regretted the ending of so many years of tutelage. I was grateful for the skills she had taught me. Her sadness, on the other hand, was genuine and I know my embarrassment and the rapidity of my acceptance of the resignation confused her.

Both of Mrs. Page's usual successors were fully booked for the next year and she referred me to Mr. Varney, a lesser-known teacher whose students enjoyed successful careers on the festival circuit. I assume she knew nothing of the strange punishments we endured in order to get there.

I was late for my first lesson because Varney's directions led to a house farther away than I had expected. Initially, the location comforted me. Varney worked from and presumably lived in a narrow, rust-painted building in the Kensington area which,
though not known for safety or restfulness, housed the old, rickety Victorian homes of the sort that I usually adored. However, the sight of his dwelling, an immaculate, flowerless vision, did not cheer me.

I knocked at a cherrywood door, a simple portal without a brass gargoyle and no cherubim in sight, and Varney asked me in, his face stamped with the inviting, tolerant expression that I would learn never left his face, nor sank in particularly deeply. I noticed the living quarters before the man because I was anxious about my tardiness, though as I have said really only a matter of five minutes, and after remarking inwardly on the cleanliness that is unusual in a music teacher, took my first look at the piano.

It was the best-kept Yamaha I have ever seen, and I abhor Yamas. Only a baby-grand, it still dominated the tiny front room. It remained at its heart a stolid, dully-sculpted instrument, but frequent shinings had preserved the black lacquer so that it gleamed as a freshly buffed black pearl. There wasn’t a speck of dust at the back of the keys and I thought approvingly to myself that Varney resisted the urge to caress the body of the piano, touching only the keys, and kept his fingers clean before playing.

“You won’t play the Yamaha if you are good enough, my dear,” Varney said. “It’s for my lesser students. Those of you with potential play my treasure in the back room which I will show to you after we dispense with some necessary details.”

At that point and prior to any pleasantries, he fished the piece of leather from inside the piano seat (there was another in the second piano) and spanked me with it. The experience was very startling. Not because I did not know about abusive teachers but because I both knew he was in error and felt I was at fault. I remained during the
entire hour halted at the intersection of both convictions, unable to spur my mind to a single certainty and to action.

After that, every time I played it was with an extra spring. I felt the leather strop inside the seat pulsing just under my buttocks with every missed note or graceless passage and it compelled me to flawless performances upon Varney’s sublime Kawai. A white cat spent her days in a basket under the piano licking her feet.

I’m not a romantic musician—Romantic music is my specialty and I feel strongly about certain instruments, but I don’t revere instruments in general. They’re metal, wood and felt objects of craftsmanship that, when built with care, make the beautiful music that people like to philosophize about. The Kawai, nine feet of glowing chestnut, was such an instrument. It was a concert grand, which explained the presence of double doors leading to the back porch. The usual, failsafe marks of wear, like a horse’s mouth, the pedals, were gloved in green felt socks tied by gold string.

The only unnerving feature of the instrument was the keyboard which I would swear was made of ivory. The music stand had either been removed or the piano had been built without one. Varney believed that no song could be played well if the student had her mind on sight-reading. I was a poor memorizer but I was never relegated to the Yamaha for forgetfulness.

At his request, I commenced what I had already realized was an audition with Schumann’s Romance in F Sharp. He then demanded that I play something more heavily expressionistic. I suggested the Raindrop, a song that would demonstrate my finger sensitivity and grace without opening too widely the more vulnerable parts of my psyche. He then asked me if I knew the Nocturne in C Sharp Minor, which I did—a
simple piece with very few fast passages but requiring expert control over depth and action and also the ability to display one’s innermost yearnings and agonies to the listener. It wasn’t easy dipping my fingers into the soft breastbone of the piano with Varney watching. When I was done, he smiled in what seemed like a fatherly manner.

“I won’t have much trouble with you, Laura. Certainly, you shouldn’t be at ease. You don’t work nearly hard enough on individual songs and you rely too much on your excellent intuition of tone. You’ll benefit from our sessions, however, because you are sensitive.”

I thought the cat smiled at me, too, and then, the scale rippling towards the g still ringing in the room, Varney sent me home.

Oddly enough, I hardly thought about Varney over the following week but about the Kawai instead. By the few comments he’d made while I played, I knew he was very gifted. As long as he left the spanking business in the piano seat, it would be worth remaining his student. In spite of the chill of his home, I already loved that piano, and the electricity at the tips of fingers that could do no wrong on my own upright Kawai all week convinced me to stay. Or rather, kept me from taking my judgment of Varney beyond principle and into censure.

I never left the piano bench that week. I was awash in music and when I wasn’t, I felt so anxious that during mealtimes my family questioned me more than once. There seemed no reason, or no way, to disclose Varney’s behaviour to them. My parents would have assumed from my playing that he was an exceptional teacher, anyway.

I felt keenly focussed on the pride, almost haughtiness, of the nocturne. Where
formerly I indulged in sentimentality in the sad parts, I now stabbed almost disdainfully at the keys as if I was the kind of woman who hated to cry, and so wept without self-pity. Instead of *rubato* for a whole phrase, now I merely hesitated over a note in a chord, as if a straggler in a line of refugees took a breath before hurrying to rejoin his fellows. I discovered how a series of notes ascending the keyboard somehow rises in crescendo without added pressure from my hands; how evading the pedal’s lure and softening one’s attack creates the grace of pebbles flung in the sea, instead of waves oozing across the shore.

He did not hit me in the second session, although I was obliged to copy a hundred lines about my previous lateness. After that humiliation, we adjourned to the back room and he continued to help me shape the Nocturne, the notes like so many pinpricks in my skin. Most of my playing was with eyes closed, and Varney’s murmured admonishments a gentle rain across my eyelids.

He lectured me about the consistency of my fingers and ordered me to practice scales to improve my control. He continued with a diatribe on posture and I listened carefully while memorizing his face and manner for future examination. There wasn’t anything superficially memorable about the man; he was tall, with black hair going white. I remember his hands well, however, because the fingers were long and narrow but the knuckles were swollen, arthritic bulges. One drawback of his teaching was that he could never demonstrate his expectations on the piano. Logically, this meant either that students learned more slowly or that they became moderately telepathic. Or that what he heard in his head became an ideal no reasonable pupil could imitate. Before the
onset of arthritis, I suppose, he must have spanked students with his bare hands.

After an hour of Chopin, Varney suggested that I practice reconciling restraint with emotion by seeking a weekly gig in a cool jazz bar or restaurant. This shocked me because no other teacher had ever recommended that I explore one genre to improve another. Long after Varney, I eventually did get work at a bistro on Front Street and spent my Wednesdays adding Chopin-style runs to old standards like “I’m Getting Sentimental Over You” and my namesake song, “Laura.” Regulars enjoyed my set because it was somewhat unusual to hear very spare, subtly accented jazz with an obvious classical feel in that area. I don’t think that those who visited Chopsticks as a novelty got what they either expected or wanted. But it helped to refine my playing so that the music exhibited an exquisite and sometimes deliberately brittle strain that I love and that would have made Varney nod approvingly.

I knew a girl once whose father beat her and her siblings when they lost things, or were late or rude. She saw a therapist eventually but in spite of that healing and the therapist’s convictions, she was never sure that she had been abused. Her parents were Europeans, raised themselves with whips, and she was only hit in discipline, although that is not to say without anger. While an unhappy, confused child, she grew to be a moderately successful novelist and decided, finally, that while the value of such punishments was ambiguous, in her parents’ case it was well-intentioned. Her continuing conundrum was whether or not her achievements resulted directly from her early treatment. It was not, I think, that she was in the habit of blaming her childhood for all her triumphs or ills. I think that she wanted the evidence of her health and growth—
her books—to have been created from a love not originally communicated in violence.

I know, rationally, that her predicament was irrelevant in the sense that no matter what the foundation, she had built a life for herself for which she should be praised—all things achieved in maturity are largely the pride of the individual, far in years as we are from our fumbling parents though the influence of these creators is moot and acknowledged. In fearing a dark source for her talent she took the credit away from herself.

When on my fifth lesson, enraged that I had neglected to properly memorize the Ballade (it didn’t matter to him that the piece was thirteen pages and that I knew the notes if not the dynamics), Varney ordered me to pull down my pants. He had already retrieved the leather strop from the Kawai’s seat and gripped it with a repressed grimace of pain, when I whispered ‘no.’

I don’t know why I resisted that. I would allow the spanking, but not on my bare flesh. Using my parents as an excuse, I explained that they would disapprove and offered my covered backside to his ministrations. He accepted the denial without complaint. After five strikes or so, he desisted and we returned to the piano.

On my way out, a little late because of the discipline, I met a boy on his way up the drive. Varney was inside, out of range, and so I stopped the boy. He might have been fifteen. I asked him if Varney ever behaved with him in a way atypical of music teachers, if he did anything that made the boy uncomfortable.

“Like what?” the boy said, watching me with opaque blue eyes. I paused for a few moments, assessing his expression.
“Well, like make you write lines. Or even hit you.”

His face closed. He pushed past me and said, “I don’t want to talk about anything like that.” He entered the house without knocking.

At supper that evening I finally told my parents about the lectures, lines and spankings. They forbade me to continue working with Varney and so that was my last lesson. I know that they informed Mrs. Page and that she in turn spoke with a representative of the Conservatory, but I don’t know what happened to my teacher.

On a whim, I drove past his house on my way to a concert at Trinity Church not long ago. There was a great deal of shrubbery, the paint was wearing thin and the new occupants (I don’t believe Varney capable of such natural chaos) had started an ivy under the bay window. I don’t know whether or not I would have stopped in had he still been there.

After Varney I attended the odd music workshop but, other than some infrequent consultations with other pianists, I never visited another music teacher for the rest of my career.
OBJECTS

“Right now I’m going through a change,” she said. “You know, it’s like change started somewhere outside me and then its little fingers began sliding around my vagina! And then it slipped right in.”

I considered this silently for a while. My usual reaction to Barbara’s little comments was to sit on them, and think up some equally witty response. But I couldn’t, you see, this time. Of course, I was in love with her. It happens.

“So keep going with it,” said I. “What part of your body is Change in now. I’m sure you’ve thought about it enough. Shock me.”

“Okay, here goes. I have a motto or two in life, as you know. The way I see life is this. I consider myself as a sort of wandering star in the universe and I see every problem I hit as accidental orbits I’ve slipped into—”

“Don’t you mean, ‘slipped out of?’”

“No. I mean into because I see my life as forward moving. I never really look right or left, so when I get into trouble or some kind of a fix it’s more like I’ve got into a circle, like of the vicious kind. I don’t mean to say that I never know what is happening around me, of course I do, it’s just that events and other people’s problems et cetera occur in my peripheral vision. That’s kind of why I have so much energy, because nothing else except myself is using me up! Terribly ego-centric I know. But I’m an artist by trade and this way of thinking works for my creative potential and output.

“So the change, in view of my mind set, is this. It’s you, Samantha, that drew it out for me and yet I know you’re wondering how that might be considering how little
input I usually accept from other people. It has to do with time and reasons. I'm starting to think about moving on or at least travelling again."

At this my heart fell. Barbara's straight line in life had always had me as support or at least, my life had always run parallel to hers, if two years could be considered always. Those two years were my life, though. No matter how kitschy, she was my breath, my heart. I was suddenly numb, as if my arms were tied in a jacket.

She continued her monologue, her candid tone hushed. "I know how you're feeling right now, Sam. Don't think I don't. No, don't say anything yet until I explain. I go for walks every night, after midnight. Now, nothing terrible has happened to me, that's not what I'm getting at. It's that the accumulation of these walks has added up to a lot of reflection about my life. You know, I walk down the deserted, late-night Montréal streets and I look into people's apartments, into their lives, Sam, and each life is fascinating. Even if I don't see any people I see their interior decorating, for Chrissakes, and I love it. So many objects, always so carefully placed. A lamp here, a child's clay flowerpot art project there. A dog or cat under the coffee table, I don't know. And I've started to really look, to really look, Sam, and I swear I never really paid attention before. My art, my thoughts have always revolved around myself though God knows what I've ever really had to express since I've never been an observer of humanity, just of myself. But I'm starting to see reflections of myself in these houses and I'm fascinated. And I don't mean that it's fascinating as yet another way to understand myself exactly, it's more like I'm finding places in the world, in these houses, to put myself. Like we are all little bits of each other subdivided into different personalities and different things. Like we're all pieces of God, I don't know."
"So why leave, Barbara? When you’ve just started to make this realisation, or discovery? Why now?"

"But that’s just it, Sam. I wouldn’t be moving on this time just for the sake of moving. Now I have a mission. I want to see other places, really see them, so that I can try to apply this observation of people, humanity, you know, and myself to the rest of the world. I’m just starting to see the beauty of the tiny details, instead of just the beauty of the Big Emotions or Thoughts that I’ve always been thinking of. My art has always been so big, physically. So abstract. Now I want to absorb all the tiny things that are so beautiful, because they are so different, but all the same. Like grains of sand. Yah, like grains of sand."

"But by ‘going tiny’ as you say, aren’t you then limiting yourself in a way?"

"No, because this is like getting big in a different kind of way. Instead of concentrating on the big grains of sand individually, to keep with the metaphor, I want to really observe thousands of little things. Like the particular way one person may grow basil in the back yard and another raise children and so on. I am fascinated with the universality and beauty of the mundane. The simplest, tiniest human expressions, so enormous when you add up the millions of them. But all these things, you know I’m really starting to see this now, are all related to the big things. All that is big is small and all small is big.

"Oh, God! Look at the rain coming down all of a sudden now!"

She continued, awed.

"So, I’m not really forward moving anymore. And it’s not like I’ve hit a problem and am now in a circle. Instead, I am at the centre and my life is streaming out from me
in all directions. Like a spectrum of possibilities has opened up. And it’s ironic, because for two years I’ve been moving forward in one spot, and now I’m static, at the centre, but physically moving on. It’s almost like I exist less, though. Because even though I’ll be making a physical impression by moving around, okay, since I’m feeling so subsumed by everyone and everything and everyone around me or rather a part of it all, I’m less important in the face of all this. God, I’m—I’m so fascinated by life, Sam, so fucking alive!

I doubled over inside. Was it the stasis of our relationship that got her on this track? My love, breaking my heart.

“And I look around this room, our so familiar living room, and it’s as if I’m seeing it with new eyes. The coffee table, the bean bag ash tray, and the open bay window with the rain flying in. Sam, Sam, I never really saw these things before. And I think it was you, it is you. Your tender way of always being so sensitive to me, always being careful about the details. Giving my hands massages after I had painted too long and they hurt. And what’s so weird is that so often you’d ask me if I wanted one before I even knew I was in pain. Or making my eggs poached my way, instead of most people who’d just keep making them for you their own way no matter what you wanted. You pay attention, and that’s what I’ve learned from you. Attention. And this trip I’m planning or this move, I don’t know which, is sort of for me to learn perception.”

“Well, Barbara, it doesn’t appear to me that you have considered a place for me in this mission of yours. There’s no consideration of me in here at all. Is this it? I’m glad for you but I’m finding this all very ironic—you’re basically saying that I have driven
you to leave. And sure all of this is wonderful. How is it that you can be so nonchalant about going?”

“Samantha, it’s not nonchalant for me. I’m not taking this too well either. I don’t want to stop talking normally with you—breakups are usually so confrontational, when they’re usually the one thing at least that the couple is sharing. You’d think they’d be more understanding, instead of exploding.”

“I’m not exploding,” I said, “but I can at least expect you to be serious right now.”

“I’m being as serious as I can. We’re talking about the course of my life here.”

“Yes, yours. And not ours, and definitely not mine.”

“Of course, Sam. This is about me. I’m glad we had our time together, and I’ll wrap it up like a package in my imagination and remain thankful for ever having had a relationship with you. But our time together is over now and we need to each move on.”

“But Barbara, what you’re talking about is ships passing in the night. Like everyone follows a linear path, your former model, and heads towards goals, or relationships, or whatever, then attains them and moves on. That’s not about spectrums or possibilities or anything else you said.”

“Oh, but it is,” she replied. “It’s about sampling plentifully from the world all of its opportunities. Choosing from a range and being grateful you were lucky enough to have a choice. It’s about standing in one spot and surveying the possibilities and then finding the most interesting and thought-provoking route to get to where you’ve chosen to go, instead of choosing the straight path....
“I have to do this, Sam. I’ve finally found my place in life: in a sense, it is to exist at the centre of thousands of relationships extending outwards from myself, to which I am subordinated, and I have to be alone to understand them fully. If that’s even possible. There can’t be two things or people at the centre of a model. At least not until I fully grasp the magnitude of this discovery of perception. I can’t have any distraction—”

“Is that what I am?”

“Yes,” she said. “I have to be honest with you, and I’m trying to be. You love me too much not to keep taking care of me. Too much to stop being my eyes for me. I have to learn to really see for myself. And for that I have to go away and experience things through travel, and through solitude.”

“I don’t know if I’m so perceptive, Barbara. I understand what you’re saying and I see that only in this area it’s usually me giving and you taking, but I don’t want you to go. I’m not good at having nothing or no-one to give to. I just don’t want to be alone, and away from you.”

“I’m sorry, Sam.”

“So am I. It’s hurting already, though, but I suppose a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do, like John Wayne said.”

So she left. But I got something in the mail from her a month later. It had no title.

right now, just a little lonely,

I am trying to dance, supple,
like an indian gypsy. I spin
and in my head I get a weird
pain, so I stop.
but for a minute there the colours
in the room all blurred
into sand and brush and my
shirrtails were fuschia and gold
and, breasts unfettered, I
felt a flute twine around me,
like a cool flirt dipping under
and over my gold, tan arms,
the flaming soles of my feet
slamming into the hard ground
around and around a tree that
stretching higher and higher,
split the immense sky, just
like cracks in a ceiling.

And I considered it for a while. Like most things about Barbara, it was truly colourful.
DELLA

Her voice is husky and stumbles over itself. The man unfolds his naked body from the bed in a rapid motion that is alien to the dust and stillness of the room and he informs her that she is vague as usual. At the window he draws a long breath and releases it. The girl lifts her blouse from the filthy floor and pulls it over her head. The motion seizes his eyes. He closes them briefly at the sight of the unshaven hair in her armpits.

Why don’t you get yourself a shaver one of these days, Della.

What for. You never notice me anyway.

I just did.

You only see what you don’t like. You don’t like anything, now that I think about it.

He turns back to the window. The night outdoors is thin and vacant. Its atmosphere is exactly the opposite of the prairie night in July, he thinks, when the air is close and pregnant with warning. It reminds him of nothing. He sees her reflection in the window next to and behind his own and traces her colourless face in the steamy dust. She stares vacantly at the little drawing and stands, naked except for her shirt and joins him at the window. Removing his handkerchief from his pocket he wipes the shocked face away, precisely. Then he allows her the embrace.

Well?

Della, you know I’ll do anything but.

No, I don’t know.
Look, Della, honey...Can’t you go see someone? It’s simple these days.

I don’t know that I want to.
He pauses for a moment then goes to the bathroom and washes himself off. She puts on the rest of her clothing mechanically. She finds the case on the table, lights a cigarette and waits for him to get out of the toilet. She watches him in the mirror parting his hair above his left eyebrow. It takes almost her entire cigarette for him to get the part. He shaves fastidiously with a rusted razor and then brushes his teeth and tongue without water. What comes out of the taps is yellow and he doesn’t trust it. Della admires him out loud when he is done. She is breathless with defeat.

He wonders if he has the right to ask if he’s responsible. She would probably lie. She was a desperate woman. He walks to the closet and takes the suitcases off the shelf.

You should get out of here, Della.

Why. Why don’t you come with me, David.

I can’t leave her. It would kill her.

Men always say that. But I don’t think they’ve ever been right.

Why? Do a lot of men say that to you?

David, please.

I’ll take care of the rent. It’s the least I can do.

Yes. Of course.

She sits back down on the bed next to her suitcases. He sees that she has cried but her face is dry now. She takes out another cigarette and lights it. Some of its ashes get on her clothes as she folds them into the suitcases. There is little to pack. She stands and crushes out the cigarette in the glass ashtray on the mantle, fumbles with the envelope
that he has placed on the desk. He tells her to go to Boston and writes a name on a sheet of paper with an address. Tells her that it comes from a reputable source. She is silent but eventually takes the paper and folds it. She slides it and the packet in the sleeve of her coat.

They put on their shoes. He carries her cases and they leave the room together. The door closes and the lock is bolted from outside.

Out in the street a young woman looks up at the window from a taxi. She sees that the lights have been left on in the empty apartment. The girl leans over the driver’s shoulder, says a few words. He nods and the car moves away. Her cigarette smoke curls backwards out of the window, disappearing into the windless dark.
WHITE CAPER FLOWERS

Look at it teeter obscenely on the edge of the sea. The hotel is the texture of eggshells and as white, brooding palely at the foot of mountains. It is odd that in the temperate climate of the new world trees are fat and stolid, while here by the Mediterranean sea trees arch like adolescents. Colours are too pigmented; their thickness might be mistaken for brilliance, when really it is their silted depths: the way colours solidify after a hundred layers. Every house thickens with paint. The walls of the Ligurian houses of Lucia’s youth are as pale and dense as American eyeshadow.

The sun is behind them and a silver gleam lying atop the asphalt vanishes beneath the overheated tires of the speeding car. Steaming in the passenger seat, Lucia Settini, wife, glares hotly at the white hotel shimmering a mile below her and Franco. It is an alabaster doll’s house from their height in the mountains. The hotel is as white as the whites of a frightened woman’s eyes. The old warped windows reflect light like carnival mirrors. An outdoor patio skirts the Hotel, and, at the back of the building, a bent black railing curls into a banister leading to the slim beach. Figures dot the frosted cream sand. Some, mostly couples, gather by a wild pink rose garden to gag on the stench of ripe flowers. Of course, Lucia cannot possibly see all this from her distant height. Her memory of the Hotel Villanazil is acute.

She remembers simpering vacationers sipping umbrella drinks, lascivious types with wet mouths, and the buttery marble floor, pocked by a thousand whispering heels. The mosaic design on the floor is unrecognizable to Lucia, but its patterns extend from the dining hall to the right of the entranceway, to the ballroom on the left. The marble
design is much dulled on the outdoor patio, for the hotel personnel push a white concert grand piano outside at night so that guests can dance there in the sea breeze. Indeed, the floor's expanse stretches, coated in burgundy carpet on the stair, to the rooms on the second floor. She remembers how delighted she once was to learn, upon flinging open the doors of her bedroom, that the ochre and viridian design reached all the way into the bedroom, magenta strands insinuating themselves beneath the bed. When she was first there at the hotel, the silly idea that silk-clad men might hover predatorily behind potted plants did not frighten her. Such things made her laugh, blushingly. It is a lovely seaside hotel, there can be no doubt. A famous poet drowned himself there for love, besides. We can be grateful at least that Villanazil kept its name after the death, unlike the ancient Hotel Shelley farther north.

Her husband's callused fingers grip the gray steering wheel. Franco remains grimly silent, though they are nearing the Hotel. If Lucia surprised him with a caress (which she would not), he might twitch and frown until she moved away. She hates the look of his mouth. The little pinched line at the corner of his lips appeared after her infidelity, six months before in February. She is tired under the weight of gloom, realizing she is now responsible for her husband's wrinkles. Her own might grow in soon, she speculates, though she does not expect to be blessed with the fine lines of expressiveness.

Franco suffers from an affliction common to many husbands and one from which it is unusual to recover: suspicion. Her mother warned her of the danger, by her own example. But she had balked when faith beckoned, just like Maria.
Lucia remembered playing often in the dust at her mother's feet while the aging woman's eyes turned back in their sockets, looking mournfully to the time when Lucia's father still leaped to pluck unfallen olives. She was trying to remember when Vincenzo's smiles were electric and easy, before he had found his wife, Lucia's mother, behind the village wall, holding the hand of a neighbour, and eating from, of all things, a jar of capers.

In an endless second (less than a second, she told her frightened daughter) Maria watched his blue eyes chill from gulfwater warm to gray. Her mother begged, pleaded! She crawled to the center square of their village in her black blouse and skirt, wailing her sin to the closed shutters of her neighbours. She spat at her lover's door. Maria dragged herself on her knees, black hair swinging between her breasts, to the tiny village church and kissed its bottom step repeatedly. (These facts Lucia herself does not, as we do, need to be told. She was there.)

Maria performed all the necessary rituals of mortification, but Vincenzo would not yield.

Lucia's father stood over his wife shouting and shaking his fisted hands, while one of many spectators held the child Lucia up to see the spectacle of her mother. She hung stiffly in the fat arms, her black eyes bruises in a dark head.

"Watch," the village women hissed, "watch and learn from your pitiful excuse for a mother. This is the best lesson such a woman could give you. Watch and learn who not to be!"

As Maria's daughter, the women whispered to her through the many years between her spindly girlhood and almost-womanhood, she must be extra careful. But
they were quiet when she questioned them: what did Mama do, cousin? How do I be
careful, aunt? What did the man do with my mother? Why is my father so angry? The
village women would not answer, and so Lucia became timid. Finally she grew to be
much like her mother, a pariah—easy with strangers, yet wayward and untrusting with
the familiar. People blamed the mother for rearing a capricious and fickle child.

They were quite wrong, really. While the women had, in their strange anger and
resentment, pierced Maria with their eyes, Lucia gazed upon her father attentively.
Certainly, she prayed that the demon that had made her mother betray her father and,
obviously, the whole village, would not penetrate her. She promised, trembllingly and
many times, as she hung in the air over her parents, that as soon as she knew what Maria
had done she would guard against it in herself. For Lucia witnessed with her own child’s
eyes the weakness of a man’s love: crossed once, the masculine will did not forgive. His
punishments, she foresaw correctly, lasted forever.

So when Lucia felt a boy’s marble eyes on her too often, she squashed the
jellying of her heart with the memory of her father. (Though it was necessary to call up
this dark and merciless image few times; whatever prettiness and laughter she had left
remained hidden behind her anxious seriousness.) There in a mental churchyard her
father stood forever, bending over Maria’s shaking body, yelling that the dust from a
hundred churchgoing feet was nectar, ambrosia! compared to a kiss from her filthy lips.
Furthermore, the most ancient cracking plaster on the most unkempt, embarrassing
house deserved the blessing of sunlight more than the back of her fat neck. He shouted
that from then on he, Vincenzo, would allow her miserable, crooked feet to tread only
the steepest, most bone-shaking roads. And what was more, from that night forward Maria would pick capers from the village walls along those same roads under the baleful stare of the moon.

Capers could only be culled at night, for they flowered by the light of the sun. Like them, Maria of Savignino was never allowed to bloom again. During the day, Vincenzo inspected the mossy village walls. For every caper he found he tore out one of Maria’s glossy black hairs, and threw it, to frizzle with a hiss, in the woodstove, while Lucia stood like a wraith at the door. Vincenzo ignored her, his only child. She stayed and watched of her own trembling free will. She knew better than to interfere with Vincenzo.

Lucia roamed the village roads in secret every morning while her father worked in the olive groves, plucking as many flowering capers as she could find. She flung the pitifully white flowers over the crumbling village walls. Sometimes, in Spring, there were too many capers and too few hairs. Her mother would let Lucia weave some of her own, Lucia’s, hairs into Maria’s during the day, so the angry villagers would not suspect that Maria was almost hairless. Traitorous wives were one thing; vengeful, cruel husbands quite another. Maria’s faith, since the Incident, had stood the test of time while Vincenzo had become the village villain.

Once, when she had grown older, Lucia tried to bargain with him.

*Take my hair,* she cried. *Mine for mother’s.*

But both the husband and wife refused the gift.
Finally, after endless years of watching through her midnight bedroom window her mother Maria weeping and scrabbling at capers in between rocks in the village walls, her father died. It was clear to Lucia that he had simply brooded to death. She was glad he was dead. Perhaps he would have been kinder to his only child had she been a boy, she thought. He knew she would grow into a woman, and so he despised her. Leaving her bald mother in the bosom of a village that had forgiven her when her husband could not, Lucia stole through the gate under the white blooms of stars one windy night and disappeared forever.

Lovely Lucia, Franco called her, even in public. *So like a black butterfly you are, everywhere and nowhere that I can catch you!* He first met her in the seaside town of Levanto; she was the barmaid at Barolino’s on via Olivieri. He ordered drinks just to lure the reluctant girl to his table. And every night he left a carafe languishing, half-full and forgotten. Eventually, she was swayed by his devotion. Lucia began to play the same tricks, bringing napkins, wooden matches, green toothpicks and cutlery that he did not need just to wait at his table. Her boss dreaded Franco’s arrival. Grumbling patrons ordered several rounds at once so they would not have to wait too often for the dawdling Lucia, who was never sure if she wanted Franco but not unsure enough to bother serving other customers!

One night, the bar closed, Lucia stood by Franco’s table (always the one closest to the bar) holding a half-empty carafe up to the moon in the window. In the cloudy jar the rich red wine glowed gently and she thought on Franco. Alone, she poured herself a glass, settling into his chair in the dim bar, and drank it pensively. He seemed a good
man, Franco. He was respected, a vintner from Toscana resting at the seaside. She was
taller than he was by half a foot but in all other ways he seemed just right. He was
respectful, never grabbing for her arm or patting her leg as she went by like other men.
She felt silly and virginal (which she was) when he spoke to her, quietly, leaning
towards her.

And her mother had died—there had been a letter from the village that day. All
day the shade of her mother’s sin had been gradually lifting. The awful,
incomprehensible betrayal that had shaped her girlhood seemed to drift finally with
Maria into the grave, like the settling of sediment at the bottom of a bottle. For once,
Lucia felt almost completely unafraid.

And so, naturally, she and Franco married. Her boss and a few regulars from the
bar who had witnessed their shy courtship surprised them with a shower of rice and
flowers, but otherwise their wedding (and indeed, their marriage) was unremarkable in
everything but in the amount of love and affection that imbued the couple with a kind of
gentle light. They found their way back to Franco’s tiny, mountainside vineyard. Lucia
relaxed into the life of wine-making, the movement of seasons in the mountains. She
wandered through the vines, not unlike the olive groves of her childhood. In the
evenings, she explored the strange secrets of Franco’s small library and music room.
She caught herself musing on the fine mystery of children.

But unlike the stalwart Franco, there remained a small place in Lucia’s heart that
was unsure of their love. A defiant part of her that feared but also desired to be snared,
like a pale spring olive, in the net of her marriage. Her mistrust appeared to Franco in
the sometimes tremble of her kisses, and her bent head as she undressed at night. He felt
it in the way her hand alternately gripped, other times fell away, from his own sure one on their evening walks together. Even after several years of peaceful marriage, sometimes this scared him.

And it was into this tiny window in her breast that, one night, a strange traveller crept with the help of tropical drinks and hors d’oeuvres: Lucia and Franco, the harvest over, were vacationers at the Hotel Villanazil. Besieged by the dazzling vanilla-whiteness of the stranger’s suit and wondering innocently, just this once! what it was to know unfamiliar hands, Lucia yielded. Perhaps, in the loving years of her marriage, she had forgotten the wariness that protects other, less-loved women.

She found herself crushed against the hotel wall, away from dizzying patio lights, her hair in her eyes. A strange, shining blonde head blocked out the sky, like a giant burnished chestnut with lips that thrust at her. There was no laughter in the twisting mouth, no delicious shudders in her skin. He weighed heavily upon her and her head felt ready to burst, but not with pleasure.

How awfully different this other man was! His body was hard, but with jagged, unyielding corners. His lips were slick and fat; his touch was sloppy and bony at once. He did not close his eyes as he sucked her lips. She felt the same sneer with her mouth that she cringed to read in the alien eyes.

After a dozen wet kisses on the terrace, his pale fingers groping beneath her dress, she reeled back, pinned by the man’s cold green eyes. She remembered Franco, at that moment ambling ignorantly along the almost-moonless beach. There suddenly, exquisite in her drunken mind, was his gentle, big body and the way it curved around her in love, the drift down of his eyelids as he sighed his exultation.
And so, as she kneeled moments later at his feet, by a sea whose glassy surface concealed a winter current, the blond hairs writhing amongst the rich black on Lucia’s bent head told Franco the whole sad story. He stared at them, his hands in fists, shaking. He plucked the hairs almost carefully from her head, and threw them in the sand. Looking up, Lucia thanked God that his eyes were shaded by darkness. She swayed on her knees before him, beseeching mutely. But he turned away and ran down the beach, and it seemed to Lucia that his feet did not touch the ground as the darkness swallowed him up.

Now, for only the second time in six years, she is in the province of Liguria again, on a bitter pilgrimage to Hotel Villanazil with her black hair in a bun. He wanted to return to the scene of the crime, Franco had said angrily, a month or two ago. They had lasted through the rest of the summer until Franco had found time for a second vacation. She had shouted back,

*It was an accident! I’ve been a good wife to you!*

Franco’s brown eyes shrank with hurt,

*and that’s it? You just say you’re sorry and it’s over? Who are you to decide when my suffering should end? I’m paying for what you did with my pain!*

Lucia went limp. She perceived that within the fine youth of his robust body, the rich muscles and supple hands, the easily-smiling eyes, she had made a wound where none had seemed possible.

For the first time in her life she understood how when her father Vincenzo tore out one hair, Maria could reach up and pull him out another strand. For he had never,
would never forget her as she had him. Franco drifted by pretty waitresses, his friends' elegant wives, with only Lucia's face in his heart. She, on the other hand, watching so anxiously that she should not be tempted as her mother had been, basked innocently in the small flirtations of life, certain that these tiny pleasures could not bear the seeds of that horror she remembered so well from her childhood.

"Yes, Lucia."

"We don't need to do this. We don't need to replay this over and over again."

"I think that we can make our marriage work if I can only understand how you could have done it. If I could understand then I might be able to let it go."

"But I think that maybe it's I who have never understood. I think that you have always understood—"

"What kind of joke—"

"Let me explain. I thought that nothing had changed for me, before and after it happened. That I have always loved you so much—well, I think that that is true, actually—but I don't feel like I knew I did as much before it happened as I know it now. I think that in my heart I have been always afraid of a man's love. I think that in my heart it has been me first every time, when it really counted, because I didn’t believe I could count on you. Do you see? But at the same time, I think I did it because I didn't know how not to do it—"

"Come on."

"No, I mean that with you everything has been so beautiful so how could anything be dangerous? I trust everything, now. Although at the same time, deep down,
what I said about feeling not sure is also true. I don’t know how it can be, feeling too
sure of the world for once and not sure enough about you…”

“Lucia, all this may be true but it doesn’t explain how you could forget me like
that?”

“But I told you, it was when I remembered you that I pushed him away. I don’t
know, Franco. I told you that I, that I maybe have not been as committed to our marriage
as you—”

“Why did you marry me, then?”

“But I mostly was committed, I mean, I love you. I was so drunk that I couldn’t
think! Nothing was right in my mind.”

“That scares me even more, that you could drink so much that you couldn’t even
think. How can I trust you now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think it will happen again, but how can I know? How can
you know that you won’t, Franco—”

“I would never betray you.”

“Yes, maybe you wouldn’t.”

Then they were on the gravel driveway and parked and Franco was unloading
the car. Lucia stayed in her seat, staring listlessly at the corner of the hotel that hid the
patio behind it. Franco fussed at the luggage in the trunk. Around that white corner lay
her betrayal.

Lucia thought about the days ahead of them, days saturated with Franco’s
suspicion, his leading questions and righteous inquiries into her every thought. She had
offered him her diaries to satisfy his insatiable curiosity. He had had the grace to refuse, for the moment. She had sobbed and pleaded, knowing somewhere at the fount of her riotous emotions that these were the displays he craved. But she was too tired to continue and had been too tired for months.

She stepped out of the car and began to walk across the patio towards the sea, ignoring Franco’s indignant call. Sitting down cross-legged on the bleached sand, she gazed meditatively at the water. There was a line of trees behind her that shaded the patio from wind off of the water and two long spits that extended outwards into the ocean. Small, pastel-painted boats were tethered along the shore near the spits. Far away upon the horizon she thought she saw an old, medieval ship, the kind that travelled by the force of slaves chained to enormous oars. Out of nowhere someone sat down beside her, and a corner of black fabric whispered and settled on Lucia’s knee.

Lucia looked and saw that it was her mother. Maria gazed out at the sea without looking or speaking to Lucia and, for some reason, Lucia did not try to speak. The daughter examined her mother, noting an abundance of black hair, black as pupils, and an absence of guilt in her posture. Maria’s lips were full and edged with soft lines, her jowls hung from a straight jaw and her eyes were as blue prisms hung before candles. The marks of scavenging had left her; her hands had lost their clawed shape, and there was an easy slope to her spine and a suppleness in her neck.

Lucia had only the time she needed to notice these things before Maria vanished.

When Lucia left Franco after they returned to Tuscany, she did so without explaining the significance of the brilliant white flower that he would discover on his
pillow upon going to bed that evening. Around it wound several black hairs and the entire arrangement was Lucia Settini's last sacrifice to her husband.
CARD GAME

The four of them are sitting on the floor and playing cards, when Dennis caresses Susan's legs under the coffee table. As Laura takes his ace of diamonds with a trump card, he slides the tapered fingers of his right hand along Susan's calf. Her stockinged legs open. Dennis' girlfriend, Joyce, squeals breathlessly as she and Laura slowly widen their lead.

"We're three tricks ahead of you!" Susan gasps noiselessly as Dennis' fingers leave her skin.

"Can I refresh anyone's glass?" he says. "What's your poison, Suey?"

"Anything, whatever you're having, Denn," Susan says darkly. He smirks at her. She runs a finger around the rim of her glass and looks away.

The women are left around the table, drifting on their little clouds of gin. Laura dips two long, pink fingernails into her glass and fishes out some ice. She sucks the cube thoughtfully as she watches Dennis. They eye his trim shape through a window separating the parlour from the kitchen. The wall between them is brick and its window reveals Dennis from the waist up. Without legs he floats back and forth through the kitchen, whistling. All he needs is a top hat, Susan thinks to herself.

Dennis returns with the drinks. Susan's heart beats slowly in her ears as she gulps full-throated. She lifts herself unsteadily from the floor to visit the washroom. Her delicate walk is slow and carnal and she pretends aloud to the others that booze puts her balance off. Dennis shoots her a look that says, Bullshit your balance's off, honey, I bet
your balance is so good you could fuck me on a trapeze right now. Laura and Joyce eventually win the game. The four of them switch partners and start another round.

Lighting a cigarette, Susan squints through the smoke at Joyce re-arranging her hand. Dennis starts on her legs again. He has never actually touched her before. It has always been just in the eyes. Susan knows that Laura is watching it all happen. Her eyes glow at them in the dim. Susan realises that Laura is aroused and wonders if she should be surprised.

Joyce deals them each five cards. Diamonds are trump and Susan holds a red hand.

Dennis fingers the flesh beneath the rim of her underwear. She lets a tiny moan escape her and Dennis rips his hand away just as Joyce looks up in surprise. Laura smothered a giggle. Laura is a gorgeous, shrill blonde but her sister Joyce’s inane brown eyes and soft body catch all the men, something Laura cannot forgive. But it is fine, Joyce is too tipsy to figure out what is going on. A hand later Susan deals and Dennis begins enjoying himself under her panties. He must use this hand if he wants his drink, for the other contains his cards. When he finishes gulping, the hand returns the drink to the table, leaving a smear on the glass, and finds its way back to Susan. His fingers from the glass are cold, like a boy’s tongue after a Popsicle.

They take a break at the half-way point and Susan follows the other women into the washroom. Pelvises pressed up against the coral counter, they mutely reapply the lipstick left on the rims of their glasses. The bathroom is small and Joyce and Laura press against Susan in order to reach the mirror. Joyce’s arm brushes the tips of Susan’s
erect nipples as she applies her mascara. Susan shifts from one foot to the other and leaves the bathroom. Dennis waits around the corner.

"Come with me," he whispers, gesturing towards the kitchen.

"Joyce will be out in a second," she hisses. She can see his erection.

"No, she won’t, it always takes her ten minutes to fix up," and he takes her arm and leads her to the kitchen. “And if you’re thinking what I’m thinking, then Laura will keep her in there as long as she can.”

Susan nods and lurches towards the kitchen. He fumbles at her breasts but the bathroom door opens behind them, Laura talking loudly. Laura smiles at them over the top of Joyce’s head. Susan wonders for a moment why everyone seems to be conspiring against Joyce.

The game ends uneventfully. This time Laura and Dennis win. It is one in the morning but Susan works nights and is not tired. Joyce yawns and does not hide it. There is nothing for her to stay awake for. Saturday nights Dennis drives the girls home and takes the highway into the city to his downtown apartment. Susan assumes he has other women—she has listened to too many of Joyce’s tedious complaints about Dennis’ tight schedule. Laura does not drive. Susan does, but she lets Dennis pick her up and drive her home under the pretense of a low tolerance for booze, just for that long minute at her door when both of them know that her apartment behind her is empty and waiting.

This is the first night that she feels ambivalent about being the last woman for Dennis to drop off. It isn’t so much Joyce’s open face and naive manner; rather, it’s Laura’s thin, expectant expression as she watches Joyce and Dennis and Susan night
after night. Once Susan caught Laura making herself throw up in the bathroom when she stayed at her apartment for a few days. Laura shrugged it off. Susan also found several bottles of laxatives, but she kept her mouth shut. It isn’t her problem, anyway.

The three of them leave Joyce and her apartment silently. It strikes Susan suddenly that she has no idea what they are thinking. And yet she is sure she can pinpoint every one of Joyce’s thoughts as she turns all the lights off and prepares herself for bed, stripping off her make-up and clothes while her boyfriend’s pick-up backs out her driveway. Susan feels a sudden flash of fear but she pushes it away quickly, puzzled at herself.

The whole drive is silent, not even the engine makes a sound. Dennis drives carefully and only ever has a couple of drinks so that he’ll be sober enough to drive. When they get to Laura’s she surprises Susan by asking them in. She shrugs when they decline. Laura wants clearly to say something but turns into her building without looking back.

Back in Dennis’ pick-up the urgency returns. Susan kicks her shoes off and rests her bare feet on the dash. Dennis drives, keeping his eyes on the road.

“What are you thinking?” he murmurs, after a minute.

“I’m wondering what we’re going to do.”

“Got any suggestions?” he says, and laughs softly.

“What about Joyce?” she says.

He parks on her street and turns the truck off. They sit for a moment and share a cigarette. She laughs.

“What is it?” he asks.
“Do you know that your girlfriend doesn’t know you smoke?” All she can see are his white teeth, and the red end of the cigarette.

He pulls her leg towards him and kisses her left foot. She recoils, irritated by the gallantry. He eases a toe in his mouth and sucks it, then slithers his tongue between two others. She shivers. Desire rises up in her again but it is different. Before it had concentrated in her genitals, now it suffuses her mind as well. She feels dizzy for a moment. He bends on the seat, pulling her around so that he can go down on her. A few minutes later she asks him to come into the apartment.

They undress in her room without speaking. Susan closes her eyes and imagines Laura at her apartment door, watching them enviously, her long legs rubbing against each other as she walks away from the car, adjusting her blouse, one hand lingering on her breast. Susan lays herself down on the bed and Dennis settles above her, moving against her from side to side, kittenish. As they kiss he touches her inside again and the image of Laura melts into one of Joyce. She had never realised how similar the sisters’ expressions were. She remembers Joyce’s arm brushing across her breasts in the bathroom and moans as Dennis pulls away, holding her down. He strokes her like he did under Joyce’s coffee table but it is too slow. Susan, impatient, pulls his body back down onto her.

His back arches above her and he grips her breasts with his hands. As his penis pushes its way into her she envisions Joyce’s expression as she kissed Dennis at her door. Susan remembers Joyce’s talk of a real commitment with Dennis. She smirks to herself and surges upwards, her long, pink nails impaling his buttocks as she forces him farther in. Her flesh is so sensitive it feels like it is lined with sand, scraping against the
slick walls as Dennis rotates back and forth. Each thrust feels like a punch and she groans against his sweating neck and then bites it, sharply.
A QUESTIONNAIRE, A LETTER, A POEM, A PHOTOGRAPH, AND A MONOLOGUE

The Questionnaire

Section A.1 – Describe Loneliness With An Abundance Of Concrete Detail

Chew on your pencil first. Attempt to be poetic. Digress.

Loneliness is black and white pictures of someone you see once a month. Especially the grainy ones. Loneliness is trying to keep good habits, like dusting off old photographs. I have several nudes of my boyfriend hanging in my apartment. He told me not to show anyone the pictures but he is also glad that they are there. For his sake, I only hung the ones with low f-stops so that his jiggly bits are blurry. I want my apartment to be like a gallery because the pictures are always clean, well-lit and protractor straight. I like my art to be surrounded by a lot of white space. That way, my body counterpoints the two-dimensionality of the pieces, as well as making their orderliness seem forced.

Section A.2 – Relate An Experience Involving Jealousy

Smile.

My old boyfriend calls me up from Toronto. Vito. Tall, dark and skinny Vito of the pimpled teenage back and glowering looks. We dated four or five years ago. After not hearing his voice for three years he still wants to rub his new girlfriend in my face. Now
he's living with her, he says. Even though I know I never told him about Lee, I tell him, 'Oh, I'm still with my guy, too, even though we broke up briefly last year.' Vito grunts in surprise.

—I guess I never told you. I'm dating my first boyfriend again, the guy I went with back in early high school. Lee.

There is a pause while Vito thinks. I'm happy that he finally knows that I was myself seeing someone the whole time Vito was trying to make me jealous. I didn't want to sink as low as Vito by telling him. It's nice to let myself do it, now that I'm so far away.

—I say you never get over your first love, he responds, finally.

—Well, I think it's grown a little past that.

—Yes. It must be more real for you two now.

—Uh-huh.

—But also a little boring.

—I don't think so, Vito.

—I guess it depends on which way you look at it.

I call up everyone I know, laughing angrily. Jen says, "Phew! Someone's carryin' a torch for ya, huh!"

Lee asks me if I'm still in love with Vito. I say, no, if I ever was. I also get very upset.

Section A.3 — Say something About Someone You Never Speak To Anymore

Say something profound about sacrifice.
Here in the dark, you and I drink and drink, until your head snuggles in my lap and I catch myself stroking your fine hair. I was in love with you, once. Now I am drunk. We pushed the cork into the bottle with your Jeep keys. It bobs up and down as you drink, full-throated. You broke through your inhibitions. Later in the week you grin, throwing your arms wide and your glossy blonde head back, "How could you regret it! After all, you got me!"

Most people complain that there’s too little in their lives. Not me. I called her up and listened to my nervous heart in my ears while my mouth cut her out of my life. She took it well. Tried to act indifferent. I tried to be sorry. Vito said he’d call me in a year or so. All week I’ve wanted to call him and tell him off. At least just make him know he’s not wanted in my telephone. But I can’t do it, even if Lee wants me to. Cutting everything off. It’s too much.

Section B.1 – What Do You Have To Say About Change At This Point In Your Life?

You know the answer to this one, don’t you?

Change is sacrifice.

Section B.2 – Write Something. Anything.

Don’t write “something. Anything.” It’s a cliché. It’s denial.

I feel guilty when he leaves on Sundays because often I’m relieved. I can start answering the phone again. Certainly I’m myself when Lee’s here but just last week I
burst into tears at my women’s drawing group because I realised I gave him the wrong
directions. I cried in Jen’s bedroom while the other women laughed nervously. He found
the house anyway and charmed all the women when he got down on his knees to pet the
cat. A dark-haired man can always entice a roomful of fair women. Sheryl said goodbye
looking into my eyes imploringly. I know her the least of the four but she was the most
affected by my little storm of tears. Unlike those of the friends I’ve had for ages, her
sympathy quota isn’t used up. The pain of very good friends and strangers is viewed
with scorn. It’s so easy to see through.

Lee and I left and had a nice weekend until Saturday night. He drank too much
and I yelled at him. He was obnoxious and loud in the movie theatre where we ran into
Sheryl and her girlfriend, Marla. He didn’t speak to me all night after I told him he
humiliated me. The next day we parted on good terms but I almost forgot to run to the
window and wave our usual last goodbye. I just wanted to curl up in my easy chair and
relax. Of course I worried all day through the snow storm until he called to tell me he
got home safely.

Section C.1 – Read Over Everything You’ve Written In The Questionnaire So Far And
See If Any Of It Makes Sense.

Add anything that could help clarify what you have written.

I’ve been turning over a new leaf. My betrayal was the last bastion of my former self. I
swear it.
Finally I have a legitimate excuse for my constant guilt. Now I can be sure that it is myself I ought to despise. Despise myself even more for the self-pity of it.

It's impossible to come up with a plot when everything makes sense. I am the only backbone to this plot.

My grade eight French teacher, Madame Malboeuf, used to tell us, "Il y a les personnes qui veulent savoir le comment. Et il y a celui qui veulent le pourquoi.

Moi. Moi, là, je veux le pourquoi."¹

Section D.1 – Tell Something Frightening

Don't be afraid.

A dream: I met her in a bar and she flaunted an imaginary older man on her arm I had my eye on. She flirted with us both. Sat, her taut legs wide on a stool, sexy. He disappeared when she and I kissed. Everything moved in there, cold and steamed. My flesh clammy as a wet beer bottle. Then we were slogging through snow in a wilderness to a frozen beach edging onto a broad, iced lake. We stopped there, me with my back to a pine-covered hill covered in darkness and only the snow light to see by. She walked down the beach and on to the lake. She never looked back. Kept walking in a straight line until she was at the lake's centre and too far away to see.

If I could dream it again I'd have her fall through the ice.

I don't mean it.

¹"There are those people who want to know the how. And there are those who want the why. Me. Me, now, I want the why."
A woman once wrote a poem about a colonel who dumped a sack of chopped-off ears onto a table.

Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught a scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.²

Isn’t it awful that the first flinch when you read something like that is, oh, poets steal so selfishly. Or, god I know about ears being everywhere, and I can’t cut the inside ones out. Instead of feeling something really deep like Oppression sucks.

Section D.2 – Say Something About Doubt

Only the devout doubt. The rest subsist on Jesus postcards tacked above their beds, large placards on the lawn, knocking on doors. I don’t believe. Why should I when the man I love doubts me? I don’t want his worship or his torrential anger. I don’t want his hate or his elemental love. I do not want for anything but faith.

I admire devotion, but adoration swallows down easier.

There are two youths in their twenties, as I am, living in this building. They wear white shirts and blue ties, black pants and burnished black shoes. I was carrying in a box from the car once, and dropped half of its contents on the pavement accidentally. Just getting out of their car, the boys saw my predicament and rushed over to help me pick the books off the ground. One offered to help carry my box and I refused. They wore black nametags with their names engraved in white. Both tags also read “The Jesus
Christ Church of Latter-Day Saints.” A particularly precise title for such a vague thing. The one who wanted to help me, the one with the tag that said “Neil Davies, The Jesus Christ Church of Latter-Day Saints,” carried a soft black Bible in his outstretched hands. I keep my Bible in the Fiction section. It should not feel like sacrilege to an unbeliever. But mine is a stubborn heart.

Section D.3 – Do You Flinch or Smile When Someone Poses Personal Questions?

Well, I have considered that it is okay not to regret her. In fact, I have dreamt of her more than the once, her silky body squirming beneath mine. I remember tracing those few sprinkled brown marks across her undulating belly and supple thighs. Everyone loves to make a lover smile all over.

The person I chose over her betrayed me more than I did her. Which is to say, only, that I miss her.

2Carolyn Forché, from “The Colonel”
A Letter to Yesterday

When I met you again after that long absence it was not halfway, as you think you desired, but completely. I was giddy for you. Our love was everywhere—on couches, floors, kitchen, and always I invited you into me with the high-strung desire to please of a thoroughbred horse, or student. You helped me away from sidewalks that begged me to stop walking and lie down, from dirty dishes and bathrooms that called out gleefully, unclean! unclean! from perpetually jiggling limbs and my own, bleak reflection. You were my lifeline and I decided one day, following you up the stairs to your apartment, to change my life. I was going to swim so far from sadness that it would never find me again. But you never wanted me to let go of you, did you.

Honey, I don’t love you anymore, not even your taut, delicious skin.

Last I saw you, you were trying to look like a banker, and now I can’t remember your face. Just those tight little black glasses and short glossy haircut. Everything compact, efficient, and as contemptible as your contempt for me. I thought you and I were meant to be, and while I didn’t believe in fate, I trusted my own will instead.

* 

I went for another walk by the river tonight. It was almost dark and I worried about lone men with their hands in their pockets and steadily gleaming eyes. I discovered that there is a little lagoon nearby, only thirty metres wide. I have noticed that here the sky doesn’t go down in pinks and purples like it does up north, but in sherbet shades of orange, yellow and violet. And the sun, so white it bites my eyes. I didn’t spend long on the
sunset; there was a couple nuzzling on a picnic table and generously I decided it was more theirs than mine.

* 

When you were sick it brought everyone together, even your parents and me, together. Not us, though.

I leaned against the wall of the hospital room, noticing clearly that it was painted the green of golden delicious apples. You lay in the narrow bed, grimacing, and your face, without its usual tension, was crumpled and complaining. I repressed a surge of dislike. As usual, I reminded myself that you were the victim of this disease and not me. I resumed my seat in the wooden chair at your side and rested my head awkwardly on the pillow next to yours. I waited like this for another half-hour while you ascended from the stupor of anaesthesia, my neck stiffening into a position that it would have trouble reassuming for days. Your mother came in to spell me for a while and I took the stairs two at a time down to the ground floor, lighting a cigarette as I strode out of the Emergency room doors. Sagging onto the nearest bench, I leaned my head up against the concrete hospital wall and inhaled.

* 

I was fifteen I think when I met you at a creek party behind the high school. You went to a different high school, one emphasizing sciences and maths, unlike my high school, an arts school. I was a visual arts major. We hit it off quickly—I pretended to be more drunk than I was so that our first kiss would come quickly. Those moments were so beautiful. You cannot at all be aware of how luminous and beautifully innocent you were. It went well for over a year; we smoked pot and I watched your band jam in your
laundry room, a resentful groupie. We were the kind of teenagers who wore denim head to toe and never cut our hair. I have soft, wrinkled pictures. But I fell out of love and I don’t remember why. I wanted to meet other men, have experiences, maybe. You told me later that you had worried for me, knowing that I would expect good treatment from everyone because of you. Only almost eight years later I realize how utterly vain you are. Until now, I thought you were right.

My father tells me that you can’t change people. Is it possible that you are the one who arranged yourself into what you are? Because I blame myself, you know. I am vain, as well.

*

These days I identify mostly with heroines in books whose husbands or lovers have been killed. I read a lot of Harlequins, too. I have considered checking out books on bereavement from the public library. Practical books with flowers on their pastel covers and titles like “Bereavement: Steps Towards Recovery” or “Working through Loss.” Nothing as funny as the Ben Wicks booklet on dealing with cancer that they gave you at the hospital. The one I thought was patronizing and that you had to remind me was for people who were traumatized and needed their information slow and digestible. The book mainly bothered me because most of the cartoons were of old people—no grim 23-year-old boys. Even when we thought you might die I sometimes wanted you to. But you didn’t and I do not know you any more and the beautiful boy of my youth is gone, anyway.
Before you entered my life I was untried, greenly nervous and reckless. When you left (you left me before I left you and you can hold me to that), I had developed a hard jaw and kind, tired eyes, though this was not, perhaps, your influence.

* 

The last times we made love you gripped my buttocks so hard that it hurt. I remember rearing back, and your face was swaying behind me, rapt, your facial muscles clenched. I thought that you were nowhere. We had a mirror, do you remember? and I used to watch you fixedly, compelling you to look at me.

I’m trying to tell you that I don’t love you anymore.

* 

When I take the truck up the gears I become free. The struggle is letting go without knowing where I’m going. Like going out underwear-less regardless of whether an ambulance might need to come for my body that day or night and allowing a hot breeze to slither its way up my tense, crossed thighs. Tonight I found a windy bench near the wide, new river and held a map of Ontario down on my lap. I learned that this town is the excrescence on a peninsula and that a convenient highway meanders its entire rim.

After my vague perusal I folded the map and watched the sun go down, feeling strangely nervous but also a bit melancholy. This independence I have taken comes with a loneliness that makes every accidental conversation with a stranger seem personal. I am settling down between the sadness and rapture of loneliness and though I make my days remarkable in their healthfulness and productivity, I long for the exciting, texture-less night. There’s too much air in my chest all the time. Oh, for the carelessly intense kisses of strangers and their hot, invasive hands.
I spend certain nights thinking about you. We have come together and broken apart so many times that reminding myself of what I hate in us is a life-saving ritual. For the last year of our love I kept a strict diary of all the words you called me. I can’t go to you again, though there is this longing of mine for a bass voice in my ear. The way men laugh softly, the way they breathe. I will force myself to love someone who is good to me, no matter how many of your sneers, raised eyebrows and rolling eyes churn through my small and tired heart.

For some people, love is most of all being irritated. Love is praying that things will get better.
Shipwreck

I

It was anything but easy
there in the dark
playground, drinking from
the bottle, her head
on my lap, my brain
bobbing like cork.
We had navigated
jungle gyms, sailed
down slides,
before landing
all hands there
on deck. Grounded
on the coral orange
reef of the sandpit.

Seahorses
unleashed in the autumn chill,
drifted around us,
smug, obscene.
She whispered in my ear,
and her arms, like great, grey wings
folded about me.

One twist of
gold curl
in my fingers
and I
was unmoored.

We turned again
into the cold wind.

    Soon a new breaker:
my bed, the sheets slapping
like sails, and
the sinuous eels of her hands
along my breasts.
I came unravelled,
rigging snapped.

    I reared my head
and plunged.

    The ship of me cracked
open. A swell of salt
water surged my mouth.
Her ribs heaved.
I was sick,
a white froth on my tongue,
sand in my mind.

II

The tiny ship is shaped
tenderly, the pale
wings of sail,
paper-thin and sticky,
gossamer.
The shuddering ribs are threaded
to the spine;
the slightest of breaths
will break her.

When she is complete
the artist inserts her in
a bottle, releases her with string,
her sails unfurling,
thirsting for wind.

Your whims have ever opened me
to vacuum.

III

I dream I stand
-on a truer shore,

my sea

legs lost.

I tear her from my side.

She stumbles to the centre
-of a frozen lake, the crunch

of her steps drowned out

by loon cry. I

can barely see her

as she bends

below the winter’s air,

vanishing.

It must be cold there

in the snow.
Concealer

The thick slabs of thigh muscle, broad, rubbery hands, and wet grin almost make me love you again, you bloodsucker. I remind myself of your surgical scars, crooked legs, lean chest and little penis, but it's no use. Your legs were bowed, yes, but shapely, and you had an average cock but it was neat and tasty, lolling on lovely, musty, trim balls. Sigh.

Who are you, sweet Intruder Man? Six months of loneliness and suddenly you reappear, gamboling across a years away summer lawn, delinquent, amongst the seven dusty mystery rolls of film I finally sent to the developer. I want to forgive you, dear heart, for the grim lips and drawn brows of years later than the time of this picture-taking, but only if I won't then want you back. Behind the glossy finish and silver crystals, and the double panes of your clip-on sunglasses, your pathetic, soft, thoroughbred eyes are lurking.

I wish you were dead. I want you to die in last year's green hospital bed; I want to finally befriend your cold mother at your funeral; I want you to succumb to anaesthetic and to never call me and tempt me back to you again like you did on my birthday and never leap out at me from the ancient past with promises of joy and your slick guise of health. Because if your frozen hand removed those sunglasses, I'm sure I would see those red eyes once again for what they are.
Women, Wine

“She wanted to get some dinner. So I suggested, because it’s BYOB, Amelio’s—which is the best pizzeria in Montréal, if you want a recommendation. We got two bottles of Beaujolais, her favourite, at the dépanneur. They sell wine at the corner store in Montréal, it’s very convenient plus it’s cheap. I think dépanneur means dispenser? Once I saw one of the University bums (his little chant is ‘spare some change for food, not alcohol’) returning beer bottles there. I stopped using my dep when I got three spoiled milk cartons in a row, but they can’t fuck up wine!

“Sorry, having trouble getting to the point. Amelio’s is just a couple of blocks from the dep and my apartment. I guess it was about eight o’clock when we got there. She had been talking about sex all day, smoking Special Milds on my fire escape, grinning ear to ear. She was totally trying to seduce me, didn’t care about my boyfriend who she knew I thought of, or thought I thought of, as my fiancé. It’s not like she wasn’t seeing someone, either, a guy. She said she didn’t see screwing girls as cheating. Plus, she hadn’t been with a woman since the two of us with her ex-boyfriend the year before. It was the only time I screwed with music on, incidentally—a boxed set of Bob, Bob Marley, her favourite. She used to talk about the congruence of our astrological charts. I fell out of that stuff after a while. Still have some of the books, though.

“Anyway, oh, do you want another tea or anything? No? Okay, so we ate vegetarian, she was really sensitive to animal abuse, and began drinking our respective identical bottles of wine. We left quickly, once we were done, nicotine cravings you know. There is a park the size of a house lot at Clark and Prince Arthur, just down from
the hospital, that bums and stoners use to sleep or get high in. That wasn’t the first time we got loaded there! Her father was an alcoholic, probably still is, and he used to call her drunk at night from the States or wherever he lived, I don’t remember. Her mother and her step-father weren’t much healthier. He, at one point, owned the Winnipeg Jets and once, she paid ten-thousand dollars for a pair of shoes. They owned a white Steinway that I admired in their Yorkville condo even though no one in the family played piano. And they got some fancy psychiatrist who handed out Paxel for the whole family (including my friend’s boyfriend of the time) on the basis of two years with the mother and one session each with the rest. I don’t know if it was getting rich at twelve through her mother’s new hubby, if it was Bishop Strachan or UTS boys, her three poodles or even me, that helped her drop out in her fifth year of university when she had all A’s. But. We weren’t friends by that point so I don’t have the details, mainly because of what happened this night I’m talking about, and everything before.

“After we drank at that park for a while, we got tired of people trying to pick us up or talk to us, so we moved to this other park—we just liked drinking outside—which is actually the playground of a school. There we started on a third bottle that we bought on the way. We were really loaded at this point, I don’t think I need to tell you that. We didn’t have a corkscrew so we used her car keys to push the cork into the bottle, and passed it back and forth with the cork floating in it.

“She was so wild in these little ways, I loved that. I’m able to say that now, what I appreciated in her, now that it’s a couple of years ago. Some things I didn’t like, though. How little foresight she could have, about other people’s feelings, especially when she got on one of her pet ‘issues,’ as she called them. She was so concerned with
not being repressed, kept telling me that I was repressed, which drove me bananas (which tells me now that she must have been partly right, if I got so offended). But like, we were on this plastic contraption with a slide and a rope ladder and monkey bars, sitting on the platform at the top of the slide. It was this sort of plastic house with a roof but no walls. And, so she needed to pee at one point, after all the booze, so she just held on to the bars that held the roof, and leaned out and peed! She looked like a scuba diver jumping in the water backwards, you know how they do that, eh? and she just leaned out and peed onto the sand in this sandbox where little kids would play the next day! Can you believe that? And that is just like what she did four days later, after we went to my house and sort of had drunken sex, and four days later I was trying to get her to understand how upset I was and she tried to convince me I was repressed and that what I considered as a huge betrayal of my boyfriend was not, and then she also had the gall to say, *how could you regret it? You got me!* I don’t know. I look back on the things she said now and what I did to her and what she did to me, and I just don’t know. Another friend of mine called it college shenanigans, but she dislikes her and strives to deny her any importance. It meant more than that to me.”
RETIREMENT

The retired couple liked the new country; it reminded them of their own, twenty or thirty years ago, before the seventies when children were born, and so many mistakes made. They concentrated on bonding: played tennis in the balmy Irish air, went walking along its green-fringed roads. He learned to fly on his flight simulator and she practised poetry. For once she could let the garden go wild, have the women in for afternoon tea and cake. Their thatched bungalow perched in the better part of town, its single-paned windows shaded by trees that merely dozed through island winters. Their fall was spent roaming the winding roads, searching out her ancestry buried in the hills. He bought genealogy software, searched out his own roots. They were pleased to remember that they hadn’t always been parents, but children, too. Eagerly they recounted it all, from their distant home, to daughters who heard everything one second late.

Winter came as did the girls, one more than twenty, the other nearer thirty. The mother sighed ruefully at her cancelled tennis classes and Friday dinner parties. She half-heartedly reminded herself to welcome the intrusion, resolving to enjoy herself over the holidays. Happy as she was basking in her ‘second childhood’ (her favourite expression), she couldn’t deny that she was already a mother. Compromising, she designed this year’s Christmas to be as green as the father’s new jackets and pants. Green a new motif all over the house: blooming wallpaper, velvet loveseats, and cut flowers cleverly entwined in the foyer. When the girls finally stumbled in the door they found their mother baking grasshopper pie in the kitchen and their father decorating in the den. The whole family collided in the hall, struggled for kisses and awkward
embraces.

But one daughter and then the other soon discovered that the guestroom had become detached from the rest of the house.

Jennifer's toe was the first to catch in the crack where the threshold to their bedroom had been. Her older sister investigated the fissure, prodding a dumbfounded worm revealed in the dirt below. Marla filled the crack with window caulking, but to no avail. The crack continued to grow. It could only be a matter of time before the roof began to separate.

Jennifer badgered her mother for the number of a repairman, but she was no help. Finally the sisters found a contractor on their own, the only one who did not hang up on them. Splitting houses? they had to be kidding. Their reluctant contractor drove over to the house and scratched his head at the irrevocable evidence. He lit a cigarette and laughed, and filled the eyesore up with cement as Jennifer and Marla cheered him on.

But soon even the rest of the house was warring against them, shower water going cold half-way through, their faces in bathroom mirrors unintelligible. At dinner their plates and glasses were dissolving, and frantic jabs without forks at their mother's meals were vain punches in a foreign air that quickly re-formed after every attempt. Little by little, the two daughters began to disappear. Photographic endeavours in the picturesque countryside yielded green negatives; where a daughter had been only a dewy meadow or frosted grove remained. Their mother exclaimed, delighted at the vacuous exposures, apologising vaguely for her lack of focus. The befuddled father could not contribute a solution, and retreated further into his crossword.
The sisters began conspiring—outside of the house, of course—huddled under fragrant pine trees. But where Marla proposed negotiation, Jennifer planned escape. On the mossy ground pine needles lined up like sentries, pros and cons remaining mysteriously at odds. They scoffed at themselves, angry that they had let their imaginations get the better of them. Eventually enmity ensued in the younger generation, unacknowledged by parents occupied with portrait-painting and the world wide web. Once, unable to concentrate on the screen over the din, the mild father asked them politely to leave the room. Aghast, Jennifer and Marla stuttered in protest, but he waved them away absurdly. Children are so tedious, he observed to himself.

At hasty dinners there was always less and less. Right under parental noses the girls snarled over the few pieces of food still tangible, their once-robust bodies turning green in starvation. Complaints about portions were greeted with vague admonishments against greed.

On New Year’s Eve this voracity attained new levels when they realised they were only visible to each other. A mother’s arm reached easily through a daughter’s torso for a second helping. Dinner finished and dishes dispensed with, the father’s hand crawled through a bent head for the kitchen light switch. The translucent daughters recollected their parents’ new emphasis on safety, as he locked the door behind him, leaving them alone in the dim. Fear of burglars had put double bolts even on inside doors.

The startled sisters cried wanly to a man whose hearing aid had turned down for the evening. Behind the kitchen door Jennifer and Marla blamed each other angrily for their parents’ bewildering behaviour. Who would have guessed the situation could
escalate so quickly? They clawed at the door-knob, fingers and voices raw. But their mother, though discerning the faint squeaking from her kitchen, assumed it was the new dishwasher. The little house settled in for after-dinner hour like a proud and complacent old cook. Languid clinking and bottle pouring of another of the couple's new past-times, evening liqueurs, accompanied a graceful Mozart sonatina. Father turned to the Entertainment section, mother to Life.

By eleven o'clock, they were on the floor of the Senior's New Year disco, in matching emerald outfits. They loved being sixty. Admiring compliments abounded for the sprightly pair whose youthfulness only increased nearer midnight. The husband yielded charmingly to eager sixty-somethings as they crowded his lovely wife. Still, her coy looks over waltzing tweed shoulders met his eyes alone. Both toyed with skipping Auld Lang Syne for a more intimate tribute to the coming year.

They were crowned king and queen of the ball; he observed that the rhinestone tiara brought out the shine in her sequins. She couldn't help noticing out loud how the silver in his hair made his green eyes sparkle. His cologne was heady. He replied that he loved this side of midnight, unseen since the children were babies. He paused, puzzled. She said, What babies?

In the sedan on route home, her ringed fingers stroked his muscled thighs, the fruit of Senior's Squash. The retirement to the new country had brought with it such activities, their previous life in memory a distasteful torpor. Ireland's verdant coast outside her window affirmed her new happiness. She thought that the perfect word for their marriage was Blooming.
They attained the driveway and sighed, gazing up at their postcard house. Gentle windows looked onto a sloping lawn fenced with cedar-rail. A few pines swayed gracefully in a tender breeze that hinted, she mused, at summer. They shared a thrilling kiss outside the car before stepping out into the languid night.

Indoors she drifted to the bedroom while he unlocked the kitchen door, hoping he had remembered to chill the Brut. The door resisted him as it opened. He reminded himself to note oiling hinges on the To Do list. He fetched the champagne and balanced a bowl of cherries and two fluted glasses on a silver tray.

In the master suite he discovered his delectable wife ensconced in the middle of their circular bed. He set the tray down on a night-table and went back to lock the kitchen and bedroom door. Back in their room, he slipped from his shimmering suit and joined her there at the centre of their home.

At dawn the once-a-week maid let herself in by the back door. She smiled, passing the bedroom as snores floated with her down the hall. Broom and dustpan in hand she unlocked the kitchen and set about her business. There was little dirt, as usual, but behind the kitchen door she discovered a little pile of bones, the floor underneath speckled with blood. Grunting, she got down on the floor and scrubbed. She swept the bones into a garbage bag. Clearly the old couple had let a neighbourhood cat in one night and missed its mouse surprise. The elderly pair were so gracious, welcoming even the least of creatures into their enchanting home. Inspired, she whistled as she worked.
THE POEM

The toll man watched the car come from a ways away, steady on the gas and not in a hurry. It passed the old Wilman farm, where the Stodges now live, and the Kneal property, and finally the game farm on the border of Osprey township with the red hothouse owned by a Swiss family. He himself had never bought any of that freeze-dried, vac-packed stuff; only fools paid for what they could hunt themselves, and roast the same night. A tree stand like the ones in Rack, a nightscope and some buckshot and you could get your quota on the first day of season. God damn these new gun laws. Making men pay for hunting and gun-carrying lessons when they’d been shooting groundhogs in the fields since they’d been yea high. There never was a sight the toll man liked better then a line of pick-ups down a concession, and drag tracks across the snowy November fields.

He stretched on his stool, and selected a gray ticket from the pile. Grey County: Osprey-Artemesia $5.50. The car pulled by his booth, slipping a bit on the slush. They had not had so much precipitation in years. An American weather current gone strange was sure screwing up life for the rest of the continent.

There was a broad in the driver’s seat and no one else in the car except for a little gray dog in the passenger seat, licking its privates. She had on sunglasses for snow glare and some red on her lips. He slid open the window and handed her her ticket.

“Five dollars and fifty cents will take you to the next town line, ma’am, unless you’re turning into Dundalk?”
She held out her hand with the money, smiling without opening her mouth, and he took his time removing it from her pretty hand. He could see that hers were definitely not working hands.

He fished a dog biscuit from a jar and a newspaper off the pile in front of him and passed them to her.

"The Dundalk Herald for you, ma’am, with compliments of the township. And a little something for your navigator."

She thanked him and tossed the paper onto the back seat and dropped the biscuit in front of her dog who stopped his ministrations, eyeing her offering contemplatively.

He watched her car move off for a moment before separating the bill from the two coins. There was a slip of white paper taped to the back of the five dollars. Not really surprised (nothing shocked Grey county men, he thought proudly), he peeled it gingerly from the money, careful not to tear the bill.

At the top of the torn-off strip of white, three-ringed binder paper someone had written, "A Poem." The toll man considered the block of writing beneath it and then shrugged, readying himself for the task.

It must not have been difficult because he finished it quickly, and then, brows furrowed, he read it again, and afterwards, stared off, bewildered, after where the lady’s car should have been on down the highway, the poem still held lightly in his hands.

The mysterious lady was the last one to pay a toll that day, what with that Jerry closing up early just because of a piece of paper. Or that’s what we all thought at the time.
Their youngest son, that upstart, was the one who really caused the commotion, never you mind what anyone says about any brunette with a dog. I used to say that Jerry should have burned that letter or pome or whatever it was, if just for the county’s sake. So Lawrence went and poked around in his dad’s gun rack, like any other self-respecting Grey county boy would, and happened to found that thing in an envelope tucked in a box of .303 bullets. As if just because Jerry’d sold the .303 no one was ever going to investigate that curious not-so-dusty little box of bullets.

Have you met Lawrence and his father yet? Their people aren’t from around here. Lawrence’s grandparents on his father’s side are from Qwobeck and his mother’s grandparents hail from down South, the both of them, even though they only met here in Grey county. Still consider themselves Merkins, in spite of saying the oath twenty years ago. They only even bought that house they’re living in, the old McCutcheon place, just before Lawrence was born. Jerry’s not so bad, never you mind what I just said, it’s just that Lawrence is always putting his finger in the wrong pie. For eggzample, he’s going around with Louisa Jay’s daughter Jennifer in spite of knowing, everyone knows, that her father’s already spoken for her and his other daughters, if you know what I mean. A crying shame. Probably the sons, too. Maybe Lawrence’s just got a soft heart, like my wife says. She and I aren’t so hard on him anymore.

Other things he’s gotten himself into. Well, there’s cutting up behind their trailer so’s he could make a race course for him and his buddies. Dirt-bikes are popular with the kids around here. I can’t say the wife was happy about it. She lost a good fertile garden to it. But Jerry okayed it. He and Lawrence get along good, still, considering Lawrence’s latest ruckus.
It wouldn’t have been to bad if he’d just stuck it in the paper or something. Then we coulda all got our fill and been done with it. But Lawrence got it into his head that he was going to charge admission so to speak, ten bucks a pop. Some of the guys caved in for a lark, you know, but sooner rather than later it got into a hell of a mess.

I guess you could say that it changed them, reading it.

No, I don’t know how. Well, I do, but I don’t know that I can explain it quite rightly.

Yes. Yes, I did. Well, miss, I’ll try, but not because you’re got such a pretty smile, because you do, but because the worst part about the whole thing was that no one would talk about it once they’d read it. They’d just pay to read it again or else they’d clamour at Lawrence to burn it. It was either of those two things, you see. But in general everyone clammed up, except maybe to the wife, but some of the women paid to read it, too.

Why, yes, I keep my own copy of it right here, in my wallet. There’s a girl in Markdale who specializes in wood-burning the pome and she’s got a real lucrative business in lawn signs and kitchen plaques. Really beautiful stuff. Eileen and I are thinking of getting ourselves one. I can’t believe you haven’t seen it yet, even just on your drive down here. It’s the loveliest thing I’ve ever heard, too. Sometimes, my wife and I get some orange brandy and sit with our dog Buster by a fire and read it to each other. Some people get upset when they read it and some get sad. It made Lawrence happy, but Jerry pretty bitter, for instance. Eileen and I, we can hear those things in it, but it just makes us remember why we love each other. We’re even thinking of starting a group in town of people who have been changed by the pome. Because, well, this is
what's hard to say, because we think that maybe other people in town have had a similar
reaction to the pome, but they might be ashamed of it.

Many people, I'm sorry to say, hated the pome almost on sight. And their lives
are a real torment now. So that's why I said earlier, before Nellie brought the first cup of
coffee, that it would have been better if the pome had never happened. But I don't know.
It has to be like that. Some men, and some women, too, begging your pardon, will never
be able to stomach some things. But Eileen and I aren't the only ones who are grateful, I
know it. I've already talked to so many people. It just takes time to draw them out. It
was a couple of years ago, I understand that, but just to give you an example, our
youngest daughter, Leah, she admitted right away that she loved the pome. And she was
only twelve.

She got a hold of it by mistake. You're right, no one considered it right for
young eyes and ears, but I confess that I had a copy that I'd made in the medicine
cabinet in our bedroom. We didn't think she was such a snoop as that. I can't hold it
against her though, curious little thing.

I'm trying to get the Herald to start up a little Poetry Corner. Even if now one
else reads it, at least Leah will have somewhere to show off all her little pomes. They're
queer bits of writing. She's fifteen now, and she's got a job at the library in Owen Sound
lined up for her when she's sixteen and can drive herself. It's an hour away from here,
so it's a lot of hard work, but my girl's game. They're been hiring non-stop ever since it
happened.

Oh, make no mistake, miss, that pome made its way round the whole county!
But like I was saying, hardly any of the boys around here pay any attention to her because she’s so outspoken about the pome. They come from bad families, a lot of them, and she’s even been smacked around a couple of times. I had to call the police in once. Just burns me up, a daughter of mine getting hurt because some of the fools around here can’t see her worth.

I don’t know why the hell it drove everyone batty like it did, why it still does. Oh, I act like I know but I don’t, deep down. To me it’s so beautiful. Like I was saying before about my wife and I starting up a group, well, the honest truth is that we want to start up a little writing group. Going to give James Henderson’s pastel portrait classes a run for their money.

Even though we’re in the minority, we’re still a lot of people, even if I haven’t met more than a dozen sympathetic people here in Dundalk. People just won’t admit that they liked the pome. But listen to this: before the big commotion all everyone ever read around here was the secondhands from Another Time Around. Now they’re almost closing down from no customers anymore. Used to be they did a real roaring market with the mysteries and romances, but hardly anyone will buy them anymore. Maybe just the real young kids, who weren’t around when it all happened. But people still do go in there, especially now that Pam Barker’s carrying more pomes. The video stores and the Flesherton Nintendo and games stores are the ones that are really suffering. It’s a damn shame, I’ve got to tell you. But maybe if they start carrying more of what people really want these days then they’ll get back into the black.

Well, how do you mean, what do people want now? They want pomes.

You heard me. People are buying poetry.
I’ve got my very own collection. Eileen and I collect them. We’ve almost got enough for a lending library, but then, like I was saying before, I think there’s quite a few of us here in Grey County who liked that pome quite a lot.

Oh, yes, just let me get it out of my wallet. Here you go.

My favourite is that bit about bearing it out.

Going so soon? Well, I’ll let you get on now with your investigation. Yes, Lawrence lives at 307376 Centre Line. I’m sorry I can’t help you anymore.

You’re welcome, dear. Sorry for being so prickly at first. Eileen and I’ve been a bit wary of questions about the pome, since Leah was beat up. Thank you for the coffee and pie. Nellie can sure cook em. I can’t say you’re going to find anything, though. There ain’t no one around here who can explain it.
HULA-HOOP

The cat arrived last month, claws intact, as I discovered from the puncture holes in my legs. Some cats climb people as if we were fire escapes. Hula-hoop was named for his acrobatics by the woman in the basement apartment who pleaded with me to rescue him from the March freeze. Who can resist a woman with hazel eyes? Sydney, Hoop’s pale-eyed benefactor is my Monday breakfast date. We meet after I’ve been at the computer for a couple of hours, and always at her place.

I like to watch her, the words inside me subsiding, while she roams around searching out egg-cups or napkins. Hoop creeps between her legs attacking mice-lookalikes, or is discovered hours later dangling from something on the coat-rack.

Through such breakfasts I have memorised her home. The kitchen table with its broken tea-cup mosaic. The Monday coffee smell and her red-tiled floor. The three dozen ageing cookbooks, mostly French and Italian, sprawling between old-fashioned pots of sugar and bread flour. Frayed photographs of friends clinging resolutely to the cupboards.

Last Monday I brought Wolfgang Masha and we ate scones to strings. It’s nice to get away from words. I have been told by friends who visit her restaurant that she is a superb chef. Most mornings I swear that even my teeth have taste buds. The Hollandaise of this morning’s Eggs Benedict oozes along my teeth and tongue and I close my eyes with the sensation of it. I fresh-squeezed a few tart oranges last night for our breakfast and in the thick of the sour pulp my gums squeal. After, we swallow pineapple slices and lick the juice from our fingers and hands.
I stretch in my seat, and re-arrange the seat cover beneath me, stroking its forest green floral pattern. Ella Fitzgerald seems to be singing directly to my flushed skin and languor. *There's no love song finer...* Sidney never wipes her mouth until she’s done eating, and so it is with a swipe of her chequered napkin that we start our conversations. Hoop floats onto her lap, turns twice, and sinks into sleep. She is quiet today and so I start telling her about Hula-hoop and how he’s destroying my love life. Sydney doesn’t mind me talking of such things, as long as I joke about it and don’t go into too much detail. It is a solution we both agreed on, like children and their blood-pacts.

“I just can’t leave the poor little guy alone. What’s he going to do on his own? Read? Call someone? I leave the CBC on when I’m out. He’s more informed than I am.”

“Philip,” Sidney begins, raising her eyebrows incredulously, “Hoop sleeps most of the time you are away. Don’t punish yourself.”

“I know,” I say, noticing a baguette crumb still clinging to her moist lip, “but I can’t help it. I remind myself of how much better his life is than that of other cats—I feed him Performatrin, for bloody sake, it sounds like something for racehorses—but I can’t help thinking about him getting lonely.”

She leans back and hugs herself. “You’re the one who’s lonely, Philip.”

I take this as a slap and ignore it, admiring her slender arms in their coral sleeves. I know how her hands caress: the curve of fork along the pad of index finger, her thumb smoothing her cheek. We have never made love once in our years of friendship. Oddly, considering how frequently I think of it, my desire startles me.

“Maybe you need to get out more. Why don’t you get another cat to keep Hoop happy?”
“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Hoop’s a boy—I don’t know if you know anything about cats, Philip—and that means that a female would work well with him.”

“My apartment isn’t that big. You people with basement or ground floor apartments believe that everyone lives in a similar state of luxury.”

She chuckles, “Oh, poor Philly! Listen, why don’t we go upstairs and take a look. I’ll help you find a better spot for the litter box. Knowing you, I’m sure you just threw it in the kitchen.”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s the farthest from my study and I don’t have to smell it when I’m writing.”

“Ever heard of germs, silly?” she says, her voice gentler than her words. “You probably let him crawl around on the counters, too.”

I don’t want to take Sydney up to my flat. My eyes feel smoky, like a non-smoker caught too long in a bar, panicking for a long blink, until the world swims back open along with his eyelids, right side up.

“What about the dishes, babe?”

“Oh, it’s fine. I’ll take care of it later.”

“But it’s my job.”

“Fine, so we’ll come down after and do them then. I’m curious to see your place again. I bet nothing’s changed. Same dingy, paper-covered old study, and everything else immaculate and untouched.”
“Okay,” I say, nervously, dizzied by her confidence, “we’ll hang out at my place for once. But don’t get any funny ideas about messing with my housekeeping arrangements.”

I remind her that I keep my place quite cool because it keeps me alert. She gets a crocheted peach shawl and ties it between her breasts. As she locks her door behind us we bump elbows for a moment. Always separated by the kitchen table, we’ve barely touched before. She is so close I can distinguish her freckles. Her warm hazel eyes are startled and vulnerable and I want her, casually, with pulled-down underwear and lifted wool skirt. She might not say no.

I have known, in fact, that Sydney Sheppard loves me for a while now. On one of our occasional liquid breakfasts she let it slip and we have kept it a secret between us for her pride. And for my inability to deal with those sorts of things. I mean, I date women. More to the point, I date girls, and I’m not usually interested in eating breakfast with them.

We turn, Hoop racing ahead, and climb the four flights to my top-floor apartment overlooking Jeanne-Mance park. I open the door and say, ‘Come in,’ my voice unnatural in the spare apartment. She pushes past me and walks directly to the bay window, underwear tracing her buttocks beneath the cream skirt.

“I’ve often wished I took a higher flat,” she says, gazing out at Mont Royal. “The mountain is so beautiful in every season.”

“Especially this one.”

“Oh, I know. I love spring.”
She turns slowly and surveys the room with a mocking and critical eye. “Yes, I see I was right. The perfect bachelor pad.” I imagine that beneath her sarcasm there is a thread of longing.

“Sorry.”

“You’re a stereotype, Philip.”

I sit down on my overstuffed forest green couch. I bought everything in green so that I wouldn’t have to expend my imagination on anything but my writing.

“Can I look around by myself?” she asks, proceeding behind the couch and into the study without waiting for my reply. “Messy, Phil. Wow,” she calls out, rustling some papers. “What are you working on these days?”

“A book of poems. With the revenue from the novel and the money I made freelancing in the last couple of years I can afford to. I’m working on a series of poems about a guy who is really solitary. You ever read Pat Lane’s book, Winter?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s sort of my response to that.”

“Should I buy it?” she asks.

“Maybe. It’s beautiful but so desolate. I don’t know if you could understand it. You’re warm and you embrace life so eagerly, Sydney.”

“Yes,” she says, returning to the living room. I hear her breathing behind me.

“But some of the life I want doesn’t embrace me back, Philip.”

I don’t move.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and then quickly, “forget it.”
She turns into the bedroom. It’s odd that she neglects the kitchen, considering her profession. Perhaps she likes to imagine that hers is the only food I eat. How conceited of me. Maybe she’s sick of kitchens.

“Could I read some of the new poems?”

“Sure. I’ll get some for you.” I stand up, and, once inside the study, I feel calm, thickly alive. Everything seems crisply bright, even though the room overlooks the alley and the eastern sunlight is obscured by the ivy on the window. I suppress an urge to sit down at the desk.

I grab some of the earlier poems in the series. The newer ones reveal too much of my recent preoccupation with romance. It flatters me that Sydney has asked to see my work. I’ve written more than one ode to Sydney’s culinary expertise and they are framed in the restaurant, signed Philip Hensley, With Admiration. She hasn’t, of course, seen the other poems I’ve dedicated to her. The sweaty night poems. It’s a growing file.

Shoving the poems into an envelope, I hesitate inside the study for a puzzled moment. My ivory typewriter glows on the desk. I lurch into the bedroom. Hoop, for once at rest, is a lump of fur on the bed. Sydney is sitting by the window leaning her golden head into the drapes. She seems to radiate heat in the lazy greenness of my bedroom.

“It’s really a beautiful mountain, isn’t it, Philip?”

I sit next to her in the window seat, the seat cushion making an embarrassing whuump beneath me.

“This apartment’s definitely got room for another cat to keep Hula-Hoop company,” she says, glancing at me for a moment. Her pupils are terribly small in the
late morning light, the hazel irises glowing palely, and her cheeks are flushed peach. The finest of hairs along the pale skin of her neck lead inevitably to a mole beneath her left ear. Slippery yellow hair curls along her face down to the tips of her breasts.

"Philip, tell me what you are thinking, right now," she says, staring out the window, her voice taut. I cannot tear my eyes from her chest. I have never wanted someone so much in my life; the tightness in my stomach and tension in my shoulders possesses me.

"I don't know, Sydney, what it is this thing I feel. I look at you and it's all I can do to stop myself—," I pause, wildly unsure of what I am about to reveal.

"Please tell me."

Fingering the window seat surreptitiously my fingers discover in their distraction an essence in the fabric I never noticed before. The skin on the pads of my fingers tingles and my body thrums with lust. I imagine that I can see the blood in the vein at her neck push through its tube, her calmly throbbing life swelling. Love courses through me with a sickening delirium and I am torn between ecstasy and disgust. Her tense gazing out the window irritates me. I feel myself to be both miles from the sordid groping of this moment, and within an inch of smothering her beneath me on the bed.

"—to stop myself from touching your face. Your perfect bones. I want you Sydney but I'm so afraid of it." I stare at her, willing her to look at me. Her profile is dim and aloof, hateful.

"Philip, you shouldn't be afraid of hurting me. I'm not made of glass."

"I know, and I believe you. But I don't know what I'm afraid of. If I give in to it, will I recover if we lose it? What happens when you let yourself," I say slowly, anxiety
making everything maddeningly clumsy. I realize, suddenly, that I am acting truly honest, that this scene has caught up to me. Floundering for certainty, I inhale rapidly, and silver stars spangle in the corners of my eyes.

She turns before I can exhale, and with a sudden, desperate movement thrusts her head into my chest. Her voice in my sweater is small and very quiet. "Love is like music, or cooking. You prepare, you try hard and if you choose your recipe and ingredients well, you create a small, tender thing—intimacy. There is also passion."

"Yes." I hold her awkwardly, afraid to close my eyes lest I faint with confusion. I have forgotten what we are talking about. Thickening love tightens about my head.

"Please," she says.

The soft fabric of her shawl catches my twitching fingers in its weave. I slide my fingers through the holes and grasp her shoulder tightly. Beneath her shirt her body is thin, but not frail. I bend my head down so that we sit, clutched together like that, eyelashes and cheekbones touching.

In the gentle breaking of spring, the sun has risen, as it must, to its zenith. The first sunbeams of the afternoon penetrate my open eyes, suffusing the colours that surround me with a brilliant, electric white.

Sydney sighs against me and I am overcome with lassitude as I pull her up to my lap. Her body presses along my groin, stretching like a cat before settling. I close my eyes in fatigue, and crimson circles blink across my eyelids.
LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Jamie lounges through most of her Sundays on her friend Carla’s balcony over the alley and rhapsodises about practicality. They spend most of their time, in fact, thinking constructive and positive thoughts, and struggling through recipes involving tofu, though sometimes Jamie thinks Carla just humours her. Jamie grew interested in legumes shortly after her boyfriend of three years dumped her for a thirty-eight-year-old body piercer from Nova Scotia. The boyfriend and piercer are separated by twelve years but they don’t mind, Jamie thinks. They’re fashionably married now. Jamie replaced Dylan with beans. Beans and dill weed climb Carla’s balcony railings. Jamie visits Carla so often there’s no point planting anything in her own apartment.

They met at the Botanical Gardens. Crouched by the bed of pink violets, Jamie reached a half-hearted finger towards a fuzzy, rotting leaf. She felt like curling up on the ground next to the vista of flowers and never getting up. She would have, but for the scowling, black-haired woman sitting at the desk by the door, squeezing a cigarette between her lips. Carla had stood up and walked over to Jamie, and introduced herself as a lab assistant who was supposed to answer any questions guests to the park might have.

Jamie had no questions. It was one month since he’d left her. She was only there because it was one of the few places she and the ever-exploring Dylan had never visited in Montréal. The strange woman leaned toward Jamie.

“You alright, miss?”
She let Jamie finish crying in the bathroom reserved for staff behind the greenhouse. Even it smelled of loam and moss. She rubbed her eyes and smelt green on her fingers.

Carla inhabits a third-floor apartment in Little Italy and goes to the Jean-Talon farmer’s market with Jamie every Saturday. Afterwards they pick up handmade pasta and sausages at Milano Foods on the way back. Usually Jamie sleeps over because she lives downtown and hates the night bus. Today is a Sunday afternoon in Montréal and they have decided that middle-Ontario farmhouses and Italian tomatoes are superior to cigarettes, though Carla hasn’t quit yet—Jamie thinks it’s only a matter of time, and cherishes her own four-month record. A fat Vantage lingers on Carla’s narrow bottom lip as they peruse Canadian Home and Garden, looking up occasionally at all those apartments and all those people snoozing in a breeze warm as the word July.

Reclining in his woven plastic lawn chair, Michel Cormier peers at them from above his sunglasses. He lives in the next building a floor down from Carla and he is an incorrigible flirt. He has a shine on Carla and Jamie. Jamie is blonde and Carla’s hair is black and he can’t decide what his favourite colour is, all else presumably being equal, and he visits them on Sundays offering up his latest conclusions. Though Michel does free-lance illustrations for a living he’s really a potter. Jamie doesn’t trust artists. She is a copywriter and closet romance writer. She hasn’t had the nerve to try to sell one yet.

Michel yells a compliment to Carla.

“Playing favourites?” Jamie shouts. “If you want your iced tea you better treat me good, boy!”
Michel laughs and peels himself out of his chair. Jamie runs back to let him in while Carla crushes her cigarette into an ashtray with a hot pink fingernail and laughter on her smoky breath. Michel kisses Jamie’s cheeks and she tugs his black hair playfully as they saunter to the kitchen.

Carla calls “hello!” and Michel responds with a mock glare.

“Long and cold, baby,” Jamie tells him, raising her left eyebrow suggestively. Michel puts his considerable Long Island skills into motion, tanned fingers wet with lime and ice. Jamie admires Michel’s hands. The wrists taper delicately from his arms into muscled palms. His fingers are straight and long, their nails buffed. His skin is a honeyed brown, paler on the finger pads where he handles the clay.

Michel and Jamie rocket back to the balcony with the drinks and Carla flips her magazine past them onto the living room floor.

“Where are les biscuits?” she pouts.

“Sass,” Michel frowns and gets her Peak Freans. “Listen,” he says, holding the bag behind his back, “are you busy ladies today or can I play paramour and take the two of you out for the afternoon?”

“Michel! Give me that.”

“I want to go somewhere with you. Every Sunday I come over for a drink or café and never go out. You two are using me as live-in entertainment.”

Jamie laughs. “Live-in! You wish. Give Carla the bag, Michel.”

He sighs, “Come on, you two, I’m bored today,” and hands the cookies over to Carla’s greedy fingers.

Jamie is hurt. They must no longer amuse him as they once did.
He wants to take them to Café Cucina, an Italian place on St. Laurent, and so Jamie decides to wear make-up. Carla is made up already. Michel has never seen Jamie with it but Carla loves the stuff and wears it every day. For some reason, Jamie finds it disconcerting to watch a woman stirring a vegetarian chili, leaning away from the steam so her mascara won’t run.

They wait on the balcony for Jamie while she gathers Carla’s cosmetics from the make-up bag onto the sink. She has displayed her desire to be beautiful in front of them and feels elated. She swaths her face and neck in Ultima II face powder and her fair skin begins perspiring immediately. After mascara, yellow eye shadow, and a swipe of Wine With Everything lipstick, Jamie careens out of the bathroom.

Michel ooh’s and aah’s as she rounds the corner into the living room, Safari eau de parfum billowing in front of her. She avoids his eyes, blushing, and Carla raises a plucked eyebrow.

They arrive at Cucina a little after five, too early for the supper crowd, and choose from two floors a breezy table on the sidewalk. Staring intently into their menus they are all nervous. Jamie suppresses an urge to skitter home to her veggie steamer and orders calamari and fettucine alfredo from the slick waiter. Her knee won’t stop jiggling and Carla’s hand slides over and holds it down.

Meanwhile, Michel chatters hysterically about the respective merits of vongole and calamari. He appears to be overwhelmed with the novelty of the situation: all three of them together after at least a year of meeting on Carla’s tilted balcony. Jamie chews some bruschetta and keeps her frightened hands, wet as dog’s noses, in her lap.
The sauntering waiter eventually delivers their appetizers and smirks at Jamie. Obviously her flushed cheeks and bright brown eyes have indicated an infatuation with his Sicilian charms. His accent deepens until his words are so blurred he is incomprehensible to the suddenly partially-deaf Jamie.

“Uh, oui. Another iced tea, thank you,” she responds.

“Ova courrrse,” he slurs, glaring furiously, and disappears into the kitchen.

Carla leans over, giggling. “The waiter thinks you are in love and offers you more bread to show his appreciation! And what do you do, you flirt? Your confusion of starch and liquid displays a coquettish and irreverent sensibility. You’ve lost him forever.”

“What? a crush on that gigolo? are you crazy?” Michel interjects.

“Relax, Michel,” Carla says.

“I’m going to the washroom,” Jamie mumbles.

“Hey,” Michel cries, “what about your squid?”

Jamie had entertained hopes of reclining on the bathroom counter but the toilet is under a staircase accompanied only by a sink. The walls are drab and brown but some enterprising decorator has included magazine racks for lingering toilet users. Elle Décor’s spring condominium issue is inserted at an angle into one of several brown plastic slots. Carla and she plan on buying their very own apartment in a few years, complete with hanging plants, canary yellow paint and IKEA curtains. They are going to rent a place together next year. Jamie starts to cry. She nods to her pitiful face in the
mirror, it dawning on her all of a sudden that she is perhaps falling tragically in love with Carla's terribly romantic and therefore unsuitable French neighbour.

Back at the table Michel and Carla remain where she left them. Their heads swivel and fix on Jamie as she approaches the table. She positions herself over her food and begins to eat with all the disinterest of a carrion crow facing an unpleasantly fresh kill.

"Jamie. You all right there, chérie berry?" Michel's soft voice almost sets her off but she resists the urge to bawl in her seafood. Carla seems to intuit Jamie's tension and says nothing. Jamie is grateful for the privacy, for some reason noticing out of the corner of her eye that the fingernails on Carla's fork hand as it toys with her salad are more chewed down than usual.

"It's fine, Jaime. Really. It's obvious you two have been developing this growing attraction and really it's fine. Our plans were whimsical. You're in love. It's fine."

"Carla—we didn't know about it until last night. Michel and I—yesterday at lunch it just hit me. He's probably not the right guy for me."

"That's not the right attitude. I mean, you two talked about it last night, didn't you? What you're going to do? Together? You'll move in together when your leases are up." Carla lights a cigarette, the snick of the match audible through the phone.

"Carla, we just went on our first date last night. Please, listen—"

"I'm really fine. You're a great couple, really. You're both artists! I'm really happy for you. I saw this coming a long time ago."

"I'm a writer."
“Whatever. I’ll get another room-mate for when I move out next year. Anna, my lab assistant, was saying she can’t afford to live alone anymore either.”

“You hate Anna! She’s a slob. And when did you two talk about that?” Jamie breathes in and holds it, tears pricking her eyes. “Carla.”

“We’ll still be friends. We’ll get together sometimes, maybe on Sundays. The three of us. We’ll meet at your place instead of mine and it’ll be fine. Really. Don’t worry about me.”

Jamie’s voice slips, “Can’t I come over and talk about this with you? I mean, God, I’m just dating someone.”

“Well,” Carla spits out, “of course you are. And our plans to move in together, maybe go travelling—all those conversations about no more guys and just living together, two happy spinsters with cats—just blown off just like that because one day you go and get a crush on my Fabio neighbour.”

“Carla! You just said it was fine. And, I’m the one who said there was nothing permanent with Michel here! Give me a break!”

“Don’t you get it? Man, I’m losing my growing-old-together friend. It hurts.”

“But we don’t know that. Maybe I’ll fall out of love.”

“Jamie Fairaway, you can’t have it both ways.” Carla sighs. “Let’s talk in a few days, okay? I’ll talk to you later. Give my love to Michel.”

She hangs up.

Jamie hasn’t had to listen to a dial tone since Dylan. It goes on and on, flatly. She settles the receiver defiantly in its cradle then walks over to the window, where she and her apartment behind her are reflected in the evening darkness. There she is blonde
and brown-eyed, tall. Her apartment is small, and, she realises, drab and scarcely lived in. She stuffs her limp hands in her jeans and leans a cheek against the cool glass.

"Honey? You okay?" Michel calls from the bedroom. He comes and stands behind her, a tall brown shape in the window. Alone without Carla between them, Michel seems large and threatening. She closes her eyes in the window and breathes in deeply, then turns and smiles. His wide brown eyes lighten and she fills her arms with his torso.

She tells him to go home. Their leave-taking is awkward, and Jamie resents having to soothe Michel’s bruised feelings. Love, she fears, seems the occupation of those much more mature than herself.
RUMINATING

My characters are more alive than I am, he thought, dropping the Parker onto the page. A little black drop ballooned at the nib, and dropped the quarter inch to the page slowly, obscuring a word in a manner he considered rather cliché.

Now that the Canada Council had rejected him again, he, yet again, didn't have any deadline to work toward. Although even with that added incentive he had barely turned out half his old output in the same six-week time span. He had always written the most when he was waiting for a response. It was the kind of insipid yearning for approval that his heroes would deplore and that was probably just the sort of machismo that the council refused to support. They wanted stories, he imagined, about gutless creatures like himself. He was damned if he was going to represent on paper the chronic failure that was already all too common in the world. Much as he recognized the potential for damage of his individualist, watered-down Hemingway-esque creations, he was drawn to that ideal as the proverbial moth to a flame.

After at least two fruitless years in his once-beloved downtown Toronto, surrounded by well-meaning poseurs and Montréal-emulating bistros, he needed a change of pace. He had tried moving to a different café, writing with a pencil, writing on computer and even not writing at all for a while. Each technique had worked for a time until the familiar feeling of dread that preceded his writing sessions returned. When he actually got down to writing, things went reasonably well. But all the hours spent staring off into space, coming up with exercises to get himself started, and bribing himself on a reward system into writing had been decreasing his output steadily. It was like being a
teenager again with an arsenal of procrastination techniques and, when finally forced to confront his homework, a toolkit of tricks to get started. He was a junkie—he just had a different bag of uppers and downers.

The dread only dispersed when he was actually writing. Before the feeling had become so strong he’d almost liked it. A writing teacher had once told him that performance anxiety affected every good performer and, though not as well-documented, that it was the same for writers. The whole stage fright theory struck him as ridiculous: that a job chosen in part by people who find comfort in solitude and solitary pursuits should be analyzed in dramatic terms. Nonetheless, he’d been flattered.

His anxiety towards writing was increasing steadily and it wasn’t paralleling any rise in critical acclaim or fame. Quite the opposite, really. He woke every morning sluggishly and with false cheer. To avoid his work, he read reams of useless news stories. He sipped his morning coffee very slowly but with an internal restlessness that made both him and his cat cranky. The twitching of his leg at breakfast was beginning to loosen a table leg.

Maybe a cabin in the woods—though that’d been done to death—or a visit to a mountain spa. Or, he could rent a farmhouse and escape the monotony of pedestrians and cars and cafés with short shelf-lives for the drone of the countryside. He was sick of how beautiful and different everyone tried to be in the city, when they were all too human under their skins. Everyone was interesting in their own way and in one lifetime he’d get to know maybe a half-dozen of them. It just didn’t feel worth it. It would be ridiculous to believe that human nature differed in the country. At least on a farm you could escape it.
A blue glow surrounded the drop of ink he had been staring at for so long. He took this as a sign and booked himself a week at a farmhouse two hours north of the city the next day.

His experience at the farm didn’t appear to dislodge his writer’s block an inch. There were fields and animals and pretty, teenage cashiers at the supermarket in town, crickets, stars, and miles of gravel road. He had admired the groundhogs and been sad at a delivering cow’s painful mooing in the night.

He felt physically rested—it hadn’t been a complete waste of cash—and that was it. Well, except that the experience clarified for him that a change in circumstances was not going to solve his dilemma for him. In years past, months off in the States and one in the Arctic had invigorated his writing with new themes and ideas, but recently his fiction was following a formula: an infinite variety of names and places, but the people didn’t change much. (Once he had recognized his rut a year or two ago he’d considered trying out category romance or horror. Friends had been startled at all the Harlequins lying around during his research stage. The resemblance between his own heroes and theirs was rather startling, once he got over the simplified vocabulary and sentence structure, but he just couldn’t manage to make his attempts believable. ‘Maybe back in the old Mills & Boon days, sweetie,’ his editor scrawled on the returned first chapter. ‘Romance is about real women now—single moms, career women, even lesbians. You just don’t spend enough time on the heroine and the hero is too traditional.’)

So if he couldn’t figure it out for himself, as it appeared, he needed a muse, or at least somebody to model for his next story. He needed someone really different from
anyone he'd ever imagined. Someone opposite. No. Opposite was just the flip side of the coin—like Christianity turned into Satanism. He usually wrote stories about experiences other people told him about. Frequenting cafés and bars was good for picking up interesting stories, especially if you could get a bartender to talk. They were full of stories. His 'autobiographical period,' if you wanted to get technical, was back in the 'juvenilia.' His own life simply wasn't that interesting. Why write about what you knew anyway? Why be a preacher when you could be an explorer? 'Course he was as much an explorer as Emily Dickinson, he thought to himself.

This new approach would take some getting used to. Characters were tricky. He knew how to make plots: he just elaborated on someone else's true-life adventure. He was well-aware that some people, some rather alien people, did it the other way around. A writer at a reading had claimed to him that she came up with characters all the time. She just couldn't figure out how to get them from a to b and once she'd figured out what a and b were, she was no longer interested. Secretly he'd thought she would make a better poet.

A pretty, pert-looking girl walked by with a boy, and, laughing out loud, caught him looking—something he always found particularly embarrassing. They were dressed as if it was almost summer in shirts and slacks, their light shoes brushing the crisp leaves aside without acknowledgement. She wouldn't do. He hated to admit it, but he figured that if she was happy then she couldn't have a story. Or maybe that was his problem—grim and inwardly tortured for him always meant interesting—and that shit just didn't have much currency anymore.
What he needed, he decided, was ruminating. Somebody who didn’t do much, but who thought a lot. Not an action guy, not an insecure socialite, but a thinker. Someone with glasses and a laptop who wore green shirts and khakis, with short hair for convenience, not for style or for military precision. Someone with frown lines from concentrating, with little tolerance for the Internet, and a passion for music good enough to pay attention to or as accompaniment to a busy keyboard. A man who varied little ordering in a restaurant and drank tea, no, Italian coffee, by the gallon. With a love of oranges and gelato—always strawberry—and slender, smooth fingers with subtly expressive hands. But what the hell would a guy like that do that could carry a plot? Twentieth-century readers didn’t like think-y plots. Professors and computer geeks were only interesting when they accidentally got forced into saving the world. Otherwise they were supporting characters who figured shit out for the leading man who did all the (he was sorry he thought this) real work.

He needed the guy to come to a decision about something in order to be interesting. But what truly intelligent person ever made a decision they didn’t believe could be challenged? Readers only liked ambiguity when it wasn’t conscious. Otherwise they called it indecision and he wasn’t interested in pathology. There had to be a story in that kind of man. Maybe he’d be out buying green Hush Puppies and would fall for the sales girl. Why did something always have to happen in a story?

Maybe I ought to write for Seinfeld, he said out loud, grimacing when the person at the next table said, what? in mid-sentence.

Starbucks was good for writing. People mainly minded their own business and you could sit and do nothing for hours without getting harassed by the waitstaff unless
you were rude enough to come during the busy after-dinner hour. He used to be able to churn out a half-dozen pages in two hours here, though lately he was lucky if he got one.

Shy. He’d be shy. That’s why fuck-all would happen to the guy. He’d go out every day and bury himself in his work and except for the odd moment, shaving or in those minutes booting up the computer when a sweet-looking girl would walk by, wouldn’t mind it very much. But it’s not like he’d have a problem. He was missing something, sure, but not psychologically warped or whatever. Women were too much trouble anyway, not because they were women, but because relationships involved too much mental work and concentration, energy better saved for his writing.

Every once in a while he’d bleach his hair out of an intermittent vanity. Someday he’d marry a librarian. No, he’d probably end up a bachelor after a couple of tries with girls who were never sure he was what they wanted, but not sure enough to dump him before wasting a few years on him. There were so few people in life who made good room-mates for hyper-self-aware, artsy types like him, anyway.

The one regret the guy would have would be that he never had kids, because he would always wonder if through watching a child grow he could understand people with a profundity unmatched by what he would consider the next best thing—writing. It would be nice to be part of something you were bonded to no matter what. Everything else in life involved choices. But with kids there seemed to be no filter. This kind of character would be the kind of guy who loved and experienced his kids without examining them for his next book. Although that would probably happen accidentally. He couldn’t think of any way for the guy to get kids with a lifestyle like his, though. It was the one plot he couldn’t figure out.
Was it better to have things happen or was that just the national illusion? Nobody managed to get through life without things happening. Why wish more shit on them.

He recapped the pen, stuck it in his suit pocket and pushed his notebook into his briefcase. Sitting on the streetcar, he admired the pedestrian legions. When he got home he perked himself some coffee. It was enough action for one day.
VITA AUCTORIS

Lia Barsotti was born in 1975 in Sudbury, Ontario. She graduated from the Etobicoke School of the Arts in 1994. From there she went on to McGill University where she obtained a B.A. (Hons) in English in 1998. She is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in English and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in Fall 1999.