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IN OPEN G

Brett Eugene Ralph

for Don & Phil Everly

There is a hole in my lap
the sound comes out of,
but there is no sound now.

So I turn it upside down and shake—
hear the pick's hollow rattle,
hope for it to fall.

I can't say if men still arm themselves
with picks as they embark on their dark
odyssey into the earth,

but Egypt Mines had an operation
once, when I first moved here,
butted up against my land.

When it was warm at night, windows open,
there was a constant, distant
rumble; voices that may or may not

have bled into this world; huge, lunar
contraptions emitting the inescapable
'mon back beep of a garbage truck,

yet by light of day resembling nothing
so much as remains of dinosaurs.
It's less than a half hour from my house

to the place where Isaac Everly
rose from a pit, rubbed grit from his eyes and vowed
no son of his would break his neck

sucking blood from a stone
or sing a lifelong lonesome song
underneath a mountain in blackface.

Ike would drop his pick and pluck his sons
from fields of green infinity,
the place they had ever prayed and lay down

weary heads, tried not to hear

coal trains as they hauled away
the planet's very pulse, a life

Ike's boys would never have to learn
though they'd live out the rest of their days
grown filthy rich from singing

songs of longing to return.

THE BIG ISLAND

Chad Davidson

My friend calls Germany the perfect place
for depression, Italy a museum,
and the problem with France the French, such depressive

jouissance, so lovely from a distance. Depression,
that is. Cloistered in a blue-gray room of smoke,
train-weary on a Berlin platform, am I

to say it isn't? *It could take hours*, sniffs
the station master stirring tea as I stomp
and voice a billboard slogan. *Wir sind für Sie da*—

We're here for you—the supermarket says.
A train I don't need swells with Germans in puffy jackets,
pictures of sailboats on their backs—

Quicksilver, Maui, Honolulu. Lovely,
too, a three-engine burn-out in the sky,
smoky signature giving shape, dimension

to air, the nearest airport registering
only green invitations. The master's
tea keeps steeping. Cabin pressure

and air masks drop as everyone peers out
to witness the Messiah coming, thin
raft on the black back of the sea. Once,

in Amsterdam, I almost missed the boat
back to England, aching the whole way
on the red-eye ferry. Self-loathing nearly

floated me into ether, or down so low
I didn't care. Loss of cabin pressure,
air masks dropping, etc., thus the consolation

of metaphor. Vinyl seats ordered
the hull, ruddy, full of dull backpackers,
hemp slumped over armrests, a still life,

which I've learned from museum placards and living
is what the French call *nature morte*—nature
still born. Still, what is my friend's urge

to make of depression a tableau, a beauty lifted
from the gravity of sadness?

Kinder Chocolate wrapper waving

on the grill of the floor heater, the couple
sharing one warm beer and cigarette
on deck, pitched harbor lights finding

the girl's nose ring and a wet cheek smeared
and Vermeery on black canvas? His voice
was only caring saying he didn't care,

wouldn't console me. Depression is beautiful,
yes? And though I've walked in atriums
in many museums, have walked among the frozen

and dead and thought of lunch or of the woman
still in front of a Bernini, I can't say
which country is the best place for depression.

Notice I've used a host of foreign destinations,
or as my guide books say, *cultural points*
of interest, have peppered with the adequate

European words, the inflection of which
you should slightly bend while reading this,
not so much as to sound pedantic,

not so little as to sound unlearned.
Here's the point to my pointing to
the pin point in the middle of the Pacific,

as far away from Europe as I might find:
My friend calls Germany the perfect place
for depression, lovely from a distance.

Depression, that is. And because I'm cloistered
in blue-gray rooms in Berlin, the station master
tells me through the stirring of his tea:

And though you feel alone, you are. And will be.
And though you do not speak my language, you do.

HIGHWATER IN FLORENCE

Chad Davidson

Because you hate the things that people hate:
the incessant cesspool scooters make, the fake
Davids in every courtyard, the absurdly late
hours caricature artists keep by the lake

of tourists in front of the Duomo. Because coffee
here is watery and wine is not
local, step inside Santa Croce.
Notice angels twice your size that blot

stone tears with Dante's wreath. And if, like Stendhal,
artglut makes you seasick, buy a postcard
of my feeding pigeons with the hard
bread of yesterday. Notice how I fall

out of focus and the eyes recess
as if engulfed in sea mist. Now the pigeons
resemble gulls, their great white bodies obsessed
with tidal drift and what to eat there. Half-sturgeon

now, half nymph, this is the food you earned,
the lines the great flood left all over Florence
as it scoured every street, returned
the city to its myth of artfed torrents.

FROM THE DREAM OF RIVERS

Christine Gelineau

Euarctos americanus the American black bear
 plantigrade as a human
the whole of the sole and all five toes flat
 to the ground so that the imprint
 is familiar touchingly
 pudgy the wedge of sole and
petalling of toes we have learned
 to associate with safety ease
 infants and sunny beaches

 the appeal here is deceptive
 each toe hollow punctuated
 with the pock from a claw:
 a paw whose single blow
 can kill you

I pull my boot my shoe my sock to sign
 my foot there beside the bear track
 in the icy suck of snow

 slender arched the delicate moon
 prints of my toes express a neat
 unpunctuated row

 the April snow so unequivocally
 cold

FROM THE DREAM OF RIVERS

Christine Gelineau

May morning after rain:
the meadow
unreasonably green
and strewn about with
the coronas
of dandelions

unexpectedly

the flock of flowers lifts

into the wavering
flight of finches

then the yellow
finches weave
over the astral meadow

a mesh
of motion
in the gold-soaked air.

FROM STATE OF GRACE

Christine Gelineau

the pulmonary worms
open airways in
the breathing body of the earth

a delicate lace
of absence in
the seemingly solid presence of dirt

ants trace the surface carrying
specks of formicidial manna from
one realm to the other while amongst

their efforts the newborn colt
pulls tender slips of the green grass April draws
from his granddam's grave

all the earth is animate
with the dreams
of the unnumberable buried

the scattered the decayed:
humus is rich with memories
diatomaceous recollections

That earth which supports
and calls to us
with such hungry affection

echoes now as the mare and foal
in the sunshine in their state of grace canter
their hooves raising

an interconnecting
cardiac cadence from
within the echoing ground.

CANCER AND OHIO MADE MY MOTHER DISAPPEAR

Dan Nowak

Six weeks after my mother
decided she didn't need her
breast or the cancer inside it,
she figured she deserved to
miss the first snow. From Ohio
she went state by state to Arizona.
She had never been in a desert
or seen a cactus bloom. She called
from a city where the best burritos
dripped with salsa. She had spent
the day in Tombstone, convincing
herself the cowboys went crazy
with syphilis. They wandered where
grass was a ghost and shot themselves
full of pinto bean bullets. Her voice
smiled as she explained rock gardens
while I watched the front yard sink
into snow. There was happiness
in keeping her hair, she needed it
to keep her head from turning red.
There's a need for the sun and she
still hasn't come back for doctor's
appointments and won't until she
turns her breast into a ghost town.

MY BACKYARD

Nate Pritts

My daytime backyard pretends
there are no twinkly stars overhead,
that there is no nighttime & that green
is the color of forever.

My interstate backyard is a busy thoroughfare,
the late last dream of mass transit, a sleeping bus.

My Kafka backyard thinks it is a bug.

My anarchist backyard blows up the freighter
because it doesn't believe the finality of docking
isn't a tyranny we should overthrow.

My second Monday of March backyard
has chilled green feet & can see its own breath
as it exhales green worries.

My backyard of infinite sorrow wears an armband
to indicate its quiet rage at some loss.

My backyard of grape soda is bubbly
& colorful & rots my teeth when I hold it in my mouth.

My backyard & its many voices holds a press conference
which is attended by backyards from all over
each longing to hear the one sweet sound that makes it all right.

My sleepy backyard has one dream
every night for weeks
(which to a backyard is an eternity).

My backyard with one foot out the door
writes me a note to say where it is going,
illegible scrawl with tight loops
& starkly leaning characters indicating only anger.

My blushing backyard gets embarrassed easily.

My laundry basket backyard is big enough
to hold all my clothes.

My backyard in the front yard

has days when it wishes no one knew
its secret name or the secret handshake
necessary to gain access to the clubhouse.

My bestest backyard ever deserves a party
but is so busy it can never attend.

TRAVELOGUE, MARCH

Nate Pritts

The first night out I was forced to stop
in Wisconsin; snow fell hard
in those loose, wet clusters that made it
hard to see, the kind that iced the road

instantly. I told the desk attendant
I was from New York
& she said, "The city?" & I said sure,

why not, so for one night I was from NYC
& I felt dangerous & exotic
&, yeah, a little scornful: me, all the way
from Manhattan or Brooklyn, wherever, stuck in the provincial
mid-western snow storm.

I stole some towels & drove
that much faster on my way out of town.
The next night I stopped in South Dakota

where it was warm; me, a lonely drifter washed up
in Arlington, SD, the whole town
shut down for the high school prom,
narrow streets packed with limousines & pick-ups.

No one cared where I was from so I spent the night
drinking at the only open bar, looking up
every now & then as if about to speak

some worldly truth, to impress the locals
with my rough & solitary struggle
through life: I've seen it all.

The next night I stayed near Mt. Rushmore
& spent hours taking pictures of the monument
that I hoped would be tasteful & not at all
touristy, taking pictures in what I hoped
was a dignified & professional manner,
trying to give the impression I worked for one of those
slick travel magazines where what's on the cover
is never reproduced inside, but you've already

bought it, that's the important thing, you've bought it
& now, whatever it is, it's yours.

SUMMER ON 17TH STREET, PATERSON, NJ

Maria Mazziotti Gillan

Summer on 17th street, Joey Cuccinello's father set up
a projector in their backyard and invited all the

neighborhood kids over to watch movies he projected
onto a screen. Mr. Cuccinello wanted us to have fun,

and we did, sitting in eight pm darkness, the sky
still clear enough to see thousands of stars, the kids lined up

on folding chairs, others sitting cross-legged on the grass.
The field between Joey's house and mine sparkled

with lightening bugs, the world as small and perfect as it would ever be.
The net of happiness lifted us out of our own

skins, set us sailing above the Cucinello's yard,
above our ordinary lives and away, even for a little while,

from our mothers' voices calling us home.

WHAT DO MY HANDS REACH FOR?

Maria Mazziotti Gillan

I wish I could transport myself through the Catskills,
erasing the miles between us, and reach for you,

I would do it right this moment, take your body,
suddenly delicate, in my arms, rest your head

on my chest, stroke your hair. All day the thought
of you has stayed with me as though your mind

were hands reaching for me, as though you have
woken up again and it is four a.m. and you call

for me as you did the other night, call
until your voice is almost gone,

and I am not there. *I was afraid,*
you said, and I called and called

your name, though I knew you wouldn't hear.
I thought there was a bearded man in the room

with me. I thought he was going to kill me.
I knew I was hallucinating again

but it seemed so real.

SUI GENERIS

Geraldine Cannon

“What we have here is a one-of-a kind place.”
After looking at several houses on the market
we settled on this one just for its location:
within walking distance of the kids’ schools
and our jobs at the university—and for the view
of a hill I later found out was called Charette.

The hill has a unique apple tree called the Charette
or Donut Apple, for slices are said to resemble donuts.
The seeds must have come to this place more than 200 years ago,
but the parentage of the only known mature tree is unknown.
It was the view of this hill that helped me find comfort here,
so far away from my own Southern Appalachian hills.

Yes, “what we have here is a one-of-a kind place.”
Our old re-built house has withstood countless snows,
basement floods, roof leaks, frozen pipes and thaws.
We’ve made some improvements: put on a new roof,
and sealed up the basement windows. Now, we’re adding
an extended porch with dormers and a ha’nt blue ceiling.

The porch seems to connect us with a busy community.
Comments on the construction could probably fill up a tome,
and people often have stories to tell about the old place
as it was known before we bought it, or about their own.
People stop by, tell their tales and give me words for poems.
I go in, look out on a hill away from here, feeling not always alone.

PASSING PHRASES ON PORCH CONSTRUCTION

Geraldine Cannon

“It’s really coming along.” “Your porch looks great!”

We hear people say, in passing, as we wait.

“Everyone is going to want a porch like that!”

“Why did you extend it out so much on each end?”

“It makes the house look larger and less square.”

We hear people say. “It is taking a long time.”

“It’s worth the wait!” “Tom’s doing stellar work.”

“That’s not a do-it-yourself job! Not that one there.”

“Blue ceilings really do look good, don’t they?”

I may do that to mine.” We hear people say.

“You’ll see people doing this to theirs.”

“You’ll have started up a new trend here.”

“I’ll put away for a new porch now myself.”

“It’s almost finished now!” “Your porch looks great!”

We hear people say, in passing, as we wait.

FROM A SUITCASE IN MARITIME CANADA

Pete Hay

I was recently several weeks in Maritime Canada. My Tasmanian home naturally excepted, this is my favourite part of the planet, and I determined to write about it. This turned out to be easier said than done, and for two reasons.

First, I set out to write poetry—but I had been writing prose for too long, and the poetry metamorphosed into snippets of prose, the sort of thing that could have been called ‘excerpts from a traveller’s diary’—except that I didn’t keep a diary. In a moment you’ll be able to read them.

The second reason was ideological. I had been reading about postcolonialism. I’m about to rehearse some arcane theory, but no need to panic. I’ll be brief.

It is not possible to incontestably define ‘postcolonialism’, but I take it to refer to the persistence of certain ideologically-coded ideas, values and cultural processes that derive from past relationships of imperial dependency—which approximates the focus of Edward Said’s seminal contribution to postcolonial theory. Leela Gandhi argues that such a definition plays upon the self-importance of literary critics, because it enables ‘postcolonial’ to be defined principally as a cultural pathology. That’s so—but there is, I think, substance within the dross.

Anyway—there am I, a Tasmanian in Atlantic Canada, and there is no past relationship of dependency to implicate me here! But I know enough of the literature to recognize a postcolonial cast of mind—a sort of home-centred, prejudicial reflex—that can manifest whenever an artist engages creatively with a place, a culture, a society, and even a biota that is not the artist’s own. I know this because, once my own island was ‘discovered’ in the mid 1990s as a suitably exotic literary backdrop, it was exploited in a series of acts of cultural appropriations that are well described as postcolonial plunder. This is what happens when a writer blows in to town on a flying visit (and sometimes not even that courtesy is paid), then proceeds to treat your place and its people as mere cliché, even bedecking the land with thoroughly alien flora and fauna, and making no attempt to engage with a complex and nuanced past and a complex and nuanced present. It is what happens when your realworldness is treated with indifference, even contempt.

The Newfies already know this. Ask them what they think of The Shipping News, then stand back. I determined that I would not be appropriatory in my own writing of Maritime Canada, that I would deal with other people’s places respectfully and humbly, but from the undisguised perspective of an outsider. It can be done; Barry Lopez, a self-proclaimed ‘writer who travels’, manages it with ease. And here is what I came up with...



These mid-May Nova Scotian woods. Can there be a more potent evocation of the utterly, the painfully, dreary? We are traversing the land at speed in a sealed and motorised can, and to the stood-off eye it is all spruced and sombre green and dead sticks, all a cutback blur from the highway’s straight and functional line, and flat as the old tack. It badly wants the horizon-breaking jag of a mountain.

But step inside and here is the detail of wonder. A sly furl of life upon the ground. Pricked-green folds giving the lie to stick-death. The sudden polished plate of a lake's blue, moss-bound.

We pass a timber-getter's camp, his moonshine shack set aside by the stream. He emerges, middle-aged and big-gutted, all flannel-shirted and stubble-bearded suspicion. Now, I think, we're in for it. Then he speaks to us in French, and I know we're not. Johnny the Alsatian-cross dances in the stillness-after-rain. A nondescript shapelessness along the track cranks up his prancing excitement by several degrees, and now Johnny learns the woods' gothic corrective—his poor face is an arrow-quiver, pocked in porcupine quill.

Halifax. A gritty, on-the-edge town: elemental. The wind is sheer and blade-cold. Things happen here. Explosions. Planes down. And out beyond the conning-tower of that shore-cruising sub, a lump of ice once did for the world's greatest ship. Thousands have died. The wind, the sluicing wind, carries the breath of the thousands dead. Who could not love this town?

In the harbourside pub the music is as staunch as the town. The ghost of Stan Rogers, Canada's great troubadour, is here. *Now I'm a broken man on a Halifax pier, the last of Barrett's privateers.* There is a tight-topped girl shimmering in a roil of tough male lust. Hard young men, holding to a forced and fraying camaraderie. The joust for Fair Lady's favour wheels and eddies, favourites come, favourites go. We get a skin-blistering blast of Great Big Sea. *Can't make nuthin out of nuthin, give my country back its heart.* The tight-topped girl ripples a wave and leaves alone. Who could not love this town?

My Haligonian host is gentler than his town. He installs me in an old and doddering fisherman's shack. Later I say, jocular old me, 'I suppose the shanty would have to be haunted'. Not a twitch at the edge of the mouth. Not a hint of play in the line of the eye. His face is the deadest of pans as he says, 'Didn't you wake in the night certain there was a face an inch away, staring into your own?'

Prosaic, unfey me. What a disappointment I am. 'Slept like a gin-fed babe', I lie.



In the Bonshaw Hills the May sun bites, brings endless greens in its train, and startling yellows. There is a skunk beneath the shed.

The island's great fiddler sits in shade on the bank. His angularity sketches a jack-knifed, ten-past-four geometry. He plays a waltz with no name. 'Y'learn a tune from some other fuhla', he says, 'but y'never learn its name. Yuh ask the other fiddlers, y'say do you know the name of this? And it's "nuh", "nuh", "nuh"'. He has a smile like the broad curve of the North Shore. I lean against the shed, warm with sun and Lagavulin. Not enough space for the skunk to cock its tail.

There's a three-legged coyote about. I look, knee-jerk foolish, to the woods. Coyotes are recent arrivals—they crossed the winter sea-ice just a few short years ago. 'People lose their cat', says our host, 'and it's likely the coyote'. He pronounces 'coyote' in the conventional way, but that seems unusual. Down east last week, and even at last night's lobster supper, it was 'kai-yoat'.

Whatever it answers to, the one out there in the woods wants for a leg, but he still has my host worried. There's his much-loved dog, Molly. Molly enters the fourth hour of 'throw the ball at the shed and I'll git it'. She is inexhaustibly canine, and without a thought for the Lurker at the Threshold, the three-legged Thing from the demi-world. 'Porcupines on the island?' I ask. 'Nuh.'

The great fiddler idly plucks and strums, launches into a wild and raunchy 'Summertime', stops mid-chord to throw the ball for Molly. Later we drive through a North Shore dusk. There are foxes, flame-tailed and brazen, in the fields, even on the road's verge. This is a new and strange thing, and there's a theory: Kai-yoat has won the woods and driven old Tod to the fields, to the open country. I take a close look at old embattled Tod. He is all tail, but there is no bounce to it, no shine to his coat, and his face is pocked and scarred. I am sure I see desperation in his eyes.

The echo of the devil's jig hovers in the dusk.



I meet an artist who looks like Eric Bogle. His work is on show, tricked out to take the eye. I see lush island pastorals, Anne of Green Gables' saccharine legacy in another predictable manifestation.

Wait, though. The girls in sweet flounces have hard, implacable eyes. And there—look—there too, hints of weirdly-cast evil skitter in the shrubbery, in the doll's house, hideously there through the spokes of the perambulator. There is a worm at work, and it is not benign.

The artist's face is benign. And his easy, intelligent talk. Here in this island of churches his main living is to be found in the vivid brilliance of its stained ecclesiastical glass. He is said to be a Druid.

Some functionary bustles through the hall, bristling with detail and import. He snaps my conversation with the Druid mid-sentence, ignores me, launches into a complexly imperious set of instructions. He breaks his bombast only long enough to say, 'Do you have any questions?' The Druid who works in worm and sanctified glass says, 'What is the capital of Albania?'



At the Charlottetown Wine Festival a kind and dapper Newfie, dark and crinkle-eyed, dispenses Australian plonk.

It is a grand, cosmopolitan swirl. Stalls of vintaged exotica proclaim Chile, Spain, California, France, Argentina, Italy, South Africa, Portugal and, well, Canada. And Australia. I look for patriotic surprises, find none. These are the too-familiar, high-volume lines that, back home, you only ever buy on special. The vinous products of global capital, muscled in through corporate takeover. Though I wish it were not so, they are also, by some way, the best plonk here.

The man from Newfoundland dispenses my country's plonk with flair, with a confident authority. His spiel is oiled, polished, sad. When, all tipsy arrogance, I play the 'bullshit-I-come-from-there' card, he abandons the farce with manifest relief. 'My uncle went t'Melbourne after he married bad', he tells me. 'Even his in-laws warned him against her'. 'So', I ask, 'how does he like it there?' 'He jumped off a cliff', says the kind, smiley-eyed Newfie. Then he salts the silence: 'But *she's* still alive'.

The dark and crinkled man from Corner Brook pours another transnational Australian red. 'Git yr laughin gear around that', he says, accent perfecto.



Sea Cow Pond is a landlocked bubble with a run to the sea.

There is a legend and it is this: the Malpeque Scots, Macdonalds all, and starving in that first iced-in winter, are coasted along by the Mi'kmaq to this old walrus haul-out. Thus are they saved. The lord is duly praised and down in Nova Scotia, General Amherst and Governor Cornwallis plan the dispensation of pox-ridden blankets to that 'execrable race', the Mi'kmaq.

In 2003 a sea cow hauls out on Cape Breton's *Fleur-de-lis* shore. It is properly admonished. 'Over a thousand miles from home', shouts the fourth estate. That far, eh? Get ye gone.

There is a M. Doucette at Sea Cow Pond. He idles benignly by the boat-lined sea-bubble, overalled, ruddy and wide-smiled. 'They's all this asthma on the island', he says. 'All that sprayin uv the spuds. Course, y'can't prove nuthin.' He stands next to a lobster boat, plane-shaving lined, the abrupt brown-eye of a stern naming it the 'I Hate Fishin'. 'This yours?' I want to ask. I wish him instead a bland nice day, and he responds: 'Oh, I'm after cuttin a cord a red maple, down back aways.'

In Charlottetown I tell this story, and I'm told: 'Most likely he lost his womenfolk t'cancer. They die in their thirties up there, y'know.'



I drive the northwest coast with a folklorist, a small and brilliant man with a different tale for every revolution of the wheel. Last summer he pulled a human skeleton from the cliff over there, and this not the first. Male, very tall, head pointed west, arms crossed over breast, the remains of a coffin. A mystery. ‘There’s no record of a burial ground there’, he says, ‘and after about 1820 there was a perfectly good Presbyterian graveyard just down the shore. So this had t’be an earlier site. Or a burial from a single disaster—and it’s sure enough there’s a killer reef just out there’. Was the skeleton taken away to be dated? ‘Nuh. Just buried down there in the cemetery.’

We head inland, to potato country. Here is the economic heart of ‘Spud Island’, but it is a diseased heart, and the discourse shifts. ‘Look at these huge fields. The hedgerows have gone, the hedgerows that give cover for weasels and muskrats and such. But people are wising up. Y’know, the environment is the big sleeper out here. Look that way. Y’can see for two miles and not a hedgerow. The topsoil y’know, it just blows away in the dry without the hedges. Twenty years ago that would uv been a quilt of fields with hedgerows, maybe eight fields in there...’



Here is a day of high summer, a day of humming-birds and subversion.

The Friday beer-drinkers talk electoral reform. I disgrace myself: I’d rather watch the humming-birds. ‘Well it’s fine for you’, I think but do not say. ‘In Tasmania we don’t have life so liquid-in-air.’

I go to talk politics at Catholic Family Services. My host is a third cousin once removed of Mary MacKillop. ‘They’s MacKillops over on Cape Breton still’, she says, ‘if y’care t’look’. She is spare, feisty and getting on and she takes no prisoners. Patronage in government gets thoroughly junked. This is a lively conversation between kindred souls, but I choose words carefully—a come-from-away is only as good here as the cut of his next sentence. There is a poster on the wall and it says:

‘WHEN I GIVE FOOD TO THE POOR
THEY SAY I’M A SAINT.
WHEN I ASK WHY THE POOR HAVE NO FOOD
THEY SAY I’M A COMMUNIST.’

Two humming-birds at a feeder is fifty percent too much humming-bird. How can a bird the size of a bumblebee freight so much fight? Its wings are an air-stalling blur, its temperament all cock. It is a jewel strapped to a miniature rudderless rocket.



'We were goin t'make it a stook, but the old fubla ran out of twine'. That's the punchline of a story. Here they tell stories as public entertainment. Make your own story to put above that punchline.

The story-teller considers his art. 'The language comes up from the soil. I would listen to these big, strong men with poetry on their tongue. I do what I do because I'm afraid we'll lose the metaphors, lose the beauty in the particulars of the language. These days technological language is universal...'

This island is connected to New Brunswick by a bridge. A bloody big bridge. When you cross it, though, you get no sense of crossing a bridge. The parapet is deliberately designed to deny a view. There is no dramatic climb and descent. It is just another road, really. When is an island not an island...

'MOOSE', say the signs by the road, and 'DEER'. 'The road is littered with sad huddled bundles that once were porcupine. Well at least that tells me I'm off the island. To my shame the signage intrigues more than this north New Brunswick landscape.

CAP-PELÉ
Au Coeur de l'Acadie

Donna's Folk Art

Ye Must Be Born Again
PREPARE TO MEET THY LORD

Autoroute des anciens combattants

Fred's Boulangerie

('Fred's Boulangerie'! Next time I'm asked to define multiculturalism I'll just say 'Fred's Boulangerie')

GUY'S
FRENCHY'S
FAMILY CLOTHING CENTRE
CLOSED FOR THE SEASON
THANK YOU

There is an election in New Brunswick this week. If the employment stats are the indicator to go by this is an economy in rags. But just yesterday my own island was awash with unqualified enthusiasm for 'the New Brunswick Model'. Then a whimsical political breeze flipped the 'Model' off the platform, and it was lost... And I am here pondering the inkling of a theory to do with the economic multiplier of an IT economy, or why there might not be one...

We reach Moncton and my carseat depression is consummated. Moncton is a tidal bore (read that as you will) and one vast carpark for a shopping mall. I look back down the long road travelled, across the bridge that is merely a road, and I see a ragged trail of metaphor, the poetry of an island living, waiting in line to pay the toll. *'We were goin t'make it a stook, but the old fubla ran out of twine'*.

When is an island not an island...



This was a day on the island...

In the morning I stroll a fieldpath to a tree-enclosed square. Flowers nod me along—vetch, hawkweed, devil's paintbrush. I am puffy with immature pride—that I should be able to show-off like this, putting names to flowers of the fields and forests of a distant land.

Red stumps stud the little square, and I think of a giant's rotten teeth. It is a small square of death, an old graveyard. For thirty years it gathered in the island pioneers, then closed to begin a quick return to the red and shapeless earth. Except that, in 1851, when the Yankee Gale howled, and 80 schooners out of Nova Scotia and the 'Boston States' drove their bows under wave and shore, this little square opened its red doors once more to accept the gift from the Yankee Gale. The wind howled as it has never howled, the sea rose to the drumming deathsong, and the island's cradled shore took the sad jetsam, North Cape to East Point, unto itself.

Just where the men of Massachusetts lie in this pocket of earth cannot be known, not here, not in any of the little North Shore squares bossed with shape-worn lumps of red. So many dead. This should be the great island-shaping myth, but is not. My thought is ungenerous but irresistible: it is because these were men from away, these doomed seekers after mackerel. But I try to be fair. I think: 'I suppose that matters—that they were not island men.'

I leave the square, the path coloured up with devil's paintbrush, and the sun, out here, is an egg-fryer. Impossible on such a day to enchant the facts of history. How high the seas? How wild the wind? I cannot bring the Yankee Gale into poetry's livingness, and I seem to hear the dead cry at my back, to call upon me the shame of the absorbed here, the traitorous now.

In the afternoon I am on a trail in the woods. I have brought Longfellow along. All these years on and he finally walks here—well, not on Evangeline's Bay of Fundy shore perhaps, but at least in the woods of the Maritimes. And he is good enough to declaim the great line on cue: *Still stands the forest primeval*. From roots twined deep he has fetched a sighing refrain on the popular breath.

The trouble is—he is wrong. The fields and forests are in perpetual exchange. They are island chessmen: field takes forest takes field takes forest. It is a joust between machines and the white spruce. Look, though, at a field ‘going spruce’ and you’ll know what tomorrow brings. The spruce is alert, explosive fecundity, and in this light-repellant gloom, just here, it is no easy remembrance that, a turn of the trail away, spruce-nurtured birches curtsy with light, buttered slabs of it here, tweaked slats of it there. Even the ailing beech, perhaps, might, when we are gone, be gentled back.

I nod to Longfellow with a new respect. Machines are at their sorry work as I write, but the green surge is *primeval*, and on it sparks, on and on... Greens glide into infinite greens, and even in spruce-gloom there is sparkle where the brush-soft quills of new growth dance at the membrane of light. The tree startles and shifts to a realm beyond language, its outstraining impulse to life travelling through knotted dark to the concentrated small light of fingertips. It is a joyful chant in the unheard voice of a music of silence, whole to itself, unforced, unshaped by subtle tactic, a master piece for wind, light and life, made for itself, the idea of an audience absurd.

It is music inexorable, rolling out to encompass the world.

And now, in the evening, I enter Bingo Country. I survey cheap trestles and a basic box stage and prepare for anything.

I get a man in check flannel and workboots and a storm-gouged face that dances to a spring of joy, a benevolence that enfolds us in uncomplicated warmth. In his vast and ugly hands he holds a pair of spoons, and he waits on a stool on the stage, those huge knobbed hands covering his knees as he beams delight upon Bingo Country, now peopled with long-loved school friends, the 80-year olds of the island.

I get him—and I get, too, winsome sweetness in a ponytail and tight, excruciating bands of adolescent timidity. In her hand she holds a bow and fiddle, and talk is the hardest thing in the world—but talk she must because this is her show, and she will be calling the shots.

Now one Reeboked foot smashes against the makeshift stage—and again, and again... And the wild ache of the years—hundreds of them—that have made her, and the music, and the old man with the spoons, and all the tired and groaning limbs in the audience this night, explodes through her fiddle in a shout of exile and rebirth that clamours about the dark and cobwebbed corners of Bingo Country. The ponytail twirls to the reel, and the bow drags from the strings a cry of mystery and love and hope and loss that taps the stream of life itself—and death—and the spoons clatter as deft and as sure as bones and the Reeboked foot, wild, remorseless, slams on upon the stage. The 80-year olds strew the night with tattoos of mid-performance applause. They cheer the girl and the man, yes, but they cheer, too, this small sign that their life will persist, that it will flow on into that dangerous time to come when they will be gone.

Later a step-dancer’s flying feet strike the excitement along. She is, maybe, 15. An aged voice behind me says: ‘That will uv run the beer out uv her’. But the voice is no fit to the

words. It floats through Bingo Country with a light and tender love, and into the softened air of an island night.



The sun is in the wrong place. My directional radar—a reliable, well-tuned instrument—is out of kilter. Everything is counter-intuitive. Okay. I can work with that. We are on the *west* coast of Cape Breton Island. The *Boston States* are at my back. We are going *down north*. Even a *come-from-away* copes.

The houses are beautiful. We had this fine vernacular knowhow back home once. We, too, moulded exquisite habitat in timber; then, inexplicably, we gave it up. These houses catch the breath. They sit in springing green meadow, no fences, rarely a garden. We move from Acadien towns to towns of Scots Gaelic—well, some still have the *auld* tongue—in the space of a road’s curve. But we are tourists—we do not see the gutted communities. We do not see the closed and blighted mines, the body-crippling, widow-making mines. We do not see the despair, the slow down-the-years anger.

Here is Mabou, the Nashville of Cape Breton fiddle, music touched with a holy fire. We visit—he is just up the road—‘down north’—Alistair MacLeod. Is there, I ask myself, a finer living exponent of the short story? No, I conclude, there is not. Alistair is a sweet and generous man, too generous by far with the *musgee*. His novel has just won the Whitbread. ‘What’s next, Alistair?’ asks the brash, unworldly Tasmanian. ‘Next’, says the great man, fencin’ behind the smile, ‘next I’m coming to Tasmania’.

The land rears at the sky. After all that Nova Scotian flatness, the land rears at the sky. Here in the fastnesses of these upland forests it may be that the considered-extinct eastern cougar still holds on. I’m a Tasmanian: there is thylacine *mythos* in my blood and the story of the cougar fires me up. The locals shrug their shoulders.

We trek the National Park. On the upland barrens the vegetation is razored off at a height above my head. The moose do that. The vast upland is a moose hedge. There are bears, too, but these are black bears ‘and they won’t hurt yuh. Moose, though, y’meet a moose on the trail, y’watch his feet, not all that superstructure on his head. It’s the hooves that’ll do for yuh.’

It’s been a grand, mooseless day. We’re in a roadhouse, eating lobster. I’m scanning the local paper, reading how yesterday a trekker in these parts was mauled to death by a black bear.



There you have my traveller’s vignettes, all of them arrant failures. My attempt to be non-appropriatory, to write from the vantage of a sympathetic, even enthusiastic outsider, has flopped utterly. Instead of a cast of

empathetic outsidership I have judged despite myself, and the affection in which I hold the people of whom I write has morphed into smartarseness (as we would put it hereabouts).

This happened, I think, because I found it impossible to suspend tacit comparison with my own much loved place.

Lopez, who so successfully achieves where I have failed, always travels with an informed insider. For the most part, so did I. But I knew the places I visited only subjectively—not with the objective understanding that comes from an immersed, time-rich experience. I am impatient with people who claim, after a five minute acquaintance, that here is the place for them, that they have found ‘home’—as I am with people who claim the whole planet for ‘their’ place. Impossible. Until you know how non-human life moves through and within a place, until you have a deep vernacular acquaintance with its realms of story, until you unselfconsciously read the play of the elements as they unfold through the day and through the year, until you know how great geological forces have worked away through deep time, until you know how humans have interacted with each other and with the elements of that place—until then you are not truly at home. Most people, even those with generational ties to a place, cannot claim this. That is why placelessness is such a rampant modern pathology.

A writer is, of course, perfectly entitled to write of any place under the sun. It is not the legitimacy of the enterprise per se that is in dispute. But within the undertaking lurk unanticipated traps for the unwary. It is no easy thing to write successfully of not-one’s-place. Protocols apply, and I have violated them.

My rendering of direct speech, for example. I hear my protagonists saying those things exactly as I have written them. But they themselves will think that I have made them sound like Americans, and will feel duly aggrieved. And an Australian reader will think my rendering remarkably similar to our own vernacular. Fair comment. Then there are those fluffy punchlines. They read now as substitutes for an honest engagement with place and people. And as for my alien’s descriptions of the landscape of northern New Brunswick, and even the Nova Scotian interior—what a failure of empathetic imagining these represent, for there are folk who call these biologically and historically rich landscapes home, and who are attached to them as powerfully as I am to Tasmania. I owe them an apology.

*Some vignettes almost work. I get closest in the three stages of that single busy day observed in the narrative that begins: ‘This was a day on the island...’. Except that the description of the ceilidh in Bingo Country uncomfortably resembles what is, to my mind, the high point of Tasmanian literary achievement, the extraordinary ‘Aboriginal band in the Dog House’ sequence in Richard Flanagan’s *Death of a River Guide*. And except that I am inexcusably ungenerous in the description of my visit to the old cemetery on Prince Edward Island’s North Shore—the Yankee Gale rumination. There is diamond in the dross only in that description of the trail through the spruce forest; only there, and only briefly, does ambition meet achievement in engagement with a not-my-own place.*

One swallow, as it is said, does not a summer make. My Canadian writings remain failures, and I have learned a lesson—to stay within the narrow range of my competence. To deploy another bon mot, one rarely heard these days, ‘the cobbler should stick to his last’!

DOING FENCE

Meg Thompson

THOSE MORNINGS, BEFORE WE DID FENCE

When the day was still new, still cool, we already guessed we'd go to bed with sunburns tight on our shoulders and necks. All of us sisters: fair-skinned with strangely placed freckles. Flecking the lips, inside our ears. Carrie and I have red hair. Amy and Rachel, younger than us, are dark blonds, about the color of wheat. After breakfast, we passed sunscreen around the kitchen, slathering it on each other's hard-to-reach places. The room filled with the scent of cocoa butter. Even today, whenever I smell sunscreen, I think of our kitchen, the palms of my sisters' hands thick with lotion, slapping it on my back. We've all had burns that blistered, we've been afraid of the sun. I remember our daybreak mantra as summer heated up: *Don't trust the cool, it's August*. When we all lived at home, our low-pitched voices filling the rooms, it was so easy to talk to each other.

Now, mornings in my own kitchen, I notice how small of a room it is, how quiet and empty. I wash dishes. My fingertips soften and crinkle like laundry in the warm, lemony water. My nails are clean, pink-white, and I miss, strangely, using a hairpin to scrape out the grime that built-up when I pried fence posts loose from the earth, carried them in a bouquet of long, dirty poles to the bed of a pick-up. I rinse a mug and gaze out my window to a wide sea of gravel, the parking lot. It's a sea that slopes into a steep hill, like most terrain in West Virginia. For a half-moment I hate that I grew up on a farm, how I had the luxury of opening the door and running for a minute in any direction, knowing the land belonged to us. I can't do that anymore, and when I long for a yard, I dry my hands, press both palms to the small of my back and lean, stretch, in the newborn morning. I think about where I will move to next, what the weather will be like there, if I will be far away. I think of my sisters. Our bare feet on the kitchen's stone tile, the sun just beginning to warm up the house. Women in the morning. Our legs unshaved, hair unwashed. No bras. Our mom raised us to be feminists, but I think she regrets it. Now she calls Carrie, Amy and me every week to read engagement announcements from the newspaper. Rachel, a senior in high school and the only one still at home, listens from the kitchen table while she does her physics homework. Sometimes I hear her make a sarcastic remark, but our mom, a farmer who wants grandkids more than a retirement plan, is not deterred. Sometimes when she calls I cite divorce rates, the statistics, how it has become more common nationwide to wed *later*. Sometimes I let it go. Our dad, less vocal, only had to say once, in his small, deep voice, his lips barely off the coffee mug, that he wouldn't mind holding a baby again, for my staunch feminist principles to dissolve. I ached, for a minute, anyway, to be pregnant.

The summer after Carrie graduated high school she surprised us all and moved to Charleston, South Carolina, for a degree in culinary arts from Johnson & Wales University. All I need is a hint, the smell, ham-and-cheese sandwiches searing in the broiler and I remember how she used to make us lunch everyday, hair in a loose braid over her shoulder. The day after Carrie left Ohio, our mom, arms crossed and gazing out the window to her eighty head of sheep milling in the field, said she would never let any of us leave the state again.



OUR FAMILY HAS A HARD TIME UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARIES

We have such a hard time our livestock might as well be free-range, because the fences we make never seem to work. There is even a popular family joke that asks where mom is. The punch line is doing fence.

According to my rough calculations, our mom has spent years of her life setting up fences, dividing fields to keep livestock in and coyotes out. She is, still, terrible at it, as are the rest of us. In addition to not being able to build them, we also can't remember where they are. How many times did I run full-force into an electric fence playing hide-and-go-seek? My body stilled in the bend of the wire and a current surging from my waist, a jolt like cinching your belt too tight.

About once a month someone knocked on the door to tell us the sheep were out, the pigs were out, the cows were out, or there was a flock of white geese in a huddle on the road that didn't want to move. Sometimes the person would help us shepherd the flock back to their home. I remember a woman in high heels running through the barnyard because she feared for the life of the pretty, pink hog she saw ambling along the side of the road. When she got back in her gleaming, black Mercedes, she didn't seem to care about the clumps of manure on the bottom of her shoes, and I suppressed the urge to ask where she'd grown up.

Sometimes I wonder if we weren't that bad at building fences, but our livestock was just particularly clever. Then I think about the logic of sheep. With no way to defend themselves, they are afraid of everything, even water with ripples in it. Once my mom told me that when barns catch on fire, the animals have to be forced out. They don't want to leave. They can sense panic, but the barn represents safety, even when it's being destroyed. I wanted to ask why then, if our animals so loved their home, they were always trying to get away from it.

I have a thousand memories of running down the road, laughing, my arms stretched wide, to guide sheep back into their pasture. We come from generations of farmers. Our mom can take one sweeping look at a flock and tell you which ewes have worms, which have full, meaty loins, which are pregnant and likely to prolapse. And once, when our dad broke his leg he devised a pulley system on his tractor so he could still get himself up into the seat. During the blizzard of '78, the white-outs were so bad, so constant, he tied rope from the garage to the barn, following it hand-over-hand so he wouldn't get lost in the fierce, white wind. But we can't build a straight, reliable fence line, string a length of wire through a row of posts, to save our lives.

There were times, usually when it was raining, that I wished we could figure out how to keep our animals in. But most of the time these escapes made me feel happy, even lucky. I would be mowing the lawn, circling around and around our house, when a pack of baby pigs would dart out from behind the lilac bush and sprint down the driveway, their tiny hooves in a whirl of dust and stones. I couldn't hear myself over the whirl of the motor, but I told them to run. Go, I said, just come back sometime and visit.



AT HEART, I AM A HYPOCRITE

I am also a homebody, but for some reason I love to talk about rootlessness. I say that I would move anywhere, but what I really mean is I would move anywhere in the Midwest. Part of the reason is the climate, another is I just can't drive over certain fences.

Sometimes I think the only reason Carrie could leave Ohio was because she never got her driver's license, so she didn't have to leave by herself. Our dad went with her, drove the 700 miles to her apartment in Charleston and dropped her off. I could never do that. I need the weather of each season, every year. I need to know that where I live, I will watch the season melt into another and overlap. The idea of having nine winter months out of the year, or even summer, makes me uneasy. I need, also, the greens, the acres of alfalfa shaking in the breeze, trees I can't fit my arms around, and deep, healthy grass. The first time I saw Spanish moss, swaying gray beards in the streets of Charleston, I felt strangely betrayed and never so glad to live in Ohio.

I visit Carrie at least once a year. I know the trip by heart, and it takes me about ten hours. Last October, I went down because she needed my signature. She was applying for a passport, and because she never got her license, she needed an immediate family member to come to the post office with her, present a valid driver's license, and sign a document promising she wasn't a terrorist. We sat in the Charleston post office for an hour and a half, just waiting for the family ahead of us to get their passports. When it was our turn, it somehow took 25 minutes for me to write my name and Carrie to pay \$200. It occurred to me how the U.S. Government is similar to our mom, desperately trying to keep us home and making us feel guilty when we finally trample the fences, leave, and on top of all that, fail to reproduce. That last one is probably more societal than governmental, though

After the papers were signed, we went to eat at a French restaurant. Carrie wanted to take me to a place I'd never been. When I opened the menu, I searched, instinctively, for something inexpensive and familiar. I tried to order a ham and cheese sandwich with a Miller Lite but she wouldn't let me.

"Get something you've never had before," she said.

Carrie and I both think the other one is daring, adventurous. She thinks I am because our phone conversations often begin with where I recently visited: Chicago, Lansing, Madison, Shenandoah, Washington, D.C. And it's true, sometimes I just pick up and go, but I don't like to leave for long periods of time. When she asked me if I would come down so she could get her passport, I said yes, immediately, without even thinking about it. The places she travels to are richer, more wondrous: Amsterdam, New Orleans, Disney World. She has told me she doesn't want to live in Charleston forever, and I believe her.

I ordered a salad with shrimp and scallops. We drank raspberry rickeys and got drunk in the middle of the day. When we walked home I threw my bare arms in the air and raved about wearing a tank top in October. At the time, I thought I could live like that. I said I wanted a house on the beach and to wear flip-flops year-round, but it was just the moment. I didn't mean it.



ONE TIME WE WERE DOING FENCE ALONG BIGGS ROAD

It was mid-day in August, everything soft with heat, our freckles dark orange from the sun. In two years Carrie would be in South Carolina learning how to make flowers out of cake frosting.

A mile of Biggs is surrounded by our fields. In the summer, the road is a warm gray ribbon, shaking with heat through a sheet of yellow-green. Underneath the road, half a mile from the railroad tracks that cut across the fields and divide Biggs Road, is a dry, rusty tunnel just wide enough for the squirming bodies of the two who lost the coin toss, Amy and me.

First we shut off the electric fence. One flick and all the wires connected to that power source lost their juice. Using the tunnel, our job was to link up the fence in the south field to the fence in the north field. Amy stood in the south field, I stood in the north. With one hand we waved to each other, pretending we were far away, though it was only 20 feet. With the other hand we each held onto our respective wire. Carrie and Rachel watched for cars, told us when to go. We didn't want to be in the tunnel when a car passed above us.

Go.

My sisters' voices sounded so calm in unison. But we're all like that, terribly calm, even when we don't have to be. I got down on stomach and elbows, started writhing through the tunnel, wondering about the lives of earthworms and moles. This, I thought, is why farmers have lots of kids. They need small bodies to crawl around under roads. I kept a fierce grip on the wire, which was insulated in case it touched the walls of the tunnel after we turned the fence back on. I could barely see Amy's body wriggling through the half-dark. As we got closer, I could make out her face. It was smeared with rust. She must have wiped her forehead with her arm. Her eyebrows looked singed, rust streaked down her cheeks like dark tears, and I started to laugh.

It took us four tries before we were able to connect our wires. The first two times it was Amy who lost her grip and the wire zipped back out of the tunnel. We crawled, backwards, into the sunlight. I thought about birth. The third time it was my fault. I claimed delirium, but really I wanted to do it again. I wanted to make my childhood last as long as possible. I wanted to keep all of us together, even if they were mad at me for making them stand out in the sun, even if crawling in and out of that tunnel meant it would take days to wash the rust out of my hair. I didn't want it to end, but I learned, crawling underneath the road, imagining the earth rumbling with the weight of passing cars, that when you finally make contact, hook one line of fence to another and twist them, more tightly than necessary just for good measure, you should be glad the other person wanted to meet just as much.



SOMETIMES ALL MY SISTERS CALL ME ON THE SAME DAY

It makes me feel like I'll never need to eat, grocery shop, walk slowly through each aisle wondering what I don't have. It's not planned; it's not every Wednesday after it gets dark, or every other Sunday afternoon. It happens, like waking up happens. Amy calls Carrie. I call Rachel. Amy calls me. Rachel calls Carrie. It lasts the night. By 11:30 my ear is damp and

red, my shoulder aches from squeezing the phone to my cheek so I can wash dishes with both hands. I rummage through my kitchen for soft, noiseless foods, so I can eat without distracting them: yogurt, raisins, and when I'm desperate, marshmallows. Their voices drift into me like radio songs. I imagine them at their homes doing the same things. I walk around my apartment, grazing the walls with my fingertips. I sit on the futon with my legs tucked up under me. I sprinkle fish food in the tank, watch Allison and Jealousy, a painted glass and a tetra, flitter to the surface, their sheer bodies thin as dimes. We are content, for hours, talking about nothing.

"I wore that sweatshirt you gave me."

"The one that says *Proud to be a Farmer's Daughter?*"

"Yeah, big hit with the ladies."

"You mean mom."

Our favorite conversations, those rare times when we're all home, Christmas, a week in the summer, revolve around pointing out who is most like mom, who is most like dad. Rachel chews gum a half-stick at a time. She is like mom. Amy's good at math. She is like dad. The one way we all differ from our parents: we lack their ability to tan. Our dad's farmer's tan: a sight to behold. Our mom's tan, less strange, covers more ground because of her shorts and sleeveless shirts, clothing items our dad has never owned.



I NEVER BELIEVED MY MOM WHEN SHE SAID WE COULDN'T LEAVE OHIO

At the end of the summer, Rachel will leave for a college she's yet to choose. She and our mom have been traveling, visiting schools, sitting in auditoriums to listen to financial aid seminars, mom whispering to other parents at every one: "I could *teach* this class by now." Secretly, I want Rachel to go to my alma mater, Muskingum College because I selfishly want someone close by. She would be only two hours away, right off I-70 in New Concord, Ohio. A dry town, hills swelling the landscape. It is a drive I would make in the fall anyway, to see the leaves burning yellow and orange, falling off trees and sweeping across the fields like flames.

Amy will graduate in two years from Kent State, a university 40 minutes from the farm. She plans to move west. She started in art education, but she dropped it for fine arts with a focus in printmaking. No one was teaching her how to teach a kid to draw, just how to teach inoffensively and multi-culturally so she wouldn't get sued. She saw her future: a closet full of crafty, holiday-inspired sweater vests, drawers brimming with ruler socks. I imagine her as a museum curator, hands clasped behind her back, gazing around a room of Warhols. Over the phone she tells me that in her sculpture class she is building two sheep, one out of steel wool, one out of lamb's wool sweaters. I asked her what she would use for the eyes.

"It won't have eyes. It's just a form."

I didn't understand. The thought of a fake, blind lamb depressed me. It wouldn't be able to stare. I imagined it running into the walls of some art gallery, trying to get outside.

I like to know at all times where the walls and fences and boundaries are, but sometimes, deep in the lull of highway driving, contemplating mileage and when I need to

stop for gas, I pass over state lines without even noticing. There isn't a jolt like the one I used to experience playing hide-and-go-seek. I move from one landscape to the next, knowing the mountains are softening, or rising, depending which direction I'm headed.

Note: "Doing Fence" originally appeared in *Harpur Palate* 6.2 (2007).

ILLCIT SHOCK WAVES

Andrew Farkas

And now the new Sunsphere is the cynosure of Knoxville. Standing 6,520 feet tall, its base is a black, cylindrical tower capped by a circular crown that extends well past the parameters of the column accentuated by equally black spires which carry the eye to the orb. The orb is a perfect globe of gold hovering twenty feet above the crown. It rotates thirty times per second, 108,000 times per hour precisely as does the Crab Pulsar, located 6,520 light years away near the constellation Taurus in the center of the Crab Nebula. The Crab Nebula and the Crab Pulsar were created by the Supernova of 1054 (SN1054), although the exact date of the event is unknown. The Crab Pulsar is a neutron star six miles in diameter, far smaller yet much denser than the Earth's sun. Again mimicking the Crab Pulsar, the Sunsphere's orb emits a concentrated beam of light that makes the sphere appear to pulse because of its rotations. If the orb could be decelerated, the light beam would match that of a lighthouse or emergency vehicle. The Sunsphere and the Crab Pulsar also emit radio pulses and x-rays, but only the x-rays are susceptible to Quasi-Periodic Oscillations (QPOs); hence the x-ray emissions vary, the light waves and the radio pulses remain constant. Once the Sunsphere was 266 feet tall, consisting of a green, girder-supported tower and a golden sphere made of connected hexagons. It did not pulse with light. It did not emit radio waves. It did not emit x-rays. It had a red light on a pole at the zenith to warn airplane pilots. On July 4, 2054, an explosion erupted around the Sunsphere, engulfing the structure in red, yellow, green, and blue flames. After the outburst, a crimson and cobalt cloud was left behind. When the smoke dispersed, the new Sunsphere stood in place of the former. The orb began spinning. The city filled with light.

To the southeast of the Sunsphere, windows reflecting golden beams, is Knoxville City Hospital. In OR 1058, Yang Wie-Te, a second generation Chinese-American, a physicist and astronomer, is in critical condition. He proved that the Crab Pulsar and the new Sunsphere are in synchronicity with each other. He is supposed to deduce the meaning of the cosmic alignment. He is supposed to translate the messages being transmitted through the radio waves, light emissions, and x-rays. He lies prone on an operating table. Whether he has solved the mystery of the Sunsphere and the Crab Pulsar is unknown. The operating room, contrary to the rest of the hospital, is painted white and the tables are stainless steel. The doctors, nurses, and assistants surrounding the astronomer wear suits of aquamarine, including facemasks, caps, and gloves. Their hands move rapidly. They speak in curt, terse commands or laconic repetitions. From the celeritous and ever-increasing activity, it can be deduced that the physicist is in a worsening state of dissolution. Should Mr. Yang die, he would be subject to the following penalizations: a \$250,000 fine, the incarceration of his entire family in health resorts for the despondent and valetudinary located in Farragut (or Far West Knoxville), marking of his entire family with the sign of the Theta: *theta* for *thanatos* (the death imprint). Yang Wie-Te's descendants will also be liable for any destruction caused by the physicist's death which could reach upwards of a billion dollars to assorted insurance companies, banks, law firms, and other public and private interests. Ultimately, Mr. Yang's family may face the severest castigation: expulsion from the City of Knoxville. These chastisements, and perhaps more, would be effected if the astronomer should pass away because of City Code 529: Thou shalt not die, lest ye release a shock wave. And it is true, whenever a human passes away the corpse immediately releases a shock wave that ranges in

power from a quarter ton nuclear weapon to a one megaton hydrogen bomb. On account of these puissant bursts, death is prohibited. With modern medicine, however, aging and dying are purely voluntary. Hence no one has died in Knoxville in over twenty years. Yet a question arises: how could Yang Wie-Te allow himself to degenerate to his current status? No matter the reason, the penalties and fines to be exacted on Mr. Yang's family are theoretical, superfluous. At Knoxville's current population, and given the physicist's enthalpy and exergy readings, the shock wave from his body would be the genesis of a chain reaction of shock waves that would obliterate each building, that would eradicate the entire population of 100,000,000 Knoxvilleans, if not the entire world.



Second only to the Sunsphere, Knoxville City Hospital is the tallest manmade structure in the city (since the aforementioned tower can no longer be considered manmade). From the roof of the sanatorium, the entire megalopolis is viewable, with the exception of parts of the Northern Wasteland blocked by the former World's Fair tower. Here one can see that the majority of the population has clogged the streets, parks, bridges, sidewalks, riverbanks, and other open spaces of the city. Although the Knoxville Health Commission (KHC) inundates the airwaves, satellite signals, Internet, newspapers, magazines, etc. with calming broadcasts and Public Placation Announcements (PPAs), the news of Yang Wie-Te's condition has been disseminated by some means. Utterly docile, the citizens understand that if Mr. Yang expires, Knoxville, but more importantly the Sunsphere, will cease to exist. Yet the soothing tones, the conciliating reports, and the optimistic premonitions do nothing to alleviate the tension. In spite of the danger, such masses of people moved to Knoxville because of the new Sunsphere. Being a neutron star (although comparatively infinitesimal) like the Crab Pulsar, it supplies the megalopolis with an almighty source of energy. Hence electricity is inexpensive. The citizens, however, are also filled with this vigor. No one in Knoxville needs to sleep any longer than three or four hours per night; only those who fight against their own inherent vivacity (which is also illegal) go without exercise; only those who eschew their intrinsic verve fail to accomplish their goals. Lassitude, as are aging and death, is a voluntary condition. Moreover, the Sunsphere provides the city with a constant heat source. The mean temperature in Knoxville is 85° F. Finally, much as neutron stars generate the most powerful magnetic fields in the universe, the Sunsphere's magnetism is due to its mystery and the mystery between its connection to the Crab Pulsar. The answer to this enigma is what each citizen of Knoxville hopes to learn. Yang Wie-Te had been attempting to deduce the answer for over eight years when he was checked into Knoxville City Hospital by his assistant. He was found on the outskirts of the Northern Wasteland.

East of the Sunsphere, along Summit Hill, are Market Square and the Old City, until Summit Hill becomes Martin Luther King (MLK). Market Square and the Old City are an entertainment district composed of subterranean clubs: literally subterranean. Aboveground, this recreational zone is constructed almost uniformly of red brick. The streets are older, still molded from asphalt in most places down to limestone in others. Meticulous care has been taken in this borough to preserve an aged appearance of no particular year. Gas lights line Gay Street. South Central is made of brick. Advertisements for products no longer in use, whose use is no longer remembered are still prevalent. A structure rumored to be a saloon and a bordello in the middle to late 1800s continues to be both to this day. Past the

Old City, the houses are concatenated, and yet most Eastern Knoxvilleians still live underground. Whereas the citizens of Knoxville hope to solve the mystery of the Sunsphere, or to have the mystery solved for them, there are three cults whose beliefs find their origins in the exact date of the occurrence of SN1054, which explain their interest in the World's Fair Tower. The East is home to the Believers, also known as the Doomsdayers or the Apocryphites. They believe SN1054 was first observed by Sadiae Fujiwara, a Japanese poet, on May 29, 1054. Astronomers have proven that such a viewing would have been impossible because Zeta Tauri, the closest observable star before the supernova, was in direct proximity to the sun, therefore invisible. Furthermore, Sadiae Fujiwara was not yet born in 1054, since he made his astronomical hypothesis in 1235. Although the evidence is against their claim, the Apocryphites continue to believe that Fujiwara was teleported back in time to a position where he could witness SN1054. Along with this belief, the Apocryphites assert that whatever the pulsar message may be, it will encourage humans to die and be transported to Paradise, located in the Crab Nebula, to live with Sadiae Fujiwara and James Agee. The reason humans began erupting into shock waves and the reason the old Sunsphere became the new: so more earthlings would die simultaneously and be delivered to Arcadia. At this hour, while the city of Knoxville awaits the outcome of Yang Wie-Te's surgery, the Apocryphites have concluded that Mr. Yang induced from the x-rays what the Believers themselves already knew. Yang, who perambulated in the direction of the Old City about once or twice per month, was aiming to bring about the apocalypse when his turncoat assistant committed him. Asked how they are keen to such information, Believers will say that the x-ray QPOs "told me so." They will also say that the number 529 in City Code 529 is no coincidence. It signifies that the Apocryphite belief in May 29 is correct, that their convictions are also correct. Because of their obsession with death, Apocryphite temples are the aforementioned underground speakeasies. Here they lure Tellers, Ramponans, and their own kind to dine on deleterious cuisine, imbibe alcohol and other drugs, fornicate randomly, smoke cigarettes, brawl with their fellow citizens, etc. With their goals they are successful, although modern medicine, if consulted soon enough, can cure all of the effects of these activities. On occasion, since the diversions in these clubs are prohibited, the police launch cleansing campaigns, sending those who are found to health resorts; the subterranean caves, however, are labyrinthine and the Apocryphites have never been completely reeducated. Instead, they continue their rebellion, speaking of their apocalyptic revolution in hushed, deferential tones, pointing to the new Sunsphere which they feel was created when the ghost of James Agee rose from his grave to make possible the transfer of all humankind to Paradise. The QPOs informed them so.

The Northern Wasteland was demolished by the only shock waves that have occurred. It is composed, solely, of rubble. There are no brick buildings. There are no skyscrapers. There are no cinderblock structures. There are no actual streets. There are no people. There is nothing but the reminder of what happens when a human being expires. There are sections where the detritus has been itself destroyed, leaving a view of the Appalachian Mountains far in the distance. The shock waves did not obliterate all of Knoxville because there were fewer people living in the city at that time. Before the explosions, the North was home to a fourth Sunsphere Cult: the Free Thinkers, also known as the Sunsphere Haters. Even with the radiating charm of the propaganda and the menace of death, the other Knoxvilleian groups despised the Free Thinkers to an almost self-destructive degree. The reason the Free Thinkers were hated, the reason they were called the Sunsphere Haters: they

claimed the message the Sunsphere was emitting meant nothing at all, that the alignment of the Crab Pulsar and the World's Fair Tower was a cosmic event of astounding, yet nonsensical proportions. The light waves, radio pulses, and x-rays were not a code to be decrypted, but even if they were they could be studied from the antipodes where there was no peril. The date of SN1054 is inconsequential, or was so to them. The Free Thinkers, therefore, worked to get Knoxvilleians to apostatize, proclaiming there would be no revelation from the Sunsphere, that it was merely beautiful and dangerous. A scandal would have arisen if any of the Free Thinkers had lived: who caused the shock waves? Since the Sunsphere Haters were eradicated, they were blamed. The Tower, according to the other groups, had its vengeance. The one surviving invention the Free Thinkers imparted on Knoxvilleian society is the Enthalpy/Exergy Meter (EEM). Exergy is the amount of energy that can be extracted from a system. Since this energy is ejected as a shock wave when a human perishes, exergy is the measure of a person's explosive potential. Enthalpy calculates internal energy, pressure, and volume (in the case of humans, weight). Keeping enthalpy low is the goal of all human beings who are not Apocryphites. A high enthalpy score means your body contains too much energy, too much pressure, or too much weight. Energy and pressure can add to exergy, increasing explosive potential. Weight cannot add to exergy, but an obese individual could still erupt into a shock wave equivalent to a quarter ton nuclear device. Furthermore, a corpulent human probably has a high energy reserve (since the Sunsphere energizes all), probably is under excessive physical stress, and both of these properties lead to a higher exergy rating. When enthalpy reaches a predetermined level (calculated by doctors for each individual) a person will either go into cardiac arrest or will immediately die; Yang Wie-Te was in cardiac arrest when he was discovered. The Free Thinkers, to simplify the EEM, wrote a song to explain its value:

Enthalpy and exergy work together to instill harmony,
Without them your deaths would destroy this here fine city.

The Sunsphere Haters hoped to preserve as many humans as possible until they could remove them from Knoxville. Members of the other cults now walk to the edge of Henley Street, which used to become Broadway in the North, whenever they are questioning their own beliefs, whenever they lose hope in the Sunsphere. These questioners stand at the extremity of the city and ponder the expanse of the wastes beyond. In the distance there are the mountains.

Fort Sanders, the University of Tennessee campus, and parts West are home to the Tellers of the Truth. Here there are mostly skyscrapers made of steel, aluminum, and prismatic windows which cast kaleidoscopic patterns. The streets are made of an advanced polymer that transmogrifies according to the climate to instill optimal traction. Along Kingston Pike, the largest thoroughfare in the megalopolis, are uplifting aphoristic billboards, appeasing colors, and tranquil professionally landscaped gardens. On each street corner is a speaker that broadcasts confidence-building adages and PPAs. Far West Knoxville is home to the mammoth KHC building, the third largest structure in the city. Contrary to the East, most Westerners live aboveground, as far aboveground as humanly possible, in order to be closer to the Crab Pulsar. The Tellers of the Truth, simply called the Tellers (or the Tattletales, depending on who is speaking), believe the original Yang Wie-Te was correct (the Yang Wie-Te being attended to by rapidly moving, aquamarine-clad doctors

is a far distant relative). He claimed that SN1054 took place on July 4, 1054. Since this date is widely accepted by the scientific community, the Tellers are completely confident in their assessment. They are also confident that, whatever the message may turn out to be, it will undoubtedly be found in the radio waves and it will undoubtedly encourage humans to live longer and longer. The radio waves hold the secret because they are the most easily deciphered. The secret is obviously to live longer because of the destruction corpses cause. Furthermore, the Tellers hold that their conclusions are correct because the old Sunsphere became the new on July 4: the date, they claim, of SN1054. They also claim that the Sunsphere metamorphosis was caused by a blast from the Crab Pulsar itself. The fact that such a blast would have taken 6,520 years to reach earth from the Crab Nebula does not deter their doctrines. While the prognostication becomes grimmer for Yang Wie-Te, a one-time native of the West (who departed after the Northern Wasteland was formed), the Tellers believe he had yet to deduce the answer to the World's Fair Tower Enigma. He had been working too hard. He had worn himself down. What Mr. Yang needs to do, once he has convalesced, is to check into one of the health resorts, which are also the Teller temples. Citizens either choose to enter these sanitariums for their own fitness related reasons, or they are incarcerated into them when caught engaging in harmful activities often in insalubrious parts of town (the East). The propaganda from the city address system and the consumption of attitude adjustment pills, both Teller inventions, are not militarily enforced. A human who remains morose for an extended period of time, however, is considered to be engaging in antisocial (and therefore dangerous) behavior and may be subject to surveillance by the Knoxville Police Department (KPD). On this day, the propaganda and the pills appear to be inoperative, insufficient, since the general mood is one of consternation. Yet perhaps the propaganda is working, since the message transmitted for the past two days has been that the mystery of the Sunsphere was about to be solved.

Along Chapman Highway, south of the Sunsphere, live the Ramponans. The vast majority of their structures are made of cinderblock, but an exact pattern of architectural consistency is non-existent. Their roads are made of polymers, asphalt, cement, brick, and other substances. Some Southerners live underground, while an equal number live above to far aboveground. In sections their buildings are concatenated, in others they are sparse. The Ramponan ideology is that human beings can never really know anything at all. Facetiously they uphold the SN1054 date "discovered" by Giovanni Lupoato, who backs the only Western recording of the occurrence which appears in the admittedly questionable *Rampona Chronicle*. The *Rampona Chronicle* itself includes an error, accidentally listing the supernova year as MLVIII (1058), instead of MLIV (1054). If this document can otherwise be trusted, and according to the Ramponans no one knows if it can, then the date of the supernova was June 24, 1054. Since irrefutable knowledge is solely mythical, however, the Ramponans proclaim they are ignorant of the actual date, but that the rest of humanity is also ignorant. Yang Wie-Te, vying to display his exergetic reserve, was equally benighted but had yet to construct a nihilistic detachment from his situation when his assistant committed him. Since nescience is the controlling factor for Ramponans, they have no theories as to what the mystery behind the Sunsphere could be, anymore than it is possible to infer the exact date of SN1054 (which might not have occurred in 1054). Moreover, while discussing humanity's witlessness, Ramponans will often declare that a doctrine of utter ignorance is itself a dogma, so humans cannot aver peremptorily their de facto state of naivete. When dealing with Apocryphites or Tellers, Ramponans will frequently dismiss the x-rays (especially the QPOs)

and the radio waves and point to the light, asserting that it is Morse Code. When asked what the Morse Code means they answer that no one will ever know. Often lacking congruity, the Ramponans feel their system is correct at this hour because Mr. Yang, who last resided in South Knoxville, is in OR 1058: a strictly ironic coincidence. The Ramponans remain in Knoxville to harass the other cults, to sow discord. Mockingly, they broadcast the radio waves emanating from the Crab Pulsar and the new Sunsphere. The sound, which is repeated ad infinitum, is a chopping sound, the sound of a helicopter, the sound of an overturned lawnmower. They intersperse these transmissions with belittling pleads of what it could all mean. In spite of their nihilistic detachment, the Ramponans also await the outcome of Yang Wie-Te's operation.

6,520 light years away, shrouded in a cloud of gases extant from SN1054, the Crab Pulsar sends forth its message encrypted in x-rays, radio waves, and light. For now, the Sunsphere relays its esoteric message, not yet deciphered, perhaps indecipherable. Yang Wie-Te was often known to gaze in the direction of the Crab Nebula. When asked about his mental modes operandi, he would declare that he was imagining himself near the Pulsar, he was imagining himself as an antenna, he was preparing to disseminate the directive that would one day surge forth from his brain. He claimed the Pulsar and the World's Fair Tower were made to speak through him. And they would. But now Mr. Yang is in the hospital, silent, perhaps awaiting his explosive transubstantiation. Yet in the Crab Nebula, the neutron star's nature does not change. It continues to pulse. It continues to transmit.

And now the new Sunsphere. Even below the structure, in what was once World's Fair Park, and what is now Sunsphere Place, people are compacted and waiting. They wait to learn of Mr. Yang's condition. They wait to learn about the mystery behind the new Sunsphere and the Crab Pulsar. They search for answers. They are told over a loudspeaker by a soothing, relaxing voice that the physicist, the astronomer is fine, that the mystery will soon be solved. Above them all the orb of the Sunsphere pulses signifying doom, nothing, joy, nescience. Like the eye of God it sees them all, the tower beneath it standing like a monolith to someone or something's past or possibly future demise.

WHEELS

Catherine Zobel Dent

...I am not what I thought I was, a good man doing wrong, but the wrong man doing nothing much, and I wouldn't be telling you about it if I weren't talking to myself.

—Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

Rebecca would always remember the moment right before she hit the girl, images flashing, seconds to react: training wheels, a man's harsh scream, pigtails, the flash of dark pupils circled by white. Afterward she didn't get out of the driver's seat of her cherry-red Ford. Instead, she put the pick-up in reverse. Rebecca's father, Dr. John Sperry, would later explain to hospital colleagues over highballs at the Canvasback Pub how it was that Rebecca did not tell anyone right away—at eighteen it was normal that this kind of trauma would induce in her a kind of shock reaction. Upon recovery, Rebecca's moral sensibility had led her to do the right thing. That was why on Saturday, May 26, he and Rebecca went together to the Colchester County Sheriff's office to report her role in the previous day's tragedy.

Rebecca's town Barnbridge on the eastern shore of Maryland was a town like most of the surrounding towns. Everyone knew everyone else's name. They also knew your father's business and what water you lived on, your past girlfriends or boyfriends compared with the ones you'd wanted, the car you drove, your drink preference, and your religion. Dr. Sperry was Colchester General's top cardiologist, a man to be reckoned with, who had lost his wife at such an early age that women in his social circle did not blame him for his flirting. It was rumored that he'd dated half of the nurses at Colchester General Hospital but never slept with one due to his religious beliefs. He made arrogance look attractive. To his male colleagues he was a magnet: coercive, domineering, gracious, and whether in medicine, politics or golf, Sperry hit a hole in one. His daughter Rebecca Sperry was on the lacrosse team and volunteered occasional weekends with Habitat for Humanity. She had favored beer over fruity drinks ever since the night she drank peach wine coolers until she pissed on herself in the shower stall and later puked yellow-brown on Mindy Wright's pillow. Of beers she preferred Yuengling. Everyone knew that Rebecca liked beer-pong and quarters and like most kids drank to laugh but didn't let it get out of hand. Someone you could count on. Headed to college, was it Swarthmore, or Dartmouth? Anyway the same place her father had studied, a good school in New England.

When Rebecca's community would learn about the accident, the accidental death of the little black girl—when they read in the *Star-Republican* that the grieving family lived in the next county north, Tarbuton, in one of the small houses near the Black Dog Alley trailer park outlying Ralston; when they saw in the obituary that the girl was Eliza Green, a second-grade student at Ralston Elementary who “liked to jump rope and write”; when they heard from their neighbor that the deceased girl's father worked at Route 50's Jiffy Lube, the guy who cleaned your windows for free, who said, “You drive safe now, ma'am”—people experienced bad feelings. The teenager driving was the heart doctor's daughter, the Sperry girl, never been in trouble before, good girl, headed for college, probably a degree in pre-med, maybe law, certainly a bright future.

Why was the little girl riding her bicycle on the road at dusk, veering out into the road? Why had the girl's father so nearby not put a stop to her unsafe game? Where was her mother? Poor little girl, only seven, riding her bike at dusk on a back road. No one

asked where, her truck hurtling so recklessly, Rebecca Sperry had been going or from where she'd come. No one in Rebecca's community in Colchester County asked this, no, and least of all Marvin Ewing, the history teacher who'd recommended Rebecca for the Citizen's Award she was scheduled one and a half weeks later to receive at North Colchester High's graduation.

His student did not yet know about the award. Marvin Ewing knew for sure that she would be thrilled. Rebecca Sperry was one of the county's upstanding youngsters, a girl who would go far because she knew how to talk her way into and out of situations, and smiled a lot, yet showed restraint. That time Rebecca had turned in Mindy Wright (not a close friend but one of her peers) for cheating on Marvin Ewing's P.O.D. mid-term had proved her moral code, and when Marvin told Rebecca that he would talk to the cheater but that Rebecca should let it go because this cheating girl needed a break, forgiveness even, well, Rebecca had been willing to accept that, even though her grade was lower than Mindy's. That was compassion. That was self-control in a young person. When he heard about the accident, Monday morning at school in the teacher's lounge before the first bell, Marvin thought there must have been a mistake.

He had just asked, "Why the long faces, folks?"

"You didn't hear?" Ina Fellows said to Marvin. She set her mug down carefully on the linoleum counter and stared at him with eyebrows raised.

Over by the coffee machine Marvin stopped whistling the refrain from "Dixie's Land" and stared back at his colleague. How Ina must turn off kids, those arching brows, those puckered old English-teacher lips.

"Rebecca Sperry was involved in a hit and run Friday afternoon and killed a seven-year-old riding a tricycle."

"My God," Marvin said.

"Wasn't a tricycle, Ina," said Jacquelyn Phelps, ninth grade history teacher. "It was a small bike with training wheels."

Ina continued, "Rebecca turned herself in the next day."

"Well, that was brave," Marvin said.

They took a moment to think about that. Marvin asked, "Is anyone pressing charges?"

"The accident was at six o'clock," said the secretary, Mrs. Thornton, poking her head in the door to look for someone who was not in the lounge. "It was still light outside."

Jacquelyn Phelps, always pragmatic, said, "I'm sure the dead girl's family doesn't have a lot of money."

In homeroom, Marvin Ewing saw Gabriel Brooks with his head down on his desk. Nancy Friend's desk was empty. Josh Williams and Jennie Elliott leaned on each other, eyes red. Stupid kids, Marvin thought, don't know how good they have it. Cars when they're sixteen, college paid for, only thing they have to worry about is not failing, not getting pregnant, keeping secret or at least low-key their little stashes of pot, and not getting caught driving drunk. Rebecca would come out of this fine. It was an accident. The system wouldn't let her down.

Gabe Brooks fully expected to be pulled out of class that day, but no one ever came to question him.

The dead girl's father, Jeb Green, would live on from those days in a haze of grief and fury and fury-induced insomnia. He had heard the pick-up truck's roar ever since the

four-stop-sign crossing where Black Dog Alley met Covey Road but hadn't said anything to Eliza, his daughter, out near the end of the driveway trying her little sister's training wheels. He was thinking of the problem of the garden hose. How, left on overnight, old rubber develops leaks. Water from the green tube sprayed in fourteen different directions, sprinkling both his temple and his pant cuff. He would have to buy a new one. He thought about how people were constantly letting you down in ways both important and small. From that day forward, Jeb would never buy another hose. In fact, he would leave all of the yard and household chores to his wife, Shante, who'd seen the accident from the kitchen window.

Marvin Ewing, that Monday, and forever afterward, would not think about how he'd confiscated that fake ID from Rebecca Sperry. The license belonged to another Barnbridge girl, Kitty Bailey, an older blond lacrosse player whom Marvin had taught in U.S. History four years before. Marvin would think instead how, since that accident had happened at six o'clock in the evening, well then, lucky it was too early in the day for Rebecca to have been drinking much.

Father Brian Matthews, the priest at Saint Andrew's Church where on Sundays John Sperry (and Ann Sperry before her death) had brought Rebecca every weekend since she was born, did not want to consider too hard what he'd heard in confidence from the principal of North Colchester High: Senior Bash that Friday down in Ralston. In confidence, Dr. Cunningham told Father Matthews what everyone else already knew. How it so happened every year that seniors skipped one of their last days of class. Senior Bash was a tradition at North Colchester High since this generation's parents had graduated. Drawing on memories of his own high school days, Father Matthews had assured the principal, "Kids will be kids."

And these were some pretty good ones: when Gabriel Brooks and Nancy Friend dropped Rebecca Sperry off at her truck late that Friday afternoon, they'd asked if she was okay. A half-hour earlier, they had left the party to go for cigarettes. Mindy Wright had hosted Senior Bash down in Ralston because her mother had an estate on the river there. They could use the property—Mindy's mom wasn't asking questions, but no drinking—wink, wink. Gabe and Nancy and Rebecca had been partying since noon along with dozens of other students who hooked school that day. When the girls said they were hungry, Gabriel drove them into Ralston's 7-11 on Glebe Road where they bought chlidogs and Slushees and Camel Lights, Gabe and Nancy giggling at the man behind the counter who couldn't seem to count their change. Nancy would later remember but not want to think about how Rebecca, studying the rack of candy, had seemed confused. In the parking lot, she tried to light the wrong end of her cigarette.

"What's wrong with you?" Nancy said. "Are you okay?"

"This was my idea to come buy cigarettes, what are you talking about?" Rebecca said. The ends of her words, the consonants, folded in on themselves, but the judgment of Gabe and Nancy, who had each done several shots of tequila, salt on the hand, piece of lime, sitting in Mindy Wright's mother's Jacuzzi, was not sharp. Gabe lit Rebecca's cigarette for her. He'd had a crush on Rebecca since eighth grade.

It was dusk when she tried to brake the truck. Neither Gabriel nor Nancy wanted to imagine the thud. No one, not Gabriel nor Nancy (nor Marvin Ewing nor Dr. Sperry nor anyone), wanted to think of the press of metal and rubber and red and limb.

When the obituary came out, Mrs. Thornton, secretary at North Colchester High, observed aloud, "It says the little girl liked to write?"

Ray Clemens, the liaison teacher from the middle school who directed plays, happened to be in Mrs. Thornton's office standing at the copy machine. "My wife's cousin teaches at Ralston Elementary," he said. "She's friends with the girl's teacher, Ruth Callahan. The little girl loved to write."

Couldn't trust anyone to do anything in this family, Jeb Green was thinking as he duct taped that hose. Not shop for groceries, because you had to be careful, so careful to check for rot at the base of the cauliflower, to avoid the dented cans of soup, to inspect the expiration date on the milk. And you couldn't trust anyone else to bring home the money, because you had to be sure the boss treated you fairly, because this was a white man's world, and if you wanted to work as a secretary at Barth Office Supply, or an Agway checkout clerk, well, you were asking for it, like Shante had with her last two bosses. Better they live on just one salary, Shante looking after the house and taking care of the girls. Someone needed to watch after Toni who was five and Eliza who was, despite her airs, only seven.

Eliza, riding Toni's bike with the training wheels, barely remembered what it was like to be only five. At seven she felt the power of having learned not only to print and read and do math, but also having started to write in cursive—a secret language, swirled letters that made you never have to pick up your pencil. Eliza thought it was fun to connect the words, to loop together the words, *Hollyhasapuppythatsbeloves*. Ms. Callahan, with her hands buried in her pants pockets, told Eliza she was wrong, that she needed to make breaks (otherwise no one could read it), but Eliza continued to connect the letters because she figured there was no use in a secret swirling code if just anyone could understand.

Her little sister's training wheels seemed funny to her, the little bike, Eliza's own bike two years ago, wobbling from left to right. Toni didn't want to ride. She sat on her shins picking clover blossoms and putting them in a paper bag. Eliza felt like a pencil doing cursive writing, leaning at an angle to the ground, off balance but held up by the tiny wheels. She had been riding without training wheels for such a long time—had gotten a new bike with a banana seat that was blue and said *HUFFY*—so riding this little one with her knees doubled up and those wheels on the back was funny. Twice her weight caused the little bike to fall over, making Toni laugh out loud.

"I'm fooling around, fool," Eliza said to her sister, brushing dirt and grass from her right knee, which had gone down hardest.

"You can't ride a bi-ike!" Toni sang, throwing clover with her chubby hands.

"Look at you."

"Liza can't ride a bi-ike!" Toni sang.

"You still suck your thumb, I'm going to tell Daddy."

"Do not."

Toni sat on her thumb, which Eliza knew to be warped and swollen from all Toni's forgetful sucking. Eliza would never say anything to their parents, she just liked to tease Toni. She picked up the bike and looked over at their father kneeling by the side of the house. He looked stressed out, as her mother would say. Eliza thought about riding over the grass and yelling, "Hey, Daddy, look at me!" She decided instead she'd take a turn off the driveway onto the smoother surface of the road, and see how far she could lean. Maybe the asphalt would hold her leaning all the way, and she could pretend she was her pencil, writing in cursive like a grown-up, *MysisterTonieatstoats*.

In this family, Jeb was thinking, water spraying through three new pinholes, you couldn't even trust anyone to put the girls to bed. He had come home late from Jiffy Lube

the night before and found them all bunched together on the couch, Shante's arms around both girls, watching a *Three's Company* rerun and giggling. It was ten o'clock. Jeb didn't know much about little girls but he figured all children under ten ought to be in bed by nine, a rule that stuck from his childhood. He hoped Shante was watching him struggle with the hose from the window. Teach her a lesson about responsibility.

Shante was, secretly, watching her husband from the kitchen window. In her hands she had two iron-ons, a sparkly star for Eliza, a butterfly for Toni. Waiting for the iron to heat up she spied on Jeb—nice of him to water although right now he didn't look well. It made her sad how tired he'd been the past year. There was a nice thing he didn't know. She had been talking to Eliza's teacher at Ralston Elementary where they needed a Teacher's Aide. This was a job she could do. It didn't pay much, but it would help. Tonight she planned to share her good news: Jeb would not have to work overtime clean up every night; they could go back to normal life; they could enjoy each other, be how they'd been before Jeb had gotten so eaten-up. The iron was ready, but still she gazed at him, outside the window, bent on one knee. When the Ford F-150 came barreling down the road she was thinking how much she loved her husband's shoulders, that straight, strong line against the lawn.

Gabriel Brooks had been in love with Rebecca since eighth grade and he knew that Senior Bash might be his last chance. He could tell her how much he wished she weren't leaving for college so far away. From the 7-11 they would head back to the party, and if he could just get Nancy to walk ahead by herself, leaving him to steady Rebecca, hold her hand, then maybe something could happen. She was sitting in the front seat next to him, Nancy in the back.

"You're so quiet, something must be up," he said.

"I'm fine, you dope." She took his arm. "Take me to the party, I need another beer." But when they got to Mindy's house, Rebecca changed her mind.

"I just remembered, I got to go shopping with my dad."

Gabriel was a little mad. Dr. Sperry, always ruining things. Like the time Gabe and Becca had rented *Say Anything*, and Dr. Sperry watched the entire movie with them.

"Now?"

"Early tomorrow morning, some kind of graduation present." Rebecca put one foot on Gabe's dash. She wore dirty Birkenstocks. "Probably shoes. He says I need white shoes."

"Come on, Beck, stay a while longer," Gabe said. "Look, Josh and Jennie and them just got here."

"Drop me off. Here's the truck." She squeezed Gabe's arm, leaned back and kissed Nancy's cheek.

"You sure?" they said to her in unison.

"Later, guys." She stumbled out of the car.

When Marvin Ewing confiscated Kitty Bailey's I.D. in history class, he told Rebecca that he could turn her in to the principal but believed she had learned her lesson: You always get caught. Better not get a new one, he said. She smiled, "You're right, Mr. Ewing." Much later, he wouldn't want to think about how the kids had gotten their alcohol. Around the same time, Ina Fellows wouldn't want to ask how much money Dr. Sperry paid attorney Lucille Taylor to come down from Annapolis to defend Rebecca, and Jacquelyn Phelps, the pragmatist, would not want to wonder who let Rebecca drive home, who saw her leaving

Senior Bash and waved, “Later, Becca.” No one wanted to think about who swore to the police that yes, while Rebecca Sperry was at Mindy Wright’s party, she’d only had one beer, tops. And her one beer had certainly come early in the day, at noon, the moment she’d arrived.

That Saturday morning at eight-thirty, relaxing on the couch, Dr. Sperry was imagining the look on his daughter’s face when they pulled up at Lednum’s Jewelers. The ring he’d ordered for her was waiting there with Janet Swann, a pretty saleswoman, married to Officer Richard Swann of the Barnbridge police force. The ring was blue topaz set in white gold, six small diamonds; Rebecca was going to love it.

“Dad?”

“In here. Watching the news. Ready to go?”

“Dad, I had an accident yesterday.”

“What?” Dr. Sperry checked his watch. Nine o’clock, he had told the woman at Lednum’s. “What kind of accident?”

“The truck, I think it’s messed up.”

Gabe wouldn’t think of the bottle caps Rebecca emptied from her pocket in his car; she collected those; she put them in a giant vase on her desk next to the silver-plated duck bank. Nancy Friend would never again want to think about Camels, or childogs, or Yuengling. Gabriel Brooks, Nancy Friend, Marvin Ewing, Ina Fellows, the priest, the principal, the cops, the DA, the judge, and Dr. Sperry, and Rebecca herself, especially Rebecca, would not think about why she had chosen to drive on rather than stay to see about the girl she’d hit. To hide in her bedroom until the next morning when she told her father what she’d done. Hadn’t she and Dr. Sperry gone to the police themselves? Hadn’t she complied with all requests? Wouldn’t she suffer enough—this thing weighing on her for the rest of her life?

“I think I hit something coming back from my friend’s house.”

“What friend? What do you think you hit, a tree?”

His daughter did not reply. Just stood there twisting a cord that came out of her shirt, a hood cord on her white and pink shirt. She looked pale, almost mint-colored, the delicate skin around her eyes weepy.

“A dog? What? What did you hit?”

“I think I hit a girl. A little bicycle, like a tricycle, really small, Oh, Dad—”

With that, John Sperry’s daughter’s knees gave out and she sank onto the floor.

Reversing her truck, not looking at the heap on the road, Rebecca had had a brief sense of a man running, and a small child frozen on the lawn. She had had a better, fuller understanding of her own legs shaking. Pulling onto the other side of the road, right around the tangle lying there on the road, she put her foot down hard on the gas pedal. Her father would be in Barnbridge at the Pub, he would not be home. She flicked on headlights and slowed down. The girl would be okay. Why had she swerved right at the truck like that? How old was she—not dead—six? Nine? She couldn’t be dead. Rebecca knew the child was dead.

“It is possible you hit a girl,” Dr. Sperry said slowly. He knelt over his daughter, gently checking her forehead for fever. “But maybe not. Maybe it was a small deer that leaped into the road.”

Rebecca, driving wildly on the darkened country roads, would always remember how she felt a looseness in her jaw. As if her jaw were hanging unattached like spit, the rest of

her head compact and controlled but this jaw disobedient, foreign. She couldn't take her hands off the wheel to wipe her mouth; she needed them to guide the truck, hurtling fast toward home. Once she was safely in her room with her field hockey stick and lacrosse stick, the music box her mother had given her, her desk covered with brochures and forms from the college where she was heading in the fall, she would look in the mirror and check her jaw to make sure nothing had happened to it on the drive.

On her forehead she felt her father's cool fingers, and pushing into her right ear and cheekbone and shoulder was the plush rug. One elbow stuck out at a graceless angle; her trunk and legs, crooked, felt as numb as if they belonged to someone else. Rebecca kept her eyes shut tight. All that brightness ahead.

Eliza's last thoughts before the truck hit involved the complicated process of light fading on the road, the tablet for her cursive self growing less and less distinct. Her father was calling for her, must be really stressed out. She would ask Mommy to tell poor Daddy to relax because they had a good house, they loved each other, even Toni who was only five understood about love. Nothing was so bad. She'd be sure to kiss him ten times before she went to bed tonight—calling her name, why was he calling with such a pull in his voice? A chrome grate coming, this glass windshield, the loudest roar she ever heard, a big girl flying at her like a ghost-face, wide-eyed and blank as the cherry truck hood, the gravel asphalt pad, the surrounding soybeans and field corn of Tarbutton County and Colchester County and all the counties stretching away from the Green home next to the trailer park for as far as Eliza had ever seen. Her last idea was how nothing was too bad. Her body was writing, her bicycle was writing, everything in this world was cursive writing for *Milesmilesmilesmilesmiles*.

OPENING UPWARD LIKE WINGS

Joel James Davis

Three ducks fly over, a lawnmower growls from three houses away, and the exchange takes place on Mondays and Fridays. The exchange takes place at five in the evening in the third and fourth parking spaces from the picnic tables, on the lefthand side of the sand-colored building.

On Mondays and Fridays.

Not always at five. Almost never, actually.

Almost never.

Anson Senior is almost always late, whether he's delivering or picking up. Almost always late.

Almost always.

His '86 Corolla is beat to shit, with rust psoriasis taking over the oxidized maroon paint. The tires are bald, unsafe. The antenna is broken off above the first knuckle, allowing only the occasional AM station to crackle through the one good speaker. The crack in the windshield is the shape of a line that can't stay straight. It divides the top and the bottom of the glass.

Illegal.

The smell of fried foods and pizza mixes with the sweet odor of gasoline.

The lawnmower growls.

A station wagon with three punk kids in it pulls into the lot, perpendicular to where Anson Senior will park. They get out, music blasting, car still running, go inside.

Rain spots the windshield.

The sand-colored building is a convenience store called Fast Gas. Its has a lot of glass across the front with neon signs that say PIZZA, DONUTS, ATM, PROPANE EXCHANGE. The sidewalk is stippled with cigarettes that were sucked down to the brown filter, the part installed to make the long-term damage less severe. Filters also hug the curb, multiplying and mounting. The large white box says ICE in blue curvy letters, a PAY FIRST! handwritten sign adhered with masking tape on each corner.

Random trash spills from the refuse containers flanking the front door. Pop cans. Hot dog wrappers. Small, square Styrofoam containers. Just random trash.

A car with an old couple pulls into the lot.

Anson Senior has not yet arrived on this one particular evening, a Monday, proving he's not always there at five, thus the exchange not always taking place at five.

The exchange is what they call it. They actually call it that.

In front of everybody, no matter who they are. Strangers. Family. No matter. They call it the exchange.

Meredith is there. Has been since four-fifty-three. She's impatient. She's got things to do. A guy to go see. She's got things to do with the guy. Intimate things. Oh yes, don't stop! Right there! Oh, Christ! Ohmygod!

The child in the back of her new red SUV is talking to her. Mommy, listen, Mommy, please. A din to her. A thrumming. She's thinking of the Ohmygod!

I'm hungry, the child says. The smell. It's the smell that's doing it to the child. The rear windows are down.

Now there are more rain spots on the windshield.

The lawnmower growls.

Five-thirteen.

She sees it. The large trailer pulls into the lot. It's shiny and large. Eighteen wheels under it. Very shiny. It parks like normal along the opposite side of Fast Gas, the side where air is sold for seventy-five cents. Pulling in behind the large and shiny thing is an old, ratty pickup truck attached to a small trailer. It stops parallel to the big, shiny thing. A fat man with a blood-colored bandana slowly eases out of the pickup. Another man, less fat than the first, shakes hands with the fat man. They walk to the back of their respective trailers. Doors open.

While Meredith waits for Anson Senior she watches a wobbly black and white calf amble from the opulent trailer to the small, paltry one. The calf shits on the gray asphalt.

The punks laugh loudly and open three doors. Close three doors. They light cigarettes. They pull out of the lot.

Two cars pull up to the gasoline pumps. Three pull out. They exchange places.

They all need the commodity. The gasoline.

Where the hell's Anson Senior, Meredith thinks.

The old couple leaves. Anniversary. Dinner. Love.

Five-nineteen.

Now the rain is a full sprinkle.

I'm hungry, Mommy, the child says.

She doesn't hear him. She's thinking of Ohmygod! Man. His house. His money.

His new car. Fancy. Nice. Expensive. Very. The doors are hinged on the top. They open up

instead of to the side. The doors open upward like wings, Ohmygod! Man told her.

Impressive. Upward.

Meredith powers her windows upward.

The outside lights around the parking lot come on.

The calf is exchanged from big to small. The tailgates SLAM! SLAM! Off they go.

It's dinner time. Cars pull in. Cars pull out.

Fried foods and pizza.

Cigarette butts.

Two employees walk out the front of Fast Gas, go toward the picnic tables. They each smoke a cigarette. Quickly. It's dinnertime. A male. A female. One's the boss. The other's the underage girl

he's become carnal with. He's married with three brats. Wife's a bitch, he tells the girl often. Oh yes, don't stop! she tells the boss often. She gets more hours now. And a raise, too.

Two ducks fly over the sand-colored building. Their wings move upward, then they stop and the birds glide. Then the wings move upward.

Impressive.

Five-twenty-two.

The lawnmower growls.

Where the hell's Anson...Oh, there he is.

Anson Senior pulls in. The boss and the carnal girl crane their necks for two seconds, look at the maroon psoriasis, then back to talking about his wife and brats.

Anson pulls forward, opposite Meredith, front to tail, opposites, into space number four.

Jesus, Anson. Jesus Christ! Meredith says.

Hey, AJ! Anson says.

Daddy! Daddy!

Happy Birthday, buddy! Wow, you're five. Holy cow!

Bye, Mommy.

Bye.

Let's go, AJ! You big five-year-old!

The boss and the girl go around to the back of the building. Kiss. Slowly. Go back inside.

Raining full blast now.

Meredith pulls away. Tires squeal a bit.

We'll have cake. Ice cream. Macaroni and cheese. All your favorites, AJ!

Five-twenty-eight.

Two ducks fly over, and the lawnmower stops growling from three houses away.

Cannon
Davidson
Davis
Dent
Farkas
Gelineau
Gillan
Hay
Nowak
Pritts
Ralph
Thompson

