



**RYGA NUMBER 6, SUMMER 2013**

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## RYGA: A JOURNAL OF PROVOCATIONS NUMBER 6, SUMMER 2013



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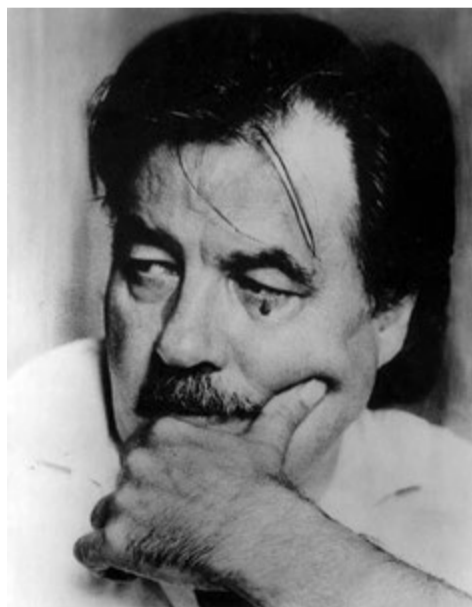
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**We take our name from Ryga**, a political writer, to honour his commitment to his art and to his world. His legacy is this: he was a human living in a community and that community was living in a nation, that nation in a world. He wrote without nostalgia about the world that lived around him. He believed the artist had a responsibility to write counternarratives, to treat the marginalized among us fairly, to challenge the formal boundaries of his art without losing the humanity of the characters that drive it. These characters live and move according to a complex, tentative political agreement that must not be taken as natural, but must be interrogated in every way.

—Sean Johnston, Editor



**George Ryga** (1931-87) is the author of Canada's best known English-language play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, first produced in 1967. He was one of Canada's most prolific authors – he maintained a taxing work program as a short story writer, novelist, radio and television dramatist, poet and film scenarist, not to mention ventures into the world of ballet and opera. In a period of 14 years he produced 190 plays, two cantatas, five screenplays, two long-playing albums, three novels, and a book of poetry, as well as a considerable body of unpublished and unproduced work.



# Ben Ladouceur

*Masters of the Impossible*

*At the Bourne*

*Transaction No. 2*

*Shuttle*

## MASTERS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Puberty and wartime  
don't count: I don't  
have many years to  
my name. My name  
is Siegfried. What  
I remember is the white  
of my mother's dinner  
plate. *It isn't  
a diet*, she said.  
*I'm simply never going  
to eat again.* I  
asked father if we  
ought to worry. *Look  
beneath the lilac tree*  
he retorted, *Look it's  
Mildred, isn't she  
pretty?* None of this  
counts. When Wilfred  
died, I was sleeping  
in an armchair.

The Celtic Cross Spread  
has informed me I've  
got one life left.  
My name remains, his  
becomes Roy. Magic  
is our livelihood, our  
gift to the coherent  
world. One of our  
white tigers reaches  
to save him from  
a tumble and tears  
his head like a dried  
Belgian leaf. The tiger  
is called Montecore.  
Love breaches that mouth  
of blood: Roy's first  
words in our life

after—for everything  
is new and red from  
here on in—articulate.

*Montecore is a good  
cat, he somehow screams.  
Make sure no harm  
comes to Montecore.*

## AT THE BOURNE

I spent my leave at Marylebone. The salad  
arrived on a baldcypress board  
unassembled: whole apple, ham in sopping  
sheets, rocket, acrid chutneys, burnt pumpernickel

crusts. Small wonder they bothered  
to kill the pig! Some Aussie  
from some weaker sister infantry  
took the seat across from me. Incarceration's legacy

perforated his vowels, made glottal  
his stops. When he said *hysterics*  
I heard *historics*. As in, *My damned battalion had me*  
*in hysterics. Those fat fucks lost track*

*of their duty—heard Doty—always running*  
*for the woods in pairs with women, they*  
*assured me, on their minds—heard mounds.*  
*Those useless base disgusting backwards*

*fags—heard fogs.* Fogs suddenly descended and it was  
Ypres again, it was early October, before I grew  
my beard. I was assembled, digested by fog. Dew  
between my back and fog's belly, fog's palm

in my mouth so I would not moan  
audibly. *Clean as a bean*, fog fibbed upon  
completion, and in the morning light I'd find  
the leaves with which fog wiped away

the faeces. Calamities  
make entrances of exits. If you do not  
survive, you are remembered  
as a change in weather: a fallacy, thrown together

pathetically. The Aussie took off. I clogged  
that establishment's toilet then made  
for the thoroughfare. Humidity was climbing  
like a millipede out of a bowl.

## TRANSACTION NO. 2

Music and light share a source

Animals wince at the door

Armpits reminiscent of inedible flora

Within the mist a chest whose moles end sentences

Cleft lip

Testicular cyst

I could not love a man who was complete

Uvulas mute like those of still bells

There is no cancer here but there are scars like mouths

We will starve

We will have only bones to hold

What strange grammar the night has been known to bring

A manoeuvre through glass

I love you less than ever before

For there is less of me



## SHUTTLE

I told so many lies that year.  
About hamburger meat becoming  
lukewarm in my satchel.  
About library books on the brink of  
expiry. I needed escape routes.

The kindest men were soft  
but the very softest men  
were so unkind. Nobody moved  
their lips when they spoke there.  
The heatwaves were long and indifferent.

Subway station signage lost  
decency as you headed north.  
The dots of the i's  
looked right through you. The tips  
of the v's could halve bones.

What little company I kept.  
Spent Saturday nights on wet patio  
chairs discussing potato  
chip flavours they missed  
from their sojourns to the Old World.

Then I kept less company.  
The unassembled vestiges of my new  
life and I waited outside an Ikea  
for a ride I had a feeling wouldn't  
come and it was the correct feeling.

**Ben Ladouceur** has been published in magazines like *CV2*, *The Malahat Review*, *Prism International*, and *Arc*. His work will be featured in the anthology *Best Canadian Poetry 2013*. He lives in Toronto.

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MY OLDER SISTER, WHO WAS A genius, knew the name of the virus right away when Zeff—that's what my parents called Dr. Zeff Fessenden—explained to my mother over the phone why he'd be late for the dinner party they had been at that moment expecting him to arrive for. The dining room table was set with the blue-and-white Wedgewood, silver, and my dead grandmother's Waterford; only the tall candles needed lighting. The other couple my parents expected was also a bit late, but they could be having trouble with their car, a thirteen-year-old Toyota. My mother had been sipping a drink my father had made for her just before Zeff's call. The three of us, my father in the rocking chair by the fireplace, me on the couch, and seventeen-year-old Lily in the big chair with the ottoman on the other side of the fireplace, all became audience to my mother's side of the conversation, trying to make sense of what she was saying.

Her smile changed into a frown as she listened to Zeff.

"I read about that in *The Sciences*. How did it get here?" my mother said.

Daddy, Lily, and I exchanged looks. It wasn't enough to go on. It was like Lily and Daddy doing the Sunday Times crossword every week; there weren't enough letters yet.

"Will she let you take bloods? Was he in Arizona?"

Zeff was chief doctor of epidemics for the National Institute of Health in our county.

Lily said, "Hanta virus," and my mother nodded.

When she got off the phone, she told us that Zeff was in the middle of an investigation of the death of a twenty-two-year-old Long Island student who had died of the fatal disease, which up until that moment had not been found outside of the Southwest.

Then the doorbell rang and the Campbells arrived, and I made myself scarce because they had not brought their kids, so I was unwelcome at the grown-up dinner table although Lily, who would be eighteen in two months, was. She had been accepted early at Guess What U. and had won about a million national awards already. So I played SEGA in the basement and watched some TV upstairs in the den and listened in at the kitchen door. Everyone except me had sat down at the dinner table when the doorbell rang again. It was Zeff, and everyone wanted to hear his news. Later no one minded when I sat next to my mother on the couch and Zeff answered more questions about the disease. What he said scared me because there was no cure and he was in our living room. My mother got up and asked me to help her clear the

first round of dishes in the kitchen.

Lily and I were having winter break from school that week in February. My parents had decided to take Friday off from work so that they could have the dinner party on Thursday night and we could go to a museum together on Friday. My father worked for the IRS, my mother was an Emergency Room nurse. That's how she had met Zeff, when he was interning.

The next morning I slept late and so did Lily. I was awakened by the sound of the computer printer in my parents' bedroom because it was against the wall my bed was on. My mother must have been printing out a letter because when I walked downstairs in my pajamas, I heard her reading it aloud to my father in the den. It was a letter about Lily who should have been valedictorian of her high school class. This had been an enormous deal in our house in October when ranking was announced in the high school; Lily had come home crying because Donald Jacobsen, whom she'd been in class with since kindergarten and was always miles ahead of, had come up to her to smirk, "I'm Number One, and you're Number Two." My parents found out that it was the school's grade weighting and ranking policy that had dropped Lily behind Donald. My parents had gone to speak to the high school Principal who admitted the district policy was to blame; he wrote a letter about Lily to all the colleges she applied to so they knew she was secretly the valedictorian while publicly, Donald would remain the named one because if everyone found out, all the grades and ranks would have to be redone and it would be a big mess. My parents agreed to that deal with the understanding that the new Superintendent and Principal would look into changing the policy so I could go on playing the double bass in the orchestra without it hurting my future rank, like a younger sister had any chance of the world of ever being in the top ten.

So what had happened was that earlier in the week of the dinner party and the hanta virus arrival on Long Island, my parents had received a letter from the Superintendent of Schools and the high school Principal saying they had changed the weighting-ranking policy. My mother's letter, the one she was reading to my father in the den, was her reaction to that letter. Now she wanted them to reconsider and let Lily be co-valedictorian with Donald.

"But we agreed not to ask for anything more," my father said.

I was standing in the kitchen doorway out of their sight.

"You make me sound like the Fisherman's Wife in the fairy tale,"

my mother said. “Always wanting more. But it’s just not fair. It’s still not fair.”

They argued for a long time without raising their voices.

“You always turn things into an attack on you,” my mother said.

“You’re accusing me—”

“I feel like Lady Macbeth married to Hamlet,” my mother said.

“Look, if you feel it isn’t enough, it isn’t enough,” my father said.

“I just don’t want to be alone in this. I’ve been alone before and it caused a death.”

“Let’s not go into all that again,” my father said.

“It wasn’t your body.”

“I know I’ve failed you. This is always about my failure.”

I heard her stand up. I got ready to disappear.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” my mother said. “I’m the biggest failure I know, not you.”

Then my mother did what she always did when she was unhappy. She went to bed and stayed there all Friday, day and night.

My father bought Chinese food for Lily and me for dinner. She and I watched Tonya Harding’s skate lace crisis and Nancy Kerrigan win the silver. She was one-tenth behind the sixteen-year-old Russian girl who wore an awful outfit with pink fuzz around her arms. I thought of Lily and Donald, but I didn’t say anything. There was no talking in our house that day or night.

The next morning, Saturday, I was in no rush to get out of bed. Dr. Zeff had been on television the night before, in front of a zillion microphones and cameras, talking very slowly about the hanta virus and the Center for Disease Control. It was weird to see someone on television who had just been in our living room except that my mother’s cousin had been on television a lot because he was a big shot county politician and also my best friend from camp’s father was on Saturday Night Live and I slept over several times at her apartment in the City, so I had seen people I knew on television before. Also, my mother’s older brother, my Uncle Martin, had won a Nobel Prize for chemistry, and I’d seen him on TV, too. The hanta virus scared me.

I heard voices from downstairs, though, and peeked out into the hall to see if Lily’s bedroom door was open. It wasn’t, so that meant that my parents were talking. Even through the floor, I could tell the talk was different from the argument. I went to the top of the stairs and listened, and my mother sounded okay. My father was asking her if she wanted to go to the museum and she said sure. Then she must have seen my big

Goofy slippers Lily had given me for Christmas at the top of the stairs and she called out to me did I want to go to the museum and I said sure, too.

I woke Lily and told her what we were doing and we did shifts of breakfast and quick showers. By the time I was dressed and downstairs ready to eat, my father was coming up the front walk. My mother said he gone out to cash money. He was carrying a little box from the jewelry store and he handed it to her when he came through the door.

It was a gold ring with a woman on it, like an entirely gold cameo. One of the woman's breasts was exposed. She was looking off to the right. It was her left breast. My mother was very happy with the ring. She showed it to Lily and me and let me try it on and fussed over it all day.

We went into the City by train. It was very cold and windy, but sunny. We got a cab from Penn Station to the Metropolitan Museum on Fifth Avenue. My parents and Lily had certain ideas about where they wanted to look in the museum. There were huge urns filled with yellow forsythia in the Great Hall. It'd just snowed for the fourteenth time that winter the night before, so it was nice to see the flowers.

Lily wanted to see the new Dégas exhibit which was landscapes. I got lost in the nineteenth century European paintings. My mother found me and made me look at a Van Gogh of blue irises against a white wall. She also dragged me through an early Renaissance Spanish courtyard, which looked down like balconies over a court with a fountain where some younger kids were throwing coins. But she got wrapped up looking at some round tapestry deal and roped my father into looking at it with her. My mother was always very keen on tapestries because "women did them." My father liked the Rodin room the best because the black statues had enormous feet and hands. He was very funny about the body parts and made me laugh although my big toe was starting to hurt in my sneakers. Lily was having a conversation with my mother when we got to the Egyptian hallway on the way to the Temple of Dendur. Lily was talking to her about the cowrie shell necklace-collar belonging to this Queen Meroe and whispered in their secret conversation voice how the cowrie shell was shaped like the crotch of the Rodin dancer who held up her foot backwards like the Russian ice skater had, "exposing her Volvo." I didn't ask.

My mother remembered me as we entered the Temple of Dendur room and faced the big, black, flat pool. "We had to fish you out of that when you were three. Do you remember?" I didn't. My father, who had been our guide through the museum, referring to the map he had made

a beeline for back in the Great Hall, led us to the back of the Temple where you would never believe there was a double glass doorway to the new American Wing.

The first thing I saw was baseball cards from the early 1900s. I was wearing my new Braves jacket. Little League tryouts were the first weekend in March, and my time card was already up on the refrigerator at home. There was a long hall of grandfather clocks my father liked, and then this whole, like, greenhouse room built on the outside of the museum. You could see the windows and doors where the museum had stopped before this tremendous build-on.

“It’s like the museum is making a display of itself, its old wall,” I said, and my mother looked at me with my favorite face, the one that said I’d surprised her.

There was an upstairs and a downstairs to this huge solarium; you could see outside the wall of glass into Central Park where someone was rollerblading in the freezing cold, and several New Yorkers were jogging past hills and boulders covered with old and new snow. I sat down on a cedar bench between two potted trees while my parents and Lily oo-ed and ah-ed over Tiffany stained glass doors and old engraved silver and lots of sculptures. I watched a little boy in a wheelchair being pushed around by his mother. He had cerebral palsy, I thought, but he wasn’t drooling. He wore a striped t-shirt and matching pants and little sneakers, much too little for the rest of his body size. He liked the statue of the Indian and the one of the three standing bears. I shut my eyes and the sunlight from outside the window came through my lids like through the glass. At lunch my mother had asked, “What did you see that you think you’ll remember?” I said the painting of the woman in a long Victorian dress leaning over to look at a painting in the Metropolitan Museum when it was on Fourteenth Street. My father was surprised the museum had originally been on Fourteenth Street. Sitting in the solarium, I opened my eyes and looked at the little boy in the wheelchair again. We were all like things in a museum to be looked at.

My mother said we had only one more place to go in the American Wing so we could go home on an off-peak time train. It was a wallpapered eighteenth century area. My mother read and commented that the wallpaper was a year older than the Constitution. I was looking for a portrait of Mercy Otis Warren because I had to write a term paper on her and had been taking notes since November. As it turned out, no Mercy Warren, but Lily led me into one of those little rooms they create, you go through a narrow doorway and are barred from entering someone



dead's living room from the 1700s and they backlight the windows and put in meadow scenes behind the paned glass. This small dark room had two green wing chairs on either side of the big fireplace, and a card table with real old cards on it, and sideboard furniture with candles and candelabra, pictures on the wallpapered wall.

I found my mother sitting on a bench outside the room.

"Pretty good, hmm?" she said.

I sat down next to her and took a pebble out of my sneaker that had been hurting my big toe for a long time.

"We could live in there," I said. "Then we wouldn't have the long trip home."

"It does look like our living room, doesn't it?" my mother said.

I leaned against her soft parka and shut my eyes. She put her arm around me. I pictured the dinner party right in that museum room. I could see Zeff sitting in the left-hand green wing chair.

On the train, I sat next to my father and Lily sat next to my mother. After Jamaica Station, when a noisy bunch of teenagers got out, I said to him, "Maybe one day our den with the forty-five-inch TV will be a room in the museum, what do you think?"

His eyes widened and he smiled. "Tell that to your mother when we get home. Maybe it'll make her happy. In fact, tell her right away at the diner."

He knew the diner was my favorite place to go out for supper. After a day of trains, lunch at the museum, cabs, we were going out for supper, too.

"She's happy already, Daddy," I said.

I looked back over to where Lily was sitting with her eyes closed. My mother saw me and smiled. The window of the train was backlit by sunset. A blur of bare trees and attached houses rushed by. We were heading east. I locked my hands together at the palms and flapped just one.

"Get it, Daddy?" I said. "The American *wing*."

**L.S. Bassen:** Finalist for 2011 Flannery O'Connor Award; Fiction Editor for [prickofthespindle.com](http://prickofthespindle.com); Reader for [electricliterature.com](http://electricliterature.com); won the 2009 APP Drama Prize and a Mary Roberts Rinehart Fellowship; book reviewer for [brooklyner.org](http://brooklyner.org), [therumpus.net](http://therumpus.net), [press1](http://press1), [bigwonderfulpress.com](http://bigwonderfulpress.com), [ciderpressreview.com](http://ciderpressreview.com), [smallbeerpress.com](http://smallbeerpress.com), [sobriquetmagazine.com](http://sobriquetmagazine.com); author of poetry in print and online. Visit *The 2River View* for recently published poetry.

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Detritus

Shortly before the end

Cloud Formations

bulletin

*Kim  
Goldberg*

**DETRITUS***In memory of Cheryl Lynn Sim*

I am building a book from trash to hold something  
 that was cast off But also perhaps  
 to transmute it For what is the true value of ligament  
 and sinew in the falling economy of our depleted dreams?  
 I don't claim to understand the alchemy, yet I am compelled to  
 scour this vacant lot at the end of my street for its  
 misshapen offerings

Yes, *that* lot, where she was found  
 after living on the street for two years since losing  
 her restaurant job—same age as me And by 'vacant' I mean  
 not yet bulldozed and built upon For this scruff of indeterminacy  
 in the gut of the city is teeming with narrative vectors  
 and forgotten genomes in every shape and size, six species of  
 clover alone, so not vacant at all

Each new day wakes from a strangle of peavine,  
 casts off the torn sleeping bag covering its lumpy mass, unwinds  
 all the raccoon shit and spiderweave that settled  
 upon it overnight and kicks them into a pile of blue  
 yarn fading in a sun-parched corner of this jumbled wasteland  
 where I gather it now for my binding I do not remove  
 last year's nut-hard alder cones caught in the fibres, for they too  
 are part of the story

A swollen leaf gall, rosy as a balloon heart on  
 Valentine's Day, becomes a bead fastener to snug the yarn tight  
 But it is the paper that lies balled in my stomach  
 every time I touch it

Catherine says the stiffened pages  
 that I cut from a crumpled shopping bag trapped  
 under a butterfly bush—gritty and  
 grease-stained, mapping our descent into chaos  
 patterns of translucent reticulation, further aggravated  
 by a coat of dirty varathane thwacked on in my basement—remind her  
 of those Nazi lampshades made from human hide

Of course neither of us has ever seen  
such a thing Yet we both agree this is how it would feel,  
how the light would glow from behind, how the body  
would recognize its own

## SHORTLY BEFORE THE END

Shortly before the end, their minds turned sleek and black and were last seen bobbing and diving among small, open fishboats in the harbour. The golden light scattered diamonds atop the sea whenever a lean mind broke the surface. Each mind had a tight band around its neck and a string on one leg. This allowed it to continue searching and biting down on anything slippery it might encounter while scouring the murky depths. But the collar prevented the mind from assimilating its catch, thus rendering each mind into an immaculate self-propelled satchel that was relieved of its still squirming bounty by a higher power every time it bobbed to the surface and the string was reeled in. By afternoon, the collars were removed and the ravenous minds were allowed to eat just enough of their catch to remain conscious and nourish brain cells. Then they were shut away in wicker crates until the following day.

## CLOUD FORMATIONS

She sees a loose white cloud dancing  
at the end of the underpass—wild cherry blossoms  
pressed tight against blue mind. Beyond this concrete tubeworm  
a world peeled raw by wind and light.

At the end of the underpass—wild cherry blossoms.  
With this shortcut, she is reborn each day into  
a world peeled raw by wind and light.  
From the shadows, a white rabbit buckets down hole.

With this shortcut, she is reborn each day into  
hands that touch, tongue that sucks the brine  
from the shadows. A white rabbit buckets down hole  
into a nest of people curled tight as pillbugs with

hands that touch, tongues that suck the brine.  
A rabbit could appear miraculous  
to a nest of people curled tight as pillbugs with  
rasp of traffic overhead.

A rabbit could appear miraculous  
like a crab in wet sand. A ragman stirs to life,  
rasp of traffic overhead.  
Pumpkin pie dreams slide away as he opens his eyes.

Like a crab in wet sand, a ragman stirs to life  
pressed tight against blue mind beyond this concrete tubeworm.  
Pumpkin pie dreams slide away. As he opens his eyes  
he sees a loose white cloud dancing.

## **BULLETIN**

the earth's hot breath arrives today

beyond the grebes, a young cormorant not yet gone black

hi-def pixels urge calm

standing statue at the back end of the marsh

levels are within

this sun-drying phoenix, crucifixion pose atop fallen swallow box

the designated safe zone

in a violet-green cloud of bucket-mouthed dreams

as a precaution

that crack of gunfire is just a beaver tail smacking down

the herd is advised

intruder alert! dive! dive!

to pitch camp underground (especially offspring)

floating low, two marsh hawks hunt wisdom in grasses

battening all hatches, and avoiding milk and fresh produce

hoping to carve the lean silence of nervous voles

for one week



**Kim Goldberg** is a poet, journalist and author in Nanaimo, BC. Her *Red Zone* collection of poems about urban homelessness has been taught in university literature courses. Her previous collection, *Ride Backwards on Dragon*, was a finalist for Canada's Gerald Lampert Award. Visit [www.pigsquashpress.com](http://www.pigsquashpress.com)

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LIONEL CRANE WAS AS QUIET AS they come. He was home-schooled for the first thirteen years of his life, and then transferred into our grade seven class when his mother decided she had nothing left to teach him. He could have gone right into Talbot's high school, but the principal advised he stay with people his own age. He had a much smaller sense of personal space than the rest of us. He didn't stare at your chest when he talked to you, but he didn't look into your eyes either—always into your mouth, as if he were looking for some secret hanging from the end of your uvula.

The only thing that got Lionel a little respect was the fact that he was the tallest in the class and had already completed a voice change without any dips or squeaks, so no one bothered him. He kept to himself mostly, and no one really knew where he went at lunchtime.

Just before Thanksgiving the grade sevens and eights at Talbot Junior High School had a talent show. A bunch of the girls lip-synched some Britney Spears songs, some guys did an air band version of "Superman's Dead," and the rest of us were just glad to get out of class. Then Lionel came out of the wings in denim tights and a blue tank top. A teacher turned off the houselights. Lionel stood in the middle of the stage, eyes glued to the floor, and then rose up on his bare toes, lifted his arms, and performed the first contemporary routine we had ever seen. He danced to a slow romantic pop song that every boy in the class had put on the mix CD he made for his girlfriend that year, a song sung with a smoky, questioning voice. He spun his skinny body around the stage with muscles I didn't think a thirteen-year-old could have. As his legs flung above his head with grace and confidence, the girl sitting beside me said to me or the universe, "I'm going to make my boyfriend learn to do that."

That was when Lionel Crane and I became friends, not because he had earned popularity points, but because the tenderness of his motions showed me that he had something worth sharing. I made it my job to tell off every pimple-faced boy who dared to say Lionel was gay. I flicked my eraser at Jonah MacKenzie's adam's apple and told him he was just jealous when he asked Lionel if he was a fag. That day Lionel and I walked home from school together. We kept the tradition for the rest of the year.

His mother had been a ballerina—not a pretty one, but still a successful one. Mrs. Crane had met Talbot's optometrist while he was finishing his degree in Calgary. She was ten years older than him, and much older than most mothers of kids my age, but I only knew this because Lionel told me her age in secret once. He told me in exchange

for my secret that our dog was half Pit Bull, but we didn't want to keep him in a muzzle all the time. He could have told me she was twenty-four or fifty and I would have believed him. The only thing that gave her age away was the thick strands of white hair through her dark bun. She refused to dye them out the way most mothers did.

There were two things about Lionel's mother that fascinated me: she wore black painted-on eyeliner that met in a perfect narrow V at the corners of her eyes. And her legs, which were bare even in the dead of winter, were pure white and veinless. I thought all mothers had spider and varicose veins, that they appeared automatically when your blood pumped for nine months into someone else.

Since she had so much free time now that Lionel was in school, she rented the upstairs of the Legion one evening a week and started Talbot's first dance class. The impact of Lionel's performance was obvious when she ended up with a hundred kids who had spent the holidays twirling all over their families' living rooms until their parents relented. I didn't take lessons because my parents couldn't afford it, but Lionel would teach me how to stand in ballet shoes and spin without getting dizzy in their basement, with its walls lined in mirrors. He would improvise for me and then ask me to try.

"You know I can't dance," I'd say.

"Because you won't try," he'd say, smiling. He'd grab my hands and pull me into a crazy Jitterbug, scrunching up his face with his tongue hanging out as if the movements took effort, as if they didn't flow naturally from somewhere deep and unreachable. I'd laugh and pull away, plunging my fists into my hoodie pouch. I'd curl up into one of the green faux-fur beanbag chairs with pink centres, and he'd collapse dramatically into the other. He told me once they looked like boobs. "Boys think everything looks like boobs," I said. I stood up and dropped my beanbag on him, then jumped on it.

I'd go home, close the curtains, blare Alanis Morissette and try to free my scraggly limbs to flow like his. Next time, I told myself, I would dance with him. I would be freer and less uptight and I'd be able to laugh at myself. But I'd catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and my hands would fall at my sides. The next time we'd hang out I'd watch him again in awe and knew I could never let him know how awkward I really was.

The summer between grade seven and eight I helped my mom clean houses while Lionel and his mother went to Vancouver to dance and his father stayed home to check people's eyes. Lionel and I thought Mom

would seem more professional if we gave her business a name. Lionel came up with Keeping Kleen. I bought a khaki utility dress from the Goodwill and he took a sharpie and drew a little feather duster on the breast pocket with two calligraphy K's under it.

We sent each other postcards we made from cereal boxes. It became a game in testing the Canadian mail system. One day he unraveled an entire roll of masking tape and wrote a message the whole length of it, then rolled it back up, still in one continuous piece. Along the inside circle of cardboard he wrote, "All the tape in the world can't contain our love." He wrote my address along the outer layer and put four stamps on it for good measure. I never got it. He told me about it when he got home, and we laughed and I loved that it was worth all that effort to create something I might never see.

When he came back from out West half way through September, it was clear something was different. His mother had spent the summer sleeping longer and longer, he told me, 'til she was going to sleep at eleven after the show, and waking up at noon the next day. Her performances were becoming more and more sloppy and he had worried they would kick her out. I wondered why he hadn't said anything about it in his postcards to me, and was glad he hadn't. He didn't bring it up again until October when she broke a hundred little hearts by cancelling her class for that term. Lionel got his father to pull him out of grade eight and registered him as home-schooled so he could stay with his mom. It didn't take much convincing since he was way ahead of the rest of the class anyway.

Lionel's mother started covering her legs with long broom skirts when she started using a wheelchair. She lost the defining black lines around her eyes when she no longer had the strength to lift her arms for more than a few seconds. He kept updating me about the stages of her body breaking down, how her voice was changing, how she would soon need a machine to help her breathe. She had told him she didn't want to drag this dying thing out. She wanted to go gracefully, smoothly, and if she shut down she didn't want anyone reviving her.

I was okay with the way he was changing. I could handle him being sad all the time. But I couldn't stand myself for never knowing what to say. I would sit there in silence while he told me he had to cut her long, thick hair because she couldn't lift her arms to brush it, because she felt the weight of it too heavy along the back of her neck. I sat there willing myself to put my arm around his shoulder, but I'd freeze in fear. I'd try to moisten my stiff mouth to say something thoughtful and I'd just end

up making nervous gulping sounds. I couldn't get myself to cry with him when he cried. I'd try to force the tears, try to imagine how I would feel if my mom died, but all I could do was sit there sweating, afraid to hold his hand because mine was so clammy.

I finally stopped visiting him after the day Lionel and I sat at the kitchen counter playing Uno while Mrs. Crane sat nearby in her wheelchair. Her head was propped up with a foam neckpiece. Her new bob splayed out crazily around it. I skipped Lionel for the third time in a row and he swore. Mrs. Crane started to snicker, then laugh. Her voice became nasally as her throat muscles began to relax. She laughed and laughed and I started laughing too. I laughed with her for a few seconds until I turned and saw that her eyes looked scared. Lionel had told me that sometimes this happens, that she cries or laughs for no reason. But he told me too many things about how her body was betraying her for me to keep track of it all. I kept laughing with her, looking into her scared eyes, my heart thudding. I couldn't look at him. I saw the bright colours of the cards droop in his hands as they went limp on the table. I could see his hand reaching out to touch my arm. I stood up before he could reach me. I was still laughing as I ran to the washroom, and then I sat on the toilet and cried until I could hear her laughter trickle away.

After that I started going with mom to work more often. I tried to fill my weekends with cleaning, told her I was saving up so I could buy a bike to get to school. I stopped wearing my khaki dress to work—I was outgrowing it anyway. He called twice for me, and then stopped trying. It made sense to me. He must have understood I wasn't the right person to talk to.

It went like that for a couple months, me working a couple of nights a week with Mom, doing some cleaning gigs with her on the weekend. I mostly liked it, seeing the kind of crap people had, learning the different kinds of dust that accumulate in different kinds of houses, discovering the corners no one seems to care about. I loved finding a closet or basement full of cobwebs, standing on a stool with a broomstick and waving the handle around just below the ceiling 'til the webs wrapped in a fluffy cocoon of filth around the end of it.

Then one Saturday while I was staring at my fingernails as we drove to work, Mom pulled the car into the Cranes' driveway.

“Mom, this is Lionel's house!”

“Oh, honey, I'm sorry—I didn't even make the connection.”

“Drive me back home, please.” I saw the curtain move in the front bay window, and Lionel's face flashed there for a second.

“I don’t think I can very well do that now.” I knew she was right. It would look awful if we left now that we’d been seen. “Besides, it’ll make me late.”

I slunk down into my seat. “I can’t go in there.”

“I think you can be a big girl about this. I don’t see any problem—friends grow apart. You’re here to work, anyway, not to socialize.”

I lifted the bucket of cleaning supplies out of the trunk and pressed them against my chest. The wooden porch made its familiar warm thudding sound as we walked up the steps.

Mr. Crane was sitting at a stool in the kitchen, in the same spot I’d had my fit. “Heidi, nice to see you again,” he said. He smiled like he wanted to mean it. “Lucile’s resting in the other room, and Lionel’s reading to her,” he said.

“We’ll make sure not to bother them,” Mom said.

“Oh, no—I’m sure you won’t be a bother,” he said, his voice trailing at the end. “No bother at all,” he said again, as if he had forgotten what the words meant. He left to do some work in the office. Mom sent me to work on the basement. I figured I’d have to go through a bottle of Windex in order to get the dust-speckled mirrors sparkling.

My heart slowed as I stood in the middle of the familiar mirror-covered room—the bureau and bankers boxes in one corner, the foam mats on the floor, and the fuzzy green beanbag chairs. I picked one up with both hands and threw it against a mirror. The mirror wiggled a bit, and the tiny Styrofoam balls in the chair made a hushing sound as it slid down the wall.

I didn’t feel like staring at myself for an hour, so I started dusting the bureau in the corner. It was covered in well-wishing cards, dried flowers, and hummingbird figurines. I found a shortbread cookie tin and opened it. Inside was a long dark ponytail, thick and streaked with strands of white. I ran my hand along it slowly. Her hair was coarse and dense. I turned to the mirror, held the ponytail against the back of my neck, ran it along my shoulder.

I thought about our class trip to the Talbot museum in grade seven. In a town with a population of 6500, there wasn’t much history to brag about, but the museum prided itself on its extensive collection of Victorian hair wreaths. The other kids thought the wreaths were gross, but Lionel and I thought they were beautiful—the various shades of black, brown, and blond all looped and twisted and woven together as intricately as lace to form flowers and organic shapes and patterns.

“Women would trade hair with their friends and neighbours,” the

curator said reverently, “to add colour and texture to their pieces.” I loved the thought of that—various pieces of friends and family woven together to make an heirloom. They were also used as a form of mourning. Sometimes strands of the hair of a dead loved one were wrapped into tiny pieces of jewelry. Lionel said it was weird since hair is something that grows but is made up of dead cells. “Apparently,” he said, “hair can still grow after someone dies.”

I told Lionel I was going to make one. I went home and started to collect the hair from my brush, tenderly pulling the strands straight into long strips, curling them in large loops and storing them in an unused pencil case. I was religious about it for a week and was about to start asking other people for their unwanted hair, until my mom found the collection, told me hair was dirty and said it was disgusting to keep it.

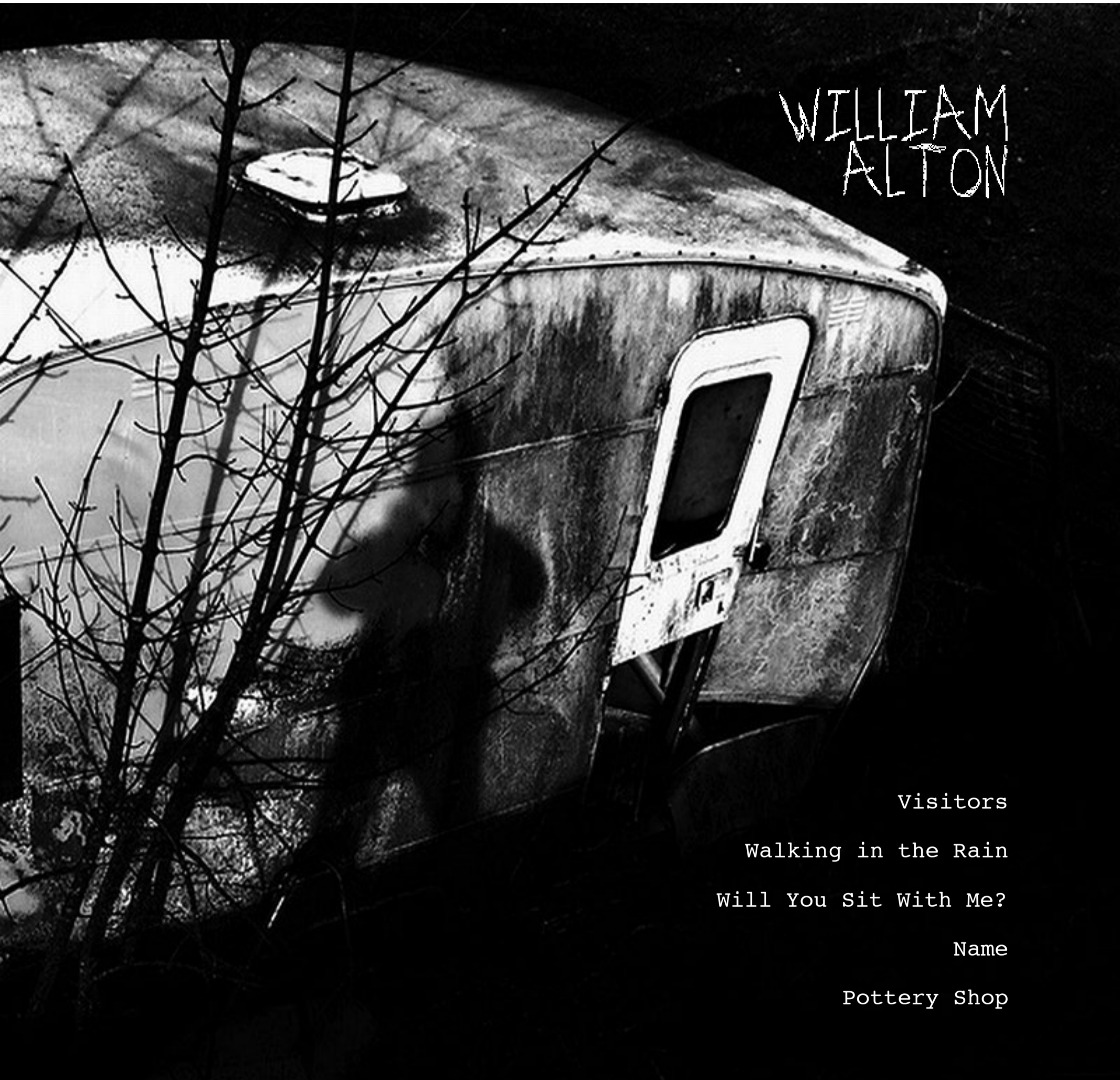
I put Mrs. Crane’s ponytail back in the cookie tin, and put the cookie tin in the pocket of my hoodie. It bounced gently against my belly button as I climbed up and down the stepping stool to reach the tops of the mirrors. Every creak from the ceiling made me look to the door, just in case Lionel came in. I kept dreading that door opening, and yet I was disappointed when it never did. I didn’t tell my mom I was keeping the cookie tin for the time being. I took it home and put it on my dresser, beside my collection of postcards from Lionel.

The trick to writing along a whole roll of tape is to empty one roll, and then start rewrapping another roll onto the empty cardboard centre. I lay on my bed that evening, throwing my ball of extra masking tape against the ceiling and waiting the few seconds for it to fall while I tried to think of things to write to Lionel—about the collection of creepy wax dolls I had to dust every week, about the man who wouldn’t let me throw out the moldy bread he was saving for the ducks, about all the things I loved about his mom, all the things he’d gotten from her, like her grace. And I was so eternally sorry. I put five permanent stamps on it, wrote his address and name, and dropped it in the mailbox on my way to school the next day.



**Melissa Kuipers** grew up on an egg farm in southern Ontario. She taught high school English and creative writing for a few years before becoming envious of her students and deciding to go back to school. She has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Toronto, and has had stories published in *Here Be Monsters* and *The Puritan*, and creative non-fiction in *carte blanche* and *Qwerty*.

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WILLIAM  
ALTON

Visitors

Walking in the Rain

Will You Sit With Me?

Name

Pottery Shop

## VISITORS

The world was water around me. I lived at the bottom of a stream.  
Everything was bent. People moved and talked, but none of it was real.  
It was all the same. People wore pale masks over brutal eyes. Their bodies  
warped and twisted. Long pale legs hung from hollow hips. Impossible  
feet ended in ragged toes. A group of visitors came through the ward  
doors. I imagined they were all family. There was the dad and the mother.  
Maybe a brother and sister, or maybe a sister-in-law. I didn't know. They  
were all fat and blond and soft. I wanted to throw things at them. But I  
didn't.

## WALKING IN THE RAIN

She kept her head down, her fists balled up in her pockets, shoulders dark with rain. Her hair stuck to her face like long red wounds. She was a pebble rolling in water. I babbled. She waited. After a bit, she pushed her fingertips against my lips. They tasted of cinnamon and cigarettes. She kind of smiled and walked away. I followed and kept quiet. She didn't want to talk. I wondered what lived on the tip of her tongue.

## WILL YOU SIT WITH ME?

She was brand new, pale as eggshells. Hair like old blood. She didn't talk much. No one knew her story. She took a lot of naps. She was ground down, all her angles worn smooth. People ignored her. She was furniture. Sometimes she was sick for days. Then she was back, tired, dark around the eyes, knees pulled up to her chest, scars running from her wrists into her sleeves. "Will you sit with me?" It was barely a voice at all: a ghost of a voice. Tears flooded the little creases where her nose met her cheeks. I wanted to tell her it was going to be okay, but I couldn't. No one knew about these things.

## NAME

The baby ate her alive. She went white. She dumped weight. I remember her ribs sticking out so far it hurt her when I touched them. Bones cast deep shadows. Her face settled into an angry, black and white mask. Her eyes got huge and glittery. All the way home, she kept her head on my shoulder. It felt lighter than it used to. Her eyes were closed. The steps were little tricky. Her legs had abandoned her. She stopped on the porch for her breath. She wobbled when I let go to get the door. "What did you name her?" She curled up on the couch and lit a cigarette. "She's going to die. She doesn't need a name."

I got a beer and thought about that.

## POTTERY SHOP

I sat in the doorway of a pottery shop on Pike. Rain and a little soft snow gathered on the sidewalk by my feet. My feet hurt. It had been almost three months since I'd taken my shoes off. Wind curled into the doorway and wrapped itself around my ears and neck, sprayed my face with whatever refugee water it carried from the weather out on the street itself. I shivered against the glass door of the shop. I wanted to die. There were noises downtown no one ever thought of. Winos talked in their sleep. Runaways cried in alleyways. Shopping cart ladies mumbled and rustled in their aluminum foil outfits, pushed their carts, the wheels raising a racket familiar and pathetic. Inside the shop, ceramic pots and glass vases stood on white pillars and shelves over a black and white checkered floor. Little pools of pure white light spread soft over them. Come morning, people with money and homes would walk through the doorway I slept in.

**William L. Alton** was born November 5, 1969, and started writing in the 80s while incarcerated in a psychiatric prison. Since then his work has appeared in *Main Channel Voices*, *World Audience* and *Breadcrumb Scabs*, among others. In 2010, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He has published one book titled *Heroes of Silence*. He earned his both BA and MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon, where he continues to live.

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IN THE AIRPLANE BATHROOM, HE HAD pressed his chin to the cool white curve of the toilet seat, vomiting three times. Dirt meant less to him now, germs meant less, and the only thing that mattered was how he was in the sky over the ocean and therefore nowhere at all. He no longer had long hair to push out of his face since he had gotten it cut two days before he left Uganda. Cattle lumbered past while he sat in a wooden barber's shack on the roadside. Barefoot and chewing on sugarcane, a small boy was following them, the whip he swung at least four times his length. The hill past the road had the same slope you get on a saddle. Michael had only seen two horses over his African year, named Marvel and Finn and owned by a retired Italian construction magnate on his farm outside of Kampala.

Maybe it was May, maybe it was in June that the pair of them had drunk Nile beer and watched a group of local boys play soccer. Two of them had been sharing a single pair of cleats, the one who wore the right shoe pausing occasionally to stare at Michael through the late afternoon's rising dust. The Italian laughed, took a sip. "Did you hear that? He just said that he wishes you were the goalie. He'd love to score a goal against a *muzungu*. Little bastard probably could, too. You don't look like much of a player, excuse me saying so." And he tipped out the remains of his beer as the day's last light slid to the ground.

IT WAS DARK IN THE AIRPORT, and the lights did nothing to change that, their sickly fluorescent glow only illuminating how the snack and newspaper shops were closed and grated. His brother Jeremy walked toward him wearing a jean jacket and fur trapper hat, its tawny pelt like blades of grass graced by different variations of light. Michael spoke up as they hugged. "Isn't it August here? What the fuck are you wearing?"

"I'm just getting into the redneck spirit, bro." He shrugged. "Found this in the closet. And seriously, don't bother trying to swear. You still sound like a priest."

Jeremy bent to try and lift one of Michael's two army-issue duffle bags, both of which belonged to their father. "God, this is heavy. What's in here, your Ugandan wife?"

If any of the other travellers focused their jet-lag blurred eyes long enough, Michael thought, they might assume Jeremy was the older of the brothers, despite his actually being younger by four years. Stocky and blond, he had muscled over his frame to distract from his unremarkable height. Ahead by a few steps, Jeremy turned back to look over a denim-clad shoulder. "I'm glad you've come to join us in our happy squalor. I give

you two days, you'll have a beard and a belch. Plus, the cabin Dad rented doesn't have indoor plumbing. So you should feel right at home."

THEIR FATHER WAS BOILING LAKE WATER on the stove when the two of them came into the cabin door a few hours later, their white faces like light let in under the door. There were chintzy curtains over the windows, incongruous with the tough sea-green carpet. Two weeks ago, Michael had made his monthly trip to Kampala to check his email at an Internet café, when he found the message from his father in his inbox. *Your mother's moved out.* Despite the heat and the man beside him in tribal dress with a feathered headband, it was as though he could see his father at the computer, typing with infinitesimal slowness in between slugs of gritty instant coffee. And Michael had come home unasked, like a good son. Like a good soldier, coming home shell-shocked, every voice unleashing a series of explosions in his head. Reason for discharge: heart troubles. Caused by a telegraphed SOS, by the way his father's misery reached farther than his limbs.

The quiet of the cabin's main room, in the final third of the night, was heavy on Michael. He shook his father's hand, and without thinking he did the Ugandan handshake, grasping palm and thumb and then palm again. Michael had seen his first skull in Uganda, against the base of a tree not far from his compound. It had the look of his father's face now, watchful but empty, a mouth full of leaves and soil. When he smiled, the smile was one more crack amidst the other lines which had already forked across his face.

MORNING CAME; MICHAEL FOUND HE HAD lasted that long. It made him feel raw, to notice the false reassurance in the butter yellow sunlight, the chirping swallows. Jeremy stared at the ceiling from his bed across the room. "You know, he barely leaves the kitchen. I think he must have raided somebody's recycling box before we came and now he just reads newspapers from like, 1992. I'm worried sometimes that I'm going to come in one morning and find him weeping into the bacon."

Years ago they had talked from their separate beds, years when night had been a solemn entity that seemed to lean over them. So they whispered, each brother's voice directed to the other via the plastic stars on the ceiling. Jeremy made the springs creak as he reached to pull on his jeans. "You've been to Africa. What the hell do you do around helpless people?"

Their father looked up briefly from his potatoes and his coffee mug when they walked in. He was peeling potatoes with a knife; he could do it in one perfect strip, a grimy curl of skin hanging in the air. It was as though such skills had suddenly become important. He had always liked coffee and disliked conversation, and why not, when one was so much easier than the other. Jeremy patted his plaid-clothed back and grabbed some towels off a chair. "Just going out for a morning swim, Pops. We'll be back soon for the grub."

Floating in the lake, Jeremy pointed something out with his left foot. "See that building on the other shore? Apparently it's a summer residence for nuns. Maybe you've already had enough of that kind of action, but let me know if you wanna make a trip over sometime."

There was a sunken log visible under the water, thick and soft with algae. Michael remembered other lakes, watching Jeremy and his friend Brian dive into the murk with ancient masks whose rubber straps left a chafed stripe around their scalps. "Hey, how's Brian doing?" He felt uneasy asking such a question, the simplicity of it revealing his ignorance, as though he was their father home from a long day at work and this blond semi-stranger might scowl at him and turn back to the television.

Spray blinded Michael for a moment, the droplets flung from Jeremy's hand as he cast both arms out. "He didn't graduate."

"Wait, what? You mean he failed? That doesn't seem like him."

"No, he died in February." Floating, Michael looked down at the swim shorts Jeremy had lent him. With his weight loss, the drawstring hung out long and limp.

"Shit. I had no idea." His mouth, practiced interloper that it was, spoke for him. He realized, too late, that it could sound like an accusation. Jeremy had never emailed and of course Michael could have no way of knowing otherwise. But why had his father written nothing either? Had he even watched while Jeremy stared with glazed eyes at the ceiling, while he ripped his hands up on the punching bag? Maybe he didn't do it with bare hands anymore, Michael thought. He could imagine trailing strips of dirtied white tape. And silence, enough that the bag could be heard speaking out its language of thuds of groans, accepting the transfer of pain.

He tried to turn and see his brother's face without sinking. He was out of practice, he had spent months in Uganda drawing water-safety posters, distributing filters. There had been no leisure swimming, no spruce tree with a coil of electric yellow rope hanging from it like a snake.

"Yeah well," Jeremy said. "Life's a bitch. Just do me a favour and

don't ask me to talk about him, okay?"

Michael could smell smoke drifting out over the lake from the cabin.

"Get a whiff of that," Jeremy said. "Breakfast must be ready. Last one in has to eat the burnt shit!" And the conversation was over then, Jeremy's blond head and back disappearing up the slope. Michael lingered, steering himself in slow wet circles. Fish flicked below his tanned legs quick as nerves, their tails miniature rudders. Everything ends too early and then we try to lengthen it, he thought, the way funeral elegies tell the long version of some boy's short life.

MICHAEL NOTICED THAT HIS FATHER STILL smelled like the white bottle of Old Spice. He used to wear Old Spice because his dad did, and then later he stopped wearing it for the same reason. The scent mixed with that of sausages and pancakes, the sticky tin of syrup in a golden pool on its plate. His father was a good cook; he had made hearty breakfasts for his fellow officers on early shifts. And their mother had been glad to hand the cooking over to him on weekends.

The idea of divorce seemed to fill his mouth and make it impossible for him to speak, like it was a bone he was chewing around. He looked over the table's pitted surface at his father the police officer, the man with the beard and the slight limp. The man who said that the prison in Kingston was full of men who had just made mistakes, the man who sat with Barker Johnson as he raged about his son's grow-op in the house by the railroad tracks. The officer on the night shift found him, asleep outside the drunk tank. Michael's father was the one who had given him hot chocolate with whisky in it when he was fourteen, his mother out of town visiting her sister. So that he would know what alcohol did. Michael drank it at the table while ten-year-old Jeremy sipped milk, his father giving him monitoring looks every so often. And then, laughing, he had gone off to the bathroom in the basement and tripped over the stairs on the way down. *Sure went down easy*, he thought, giggling to himself, as a step edged his neck.

Now he saw how his father ate off of his knife, and he wondered if he had ever felt that kind of trust since, the kind that made him limp and fake sleep at the end of a night's car trip so his father could carry him in. And he didn't know where Michael's pyjamas were; he stumbled around the bed until his wife came in to pull her son's socks off with a practiced tug. He pulsed at the edge of the room, drooping with fatigue, and then she led him off, to the grown-up room where children couldn't follow.

And then sleep came and left no room for Michael's wondering.

"Have you heard from Mom lately?" Michael asked.

"She called a few days ago. Wants to talk to you soon. No phone out here, but make sure you do it when you get back." And what was his father going to do, stay out here forever? Until snow quieted the lake and he would have to chop down the trees, trying to avoid the traps in the woods as he did so? Michael had learned from his father about several kinds of silence. And he was reminded this time of a day in Uganda when he walked into a classroom at the school for deaf children. Walked into silence that was aflutter with fingers, like wings.

His father had strong arms. He raised them to reach for the jar of mustard. He had raised them to carry his sons, up in the air where there was no danger to them but his own eventual loss of strength. Michael remembered how it seemed he would never put them down, when he grew tired he would hold a tiny Jeremy in front of the living-room window, the baby's feet pressed up against the glass.

MICHAEL AND JEREMY WENT DOWN TO explore the storage space under the cabin, like a dirt-lined cave full of old boats and crumbling life-jackets. Jeremy nudged at a white duck decoy and it bobbed, but stayed steady with a small weight in the bottom like a child's toy. There had been magazine ads on the wall of the basement, arranged around the central figure of a woman his father had appointed 'golden goddess'. She presided over the rest, draped like a cat in her beach chair, skin glistening as though from sex or wet weather. Michael had seen it for years before he realized that it was a photo of his mother. It had been long enough for him to grow taller than the tool-bench, and she waited among the wrenches and saws. His father had probably wanted to know how to fix the marriage, like everything else. And his wife must have said that there was no way to fix it. And worse, that she didn't want him to try.

"So . . . graduation, eh? How did that go?" Michael knocked his hip against a cabinet, he bent to pull open a drawer.

Jeremy shrugged, looking at a box of tangled fishing lures with silky tails. "We're having a bonfire tonight. I'm gonna burn some of my stuff. Just for some kicks, I guess. Whole fresh start thing." They could hear a motor rev, the neighbour's Rottweilers barked and growled, all of their energy in a single outlet.

"Jeremy?" It was a girl's voice, as out of place as the one beam of sunlight that had followed them into the cavern. Michael leaned out to see a blonde teenager in a wheelchair, pushing her hair back from tanned shoulders.

“Laura,” Jeremy said, “How’d you get down here?”

“Your dad helped me out. And I’m not a weakling either, you know.”

“I’ll see you later bro, okay? Gotta go help Laura out with something.” As he pushed her toward the water, she turned back to wave at Michael, and made swimming motions with her arms. They were freckled, a white scar tracing down from her left elbow like she had put it there for show.

MICHAEL HAD KNOWN A GIRL IN Uganda by the name of Grace, Grace Okweno. She was younger than him but seemed older, and was unimpressed with him, unlike everyone else. To them he was a sort of god, worthy of alternating worship and disdain. But from his housekeeper he got more of the latter. One day he saw her carrying a bucket of his clothing down onto the grass in front of the house, where she sat at the stoop and began to beat it with a fury.

“Hey!” he said, “What are you doing, you don’t have to do my laundry, I just did it yesterday.”

“You didn’t do a very good job,” she said, holding up a shirt streaked with dried soap like deodorant marks. “Look at you, no mother and no wife to do it for you.” She smirked. “I have a sister who needs a husband.”

He felt his privacy invaded, a sense that real gods did not live in such disarray as he did. “Here, at least let me bring you some coffee.”

Grace sipped, but then splayed her lips out into a grimace. “What benefit does this have? It’s just for refreshment?” And she poured the rest of the mug out on the grass. Then she stood. And she put up curtains for him, dragging a length of cloth into his house where she secured it with string and nails. Afterwards he saw her walking past outside, the curtain like a stirred veil over her face. “See you on Wednesday, No-Wife,” she called. After her came a chorus of schoolchildren ambling down the road in crimson and yellow uniforms, shades of sunset. They swung backpacks, or plastic bags, some holding shoes in their hands. As they passed they sang out to him with their favourite English phrase, “How are you, How are you?” As though he could give an answer to that question.

The day after he returned from Kampala, mulling over ticket prices and departure dates, was the last time he had seen Grace. Outside of the house that morning the landscape looked like sun-swept emptiness. As though he was stepping out of his manor and everything had burned to the ground. It turned out love was just a story you told to the children, trying to make sure the slipping mask stayed above your nose.

Grace had appeared as a hollow version of herself, an aura with

black edges. Her eyes seemed to say everything except what she wanted him to do. They were wary and weary, sad and suspicious. Looking at her was like looking through an empty frame, a woman who had forgotten her face and its usual deceptions. "I buried both my parents on Saturday," she said. And she shook, leaning forward to cry. He reached and held her head with both hands, the gesture of a child taking something from an elder, a solid grasp that disguised his own shaky hands.

There were so many people like her in Uganda, named after virtues. As though their parents could charm away ill fortune, ignore that you recognized your loved ones by their flaws. Your parents marked you and it just proved that you were theirs. His favourite local boy was called Charity; he had stood in the kitchen one day trying on old shirts of Michael's father's. Michael's mother had made him bring piles of pants and shirts, and he had hated their ugly weight in their luggage. But Charity's younger brothers and sisters peeked around the corner of the house, they each took a turn to be solemnly fitted for a second-hand outfit. Afterwards, they insisted on folding the clothes into a plastic bag and taking them with a little bow. Michael had pulled off his shorts and t-shirt to give away, he laid out in his boxers on the concrete floor after they were gone. Through the window, he could see red soccer jerseys dripping from a clothesline. Someone threw a rock at one of the stray dogs and it howled, tripped down the slope on its stung haunches.

Grace had gathered her sorrow up quick and neatly. She insisted he follow her to the market, marvelling at the chickens tied to a dress display, each with a string around one of their legs, the man who carried manicure tools in a plastic bucket and knelt to serve his clients as they chatted to one another. He waited outside while Grace picked up a dress at the tailor's, and then he heard his name. "Michael," Grace said, lit with laughter, "they are wanting to know if you are going to buy me something." And then it started to rain, heavy and explosive drops. It was the rainy season after all, when mosquitoes filled the air with stinging insults. The narrow path between stalls turned to sludge as the two of them stood under an awning, Grace stripping plantains to eat. The only thing in a hurry seemed to be the water, restless for the ground. But it was eventually satisfied, and then Grace walked away home, market basket balanced on her head. The sun as it set appeared to be melting, and she carried it away with her. And he realized he loved her, he just didn't know how to. Or he didn't know when, and it was not enough to say, I think I am going to love you soon.



MICHAEL WALKED PAST THE FRONT OF the cabin and saw over on the neighbour's property that Laura was sitting in her wheelchair, which looked brutal and sharp in the sunlight. In the water was a metal chair with the white paint mostly flaked off. As Jeremy leaned down, Laura put her arms around his neck and then he lifted her and carried her down to the chair.

"So . . . where are you going in the fall?"

"Nowhere. I don't know. I'll figure something out."

"You're taking a year off?"

"Something like that." Laura almost seemed to wince. But she must be smart, she had ample opportunity to observe people as they stood and talked over her head. It was August, she would have course calendars and campus maps coming in the mail.

"C'mere," Jeremy said, "hold on. We'll get you up on my back and then I'll just walk out. Maybe even swim a bit, out to the platform. If you're hanging in there okay."

Then further out a motorboat passed, and its wake stirred the liquid calm. "Hang tight!" Jeremy started to run through the waves, with the water slapping against his legs as they bent and rose, knees raised as though to step out of the wet. The last Michael saw before he turned away was Laura's mouth open in laughter, her chin knocking against Jeremy's shoulder blade, as he ran holding onto her thin twisted legs.

Jeremy had always been the more physical one, Michael thought, easing into the water further down shore. He began to swim out towards their own platform. Might as well spend the afternoon teaching himself to dive, to have something to talk about. One day, both brothers had heard their parents arguing in the den, and Jeremy started wrestling with him. The two of them had tumbled into the room, their arms locking and unlocking as they rolled past the couch. Jeremy had a leg behind Michael's head, but Michael could just see beyond his brother's kneecap to where their parents sat. They were almost silent but then not, a variegation of noise coming out of their mouths. Then their mother had swept them out with a look, like they were errant clumps of dust. And Jeremy's next punch drew blood.

Now there was just the quiet of the trees whispering to each other, of the lake and its swallowed echoes. He was getting frustrated and red, stomach slapped raw from impact on the water. The afternoon was ending, it should have been a dissolution sweet as burst grapes on the tongue. But they were all avoiding each other. He knew from history class how women coped when their men went off to put bullets into each

other. But what did men do? They realized that maybe no one believed their show of being competent and capable, least of all themselves.

And then he heard his father's voice. He was sat on the dock in shorts and Birkenstock sandals, beer in hand. "Keep your legs straight," he said. "They're bending because you keep trying to protect yourself. Don't get afraid of the water."

When he finally did it, when he entered with body locked straight, it was like cutting a slit in the water to disappear through. He surfaced and beat the ripples with his fist, hauled himself out and draped his torso over the platform. Breathing hard enough to wake the nuns from their afternoon nap. He looked over toward the dock for a sign, a cheer. His father rattled the beer bottle, which he had filled with silt and pebbles. "Look out!" He flung it out and Michael saw it sink. "Next lesson, my little dolphin? Opening your eyes under water."

At first he only submerged his face, like he was going to do the improbable but possible and drown in a puddle. The underwater world when he glimpsed it was thick and suspect, with its rocks and snarls of weeds blurred into each other.

"She's in Kingston. At her sister's house, in case you were wondering." Michael had his ears above water, but he kept his face under until he had to come up gasping. His eyelids dragged heavy and sore.

"And there is a phone, my cell, but the reception is dodgy out here." Would he ever check it, Michael wondered, or had he at first hidden it away but then brought it out? Maybe put it on vibrate mode, so it would scuttle on the floor like a beetle. Wanting to hear her voice and then not. In truth his mother was only a province away, but she might as well be as far as Jeremy's dead friend.

"What happened to Brian?" Michael said.

"Same thing as happens every year. Girls get pregnant and the boys kill themselves with cars or snowmobiles. It was a car, for him."

There had been a warm dry wind through the house, the last time Michael had seen Brian and Jeremy together. One of those redneck boys split between his mud-stained plaid and the impeccable, almost bashful manners he brought into the house. It was hard to imagine Jeremy probably having to drive down that road. One of the roads out of town you could not avoid, if you wanted to get anywhere else. The radio reception dying out, so voices went stuttering and then quiet.

"You need to be the older brother again. Brian needed one, and Jeremy tried to be that for him. But he's a kid, he's just a frigging kid."

Jeremy came from behind and clapped his father on the shoulder,

then left his hand there. He really had gotten so much older in some ways, Michael thought. Or else he had just learned to put on that pretense and it was hardening him gradually. It was the combination that was unsettling, his childish smirk and the fatigue behind it.

“Bro, your face looks like a wet rag. Stop trying to swallow the lake and we’ll get you something real to drink.”

THAT NIGHT, MICHAEL PULLED A SWEATSHIRT over his head as he walked toward the fire-pit. He was wearing Jeremy’s pyjama pants tucked into his socks. His younger brother was dumping things out of a garbage bag and onto the grass. “What is all this stuff?” Michael asked, just before he recognized it as a pile of Jeremy’s mementoes, like his uniform from the bakery where he had worked on weekends and some swim team ribbons and a sweatshirt from his hockey team.

“I don’t understand,” their father was saying. He wore a black cap, which he pulled off to fan at the embers.

“Brian and I always joked about burning our high school stuff once we made it out.”

Michael thought their father seemed to be doing the opposite, as he clung to every souvenir he could find of his wife. He had seen a box of CDs from her music collection in the cabin. How was he even going to play music without electricity? But she was going to have to follow him out here if she wanted those back. He would be in the sagging hammock, listening to each album on his memory’s player. To search for clues.

Jeremy passed around wine in jars, since the mugs they had found in the cabin were all dirty and suspended in the sink’s cold water. He set his down on a stump and stood with arms crossed, each hand tucked right into an armpit as though it were a pocket.

Light had fallen out of the sky and into the glow of the fire. Ash drifted up, obscuring Jeremy’s face like it had gone into pixels. It was dark but it was still there, it snapped back into focus with the force of the heat. Jeremy looked up, and grinned because he realized Michael had been watching all along.

**Heather Davidson** publishes award-winning poetry and fiction. She dedicates this story in memory of Dan James Davidson, her beloved dad and greatest writing supporter.

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