40 Below
Volume 2: Alberta's Winter Anthology

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***Please note this is an uncorrected manuscript**

Winter

Winter. Dark at five.
Dark like sleep.

I want to curl up on the loveseat
beneath a woolly red throw,

nod
        over a book,

drift

        suspended

When spring comes
I will wake hungry.

Escape Velocity

Winter starts in the sky. In space, really. Axial tilt and apogees and all that. I like to imagine that snowflakes come down from the moon. I look up at it from my window, when it's full or close to it, and it shines so bright and so white, it's easy to pretend that snow falls down from there, frozen and silent.

I read on the internet or maybe at school that there's this moon of Jupiter whose atmosphere is frozen, and it covers the surface like snow. That made me laugh- it's not really an atmosphere if it's lying down on the job, is it? But then I look at the fresh snowfall, late at night when I'm supposed to be in bed, and the night sky is so clear and crisp that it seems the cold itself has a visual quality, making everything as clear as the vacuum of space, and it does seem like there's no air left, that it's all fallen to the ground to die.

Winter in Alberta- outer space come to visit. If you go out in it unprotected, you will die. Welcome to my hometown.

I grew up in a small town in Western Alberta. Close to the Rockies. It's beautiful and it's ugly. Small and huge. You've probably been through it on your way to go skiing. Had a hot dog, had a pee. Maybe thought to yourself, "Wow, glad I don't live here." But it's home and I love it. It doesn't love me, though. My friends... or rather, the people I go to school with, that I grew up with, call me the Space Alien. Some of them beat me up sometimes.

I'm small for my age, and kind of funny looking, and I like to read, and I don't like to fish, so I guess that makes me a target. It's not fair, but that's how it is. Is it a photon's fault when it gets sucked into a black hole?

After school, I'm walking home through a field of slush. I'm not wearing boots because even though I don't think I'm too cool to wear them I know I'm not cool enough to not wear them. Instead I'm wearing Vans. Protective clothing at school. Not as helpful outside.

"Hey Space Alien!"

Two seconds ago I had been completely alone. Now somehow I have two of my "friends" on either side of me. Big Rob and Little Rob. Little Rob outweighs me by 10 kilos easy.

"Roberts," I say, as politely and noncommittally as I can. Just go away, I don't say.

"*Roberts*!" sneers Big Rob. "Why you gotta be such a douche? And here we were gonna let you see what we found."

"Another dead coyote? Not interested, thank you."

"Not a coyote, Space Alien."

"Owen."

"Owen. See? We're not trying to bust your balls here. We really found something you'll like. Serious."

"Yeah, Sp- Owen. Didn't you see the meteor last night? It fell in the woods out behind Collings Road. We found it!"

I didn't see the meteor last night. Just the full moon and the falling snow. I would have heard if there was a meteor, wouldn't I? It's sometimes- it's always hard for me to read other people, to tell if I should trust them or not. Even though the answer is almost always 'not'. A meteor, though...

"What did it look like?"

"Like a rock. But it was glowing and it . . . "

"Meteorites do not glow. I'm going home."

"No wait! You're right, it wasn't glowing. But you gotta see it. For real."

Big Rob had stepped in front of me, so that I had to stop walking. I thought he was going to push me down, but he didn't. "Look. You like space shit and we found some for you. You gonna come see or what? Or are you too much of a pussy?"

I hate when they used swear words. It made them seem more grown-up than me, more scary. "Okay, okay, I'll come. It better be real though."

"*It better be real,*" Little Rob says in a funny voice. He always used that voice with me. "Just follow us."

Collings Road is up on a ridge, and behind it, there's just wilderness. Forest. Zillions of spruce trees, evergreens covered in snow. There are bears and cougars, coyotes and wolves in there, though my Dad says they don't come up this close to town as much as they used to when he was a kid. And at least you don't have to worry about bears in the winter. The Robs took me down to the little creek that runs through kind of parallel to the street above it. In the summer there's all these big rocks you can use as stepping stones, but now they are covered in ice-spray, kind of pebbly white frost that covers them and makes them too slippery to step on. I like to look at them because they remind me of comets which are mostly just balls of dirty ice.

"Earth to Space Alien!"

They're always saying that. "I'm not a space alien."

"No, we know. We're here!"

I look around. It's just a small clearing where kids play sometimes. I can say with 100% certainty that we were not in an impact crater. "There's no meteorite here," I say. "I'm going home."

Little Rob jumps up on a small boulder and says, "This is it! This is the meteor."

"That's no meteorite. It might be a glacial erratic dropped here from the Ice Age but more likely it's just a normal old boring rock."

"Ice Age, space age. We get 'em mixed up alla time. Same thing- it's dork stuff that dorks like you like. Try and knock me offa here."

"What? No. I told you, I'm going home." I turn to leave and bump right into Big Rob, who had snuck around behind me and was blocking my way. I try to step around him but he moves in sync with me so I can't get by. This was a game they had played on me many times and I knew better than to try to get away.

"You're not going home, Space Alien. You just got here!"

Have you ever been punched in the gut? It hurts, yeah, but the worst part is how it knocks the wind out of you. I hate that feeling, like you're going to suffocate and throw up at the same time. I don't do either, but I'm bent over trying to catch my breath which makes my butt a perfect target. Big Rob knocks me down, face down in the snow. My glasses fall off. I'm trying to grab them before they step on them and then they have my jacket off me.

"We're gonna build a snowman! Here's his coat, and his glasses! Do you have any carrots in your backpack, Space Alien?"

Little Rob jumped down off his little rock and was giving me a noogie. I was glad I had stowed my Marvin the Martian tuque in my backpack or else he probably would've taken it and thrown it in the creek. Big Rob was going through my backpack, but he mostly seemed interested in the leftovers from my lunch.

"What are these pills for, Spacey? You a meth head?" As he asked he bounced the pills off my forehead and laughed.

"Hey I know," says Little Rob. "Let's carbon freeze him! Would you like that, Space Alien? You can pretend you're on a spaceship going to Mars!"

Now Big Rob is laying on my chest, pinning me down, while Little Rob starts burying me in snow. "Stop it! Stop it!" I yell but Big Rob just punches me in the nose. Not even that hard, but my face explodes in pain so I just lay there and let it happen.

"Have a good trip to Mars, Space Alien!" Little Rob yells, and they both laugh and run away. Finally. They'd buried me but left my head exposed.

After a while I stop crying. I'm trapped, but it actually feels kind of nice. Like being ... what's the word? Swaddled. Away in a manger silent night holy night. It *is* night, actually. It gets dark early in the winter. Probably isn't even suppertime yet. I wish I knew the actual time. Maybe I can figure it out from the stars.

Let's see...

So it turns out I can't figure it out from the stars. Not much of a space alien after all. At least I know that snow insulates. Wet snow though, and now that it's dark, it'll freeze again. I *should* be ok, even without my jacket. My wet Vans worry me, though. I try lifting my legs. Nothing.

The moon is out. It's full. Maybe if I'm lucky some wolves will howl in the distance and scare off any coyotes or cougars in the vicinity.

I have to pee. If I do, it will warm me up. For a while. But then . . . definitely not worth it. I hold it in.

It starts to snow. The atmosphere is going to sleep for the night. If I fall asleep, I wonder, will I wake up again? Would I want to? Maybe the Robs did me a favor, putting me in suspended animation. I can find out what absolute zero is like.

No.

No, I already know what absolute zero feels like. It sucks. It sucks . . . shit! I say that last word out loud. I've never said it before. It feels good.

"It sucks shit!" I yell. There's snow in my hair now, and in my eyelashes. I shake it off. "Aaagh!"

It feels good to scream. And to swear. Warms me up. Angers up the blood, as my Grampa would say.

"Aaagh!" I scream, and then I twist my whole torso, hard, with all my strength. The snow gives, and I take. Three more twists and I'm out. Just needed some escape velocity.

"Aaagh!" I yell, one more time. Then I say a string of swear words just for fun. I grab my jacket and backpack and glasses from their stupid snowman, and then I knock it over. Pretend it's Big Rob.

I walk home. The sky glows orange and it's still snowing. The moon is behind some clouds now.

I live on Steen Street, not far from Collings. It doesn't take long to get home. When I walk in the front door my mom is there in the living room.

"Owen," she says. "Where have you been?"

"Just playing with my friends."

"You missed supper. I was getting worried."

"What time is it?"

She looked at her phone. "It's almost 8:30."

I was sure it was midnight at least. "Is it okay if I have a bath? I got a little wet."

The hot water hurts, especially my toes. They were frozen, but not frostbit I don't think. They feel like they're burning as they thaw. Pins and needles like you wouldn't believe. The adrenaline's worn off now, and I feel like crying again.

But I don't.

Winter is like space. If you go outside in it unprotected, it can kill you. Only, I didn't die.

I sink down into the water. It's quiet, and feels like I'm floating in zero G. I come back out again.

I didn't die.

I think I know how to protect myself now. I don't mean in space, or out in the woods in winter.

I've always felt like I was a space alien, come to visit. But this is my home, where I belong. For now. In a few years, I'll head out into "outer space" and explore the wide world. Our hometowns have a gravity well that belies their size. But I learned the trick tonight. Just need a little escape velocity.

I go to bed. For the first time in a long time, I don't stare out the window looking at the snow, thinking about space.

I just shut my eyes and go to sleep. Tomorrow the thaw begins.

Aspen in Snow

for Valerie

Fragile, I stand on tip toes. Reach the broken meandering bark, weathered trunks of trees, the burr, the seed, last year's berries, sap hardened in place. Longing, weary. Will warm rains come, green push once again against my feet, love sprout generous in my heart?

As the mystery of these days slowly tends toward the light.

I touch the hardened bark of trees seeking laugh lines, tracing furrows of sorrow through my own woman's corpus, strong passages on the rough giving flesh. My hands listen for wisdom gleaned in painful, sharp, freezing times. Cheek against trunk. Questioning. What makes the skin of all living crack: splitting and joining, splitting and joining? Oval openings reveal pink and honey coloured flesh, swelling at the edges. Fruit laboured forth, made love, swollen in place one too many times?

As the mystery of these days slowly tends toward the light, I place my hands.

Evenings I wander like the deer on the edge of the city, rest beside thick stands of poplar, pine, fir and spruce, mottled, shiny and rough. Nudge up against lichen and fungi still clinging, still breathing yellow ochre, pale green, sapphire blue in this dark place. Know that thick cork-crust heaving and shifting cradles newborn flesh in its shadow, protects from cold and heat, keeps safe from injury, conserves wet within its folds.

And I take comfort. As the mystery of these days slowly tends toward the light.

The snow leopard

The snow leopard is back.

We met one furious winter that never knew the sun.

Both of us were staring at the planets dangling down from the sky.

We were waiting for the dancing goddess,

whom they called Aurora.

We were both forgotten wanderers.

He purred as a big cat would and startled me.

"Are you in pain, snow leopard?" I asked with exaggerated caution.

He gazed at me with brittle surprise at my naivety,

a fixed gaze that wondered "Who isn't?"

As a carnival of restless magnetism approached,

we sat serenely on an undisturbed quilt of snowflakes.

Millions of unspoken stories bounced between us, until

she finally descended, waving green and purple flags

of sheer jubilation and mystique with unrivaled skill.

At that moment of unmistakable awe,

he and I were whole. Mesmerized by her sacred dance,

that invited our souls to twirl along in harmonious union.

We knew everything and were certain about nothing.

Alone, and at peace. That was all that mattered.

Who could blink in the presence of

the twirling goddess? A weak mortal I was and I had to.

One blink. All it took was that single blink, and he was gone.

I set him free, or did he me? I could never be sure.

I only knew that winter cats were a different tribe.

A few winters later, he was back.

The only snow leopard I knew, was back.

He didn't know that I have not been able to blink ever since,

and that the scar he left behind had no remedy.

Not even Aurora's whirling would do.

He slowly coiled his glorious tail and sat in

provocative majesty, on that undisturbed quilt of snowflakes.

He purred as a big cat would, and I said nothing.

She twirled and waved her flags in unrivaled skill,

and I chose to close my eyes.

The Cold War

My mother taught for the Canadian Air Force, who were stationed in Lancaster Park north of Edmonton, and every day she would drive all the way across the city to get to work. Eventually, she decided enough was enough, and she began to look for a house to buy on the north side of town.

When I was seven years old, we moved to a very small house in a very big yard in Killarny, a middling old neighbourhood in north Edmonton. There were fruit trees out in the back yard, along with a huge honeysuckle hedge, that buzzed all summer long with the bees it attracted. I never wanted to take the garbage out, because I was afraid of going past and getting stung.

My mother marveled at the fruit trees, so well tended and lovely, two plums and a pear. I was too young to understand the miracle it was to have a plum tree grow and produce fruit here in Edmonton.

We are in Zone 3 in terms of growing. You have to be careful in the nurseries and hardware stores where they sell seeds, because so many things they stock and sell cannot really grow here. If you're lucky, you can sometimes find a sunny, sheltered corner and that will trick you into thinking the climate here is livable and benign.

It's not.

The year I turned eight, our refrigerator quit working. I remember we kept our milk and butter and ice cream in a cardboard apple box in the back porch, between the outer door and the locking kitchen door. The apple box was blue with red apples on the side, and its lid was almost as big as the box beneath and it slid down with a swoosh. Mom was very sanguine about it all, saying how lucky it was that the fridge had broken in the winter, and telling me about the pioneer days, which my grandmother and grandfather had lived through in the Peace River Country, and my mom had been born into. Their makeshift fridges wouldn't even be this easy.

Most of our vegetables were canned that winter. I had never tasted canned peas before that and it was a mixed blessing. Normally they were summer fresh only, unless there had been enough of a crop to be

blanched for the freezer. My mom would bring the quart of milk in the moment she got up, before she came in to wake me, so that the milk would thaw enough to go onto my porridge.

We eventually got a new fridge. It wasn't just the cost of the appliance my mother had to save for; she had to get a workman in on a Saturday to cut out the bottom shelf of the cupboard above, remove the cupboard doors and add some finishing trim. New fridges were all too big for the space the old fridge had left. I have no recollection of what it looked like, the new fridge.

It was a time of peace and plenty, and everyone who had lived through the Depression or wartime reminded us of that. We marveled at men on the moon and worried about the Cold War. Somehow, the name of it made me think it might be fought on our streets. We made jokes about Russian spies being undetectable in our world, since for months we would all be bundled lumps in similar winter clothing, moving as quickly as possible from place to place. A Southerner would stand out more than a Russian.

When there was a click on the phone line, my mother would laugh and say, "Well, there go the Russians listening to us. I hope they thought it was interesting." Schoolmates would say that we were targeted by Russian missiles because of our refineries. We all thought about the Russians a lot in those days.

Those winters of my childhood, the snow fell and fell. I helped my mom shovel the driveway, which was difficult, because it was two concrete paths for the car's tires, and grass between. If you hadn't tamed the lawn before the snow fell, you'd be dealing with wayward hummocks of frozen grass till the snow packed it all down and made it surrender. We also shoveled the front walk. We piled the snow on either side of the sidewalk – between the fence on one side, and the verge of grass on the other. All down the sidewalk, a canyon grew, with little openings for the cars out to the street.

For the longest time I thought those memories were exaggerated because I was smaller, but recently it has begun to snow the same amounts and the snow banks by the driveways trigger a load of what I cannot quite call nostalgia. It's more a sense of justified recollection.

As a child, I walked down those snowy canyons in the dark, to skating lessons at the neighbourhood rink, or to Brownies at the local school, with the streetlights sparkling up the snow. I never saw the neighbourhood in the daylight, since my mother drove me to my old school in the middle of town and picked me up on her way back from work. In Edmonton in the wintertime, the sun would rise only after we'd got to class and was going down by the time I'd finished my piano practice at school.

That was the year I began to have a recurring nightmare.

In my dream, I would wake to hear voices of men whispering in the living room. They were being quiet, so as not to wake my mother, whose bedroom was off the living room. But I would crawl out my back window and sneak around the side of the house, to get away from what I knew to be Russian spies.

The dream was never very specific about what Russian spies wanted with me, but I was their target all right. Pretty soon, I was dodging down the street, hiding behind the hills of snow, trying to keep track of where the two men in black coats and hats were. I would strain to hear the crunching of their feet in the snow to determine if they were next to me on the sidewalk or down the street by their car. My heart would pound as I crouched in the shadow of a neighbour's plowed walkway. I would wonder if I was going to freeze to death before they left the neighbourhood, clad as I was in pajamas and slippers.

They never caught me, any of the times I had the dream. And I was never clear on what they wanted with an eight-year-old child from Alberta, either. When I started to read Stephen King novels many years later, though, the dread he conjured up for hapless children was a familiar one to me.

Much later, in university, I attended a panel of Canadian writers speaking at a symposium, and an audience member asked a general question of why so much Canadian fiction focused on the weather. One of the panelists said simply, "Because here, the weather can kill you."

Yes, it can. But not if the Russian spies get you first.

IN THE MINUS (a cycle of 5 poems)

#1 frosted collars…

All the people I love
Where are they tonight?
What are they doing?
Turning up frosted collars? Leaning backward into the
Wind's teeth?
It is possible they are thinking of me at this moment.

Today I went to a department store, bought thirty welcome mats
and threw them down randomly in front of structures in this
new cold city.

Since then, I have been chalking messages on the sidewalk.
"you are home" "this way" "almost there"

Someone's cup of pain runneth over tonight,
I can just feel it,
something primordial and reptilian
a shivering twinge like a funny bone… but behind the left eye.
the body delivers messages
the way no device can
give you pins and needles in your extremities
steal the breath from your lungs

*

#2 Out of Touch

When you are out
Of touch
Those who might have taken your arm\
Crash to the ground
Those to whom you might have given shoulder
snot silently into sleeves
and you gather the chill of your loneliness to your chest
A precious crest,
An emblazoned heraldic lion.
While down they crash
in a tangle of flesh and limbs and memory.
Down. Warmth closes up, brine and water and fishes swim by the minds eye.
Down Down with origin, down down with memory.

Your voice, recorded somewhere at a different age
Your face in a bleached photo or
the scar that runs whitely through your eyebrow
or is it just your laughter recorded in the minds eye
ear?
And you are sliced with small frozen sparrows that plummet
As arrows from a frigid night sky
No warning.
Slicing you to ribbons.
Frost on the barbed wire tells you
You are home.
Home is where you feel in your skin.

We could speculate about home being
where the heart is but
that overworked organ
probably couldn't take the strain.

Home is the place the feeling the smell the taste
that takes your face
and lovingly presses it into
the ice.

If you aren't where you want to be…
you aren't

*

#3 Western Union

You can't go home
Now the shine has worn six years
off that place until now it is only a word
it is only a postal code to which you
send cards and letters and gifts
and wishes and candy but mostly money
just lots of money
from the Western Union
You duck in off the cold street
Breath making white speech balloons around you
Through the steamed up door and you write the form from memory
A thousand
Dollars can/not
take your place but it can help
so you plunk it down
on the counter. The man working there

avoids your eyes, he knows, he has people back home too.
His own version, a whole web of people waiting.
He knows what you send, along with this money.
But you keep waking with the same dream.

Your aged father auntie mother,
Your beloved sister daughter uncle falling
sliping and falling, falling
and no one there to catch her/him/them.

Two continents away… you can only send money
The man at the Western Union speaks softly
Slips you a few words in your mother tongue
He takes the pain in your eyes and he takes his cut
Because he has people
Slipping, slipping,
Sliping and falling

he has people back home someplace too.

*

#4 Barbed Wire

Tonight in the minus
birds freeze mid air
their songs cryogenically preserved
for the future their bodies plummeting
like sawblades, winged sharp points sticking in the
ground in thickets

from a distance they seem to form
a path
of barbed wire

AT THE BORDER
THEY ARE PUTTING UP
38 MILLION DOLLARS WORTH
OF BARBED WIRE
To keep people at home
And to keep the outside out
The inside in but
How much barbed wire does 38 million buy?
Can you hold that much money in your mind's eye?
Without slicing your vision?
It is hard to argue with so much metal but
what you make in a day they make in a month

What you make in a month they make in a year
What you make in a year they will never make.

If you took all the paper money from 38 million dollars
Dumped it from a helicopter on the other side
just picking it up would stop more people
Than the fence
Because if we were on the other side,
we would pool our resources
buy the best wire cutters
work in shifts all night going without food and water and sleep
and we would call this persistence, we would dub it determination.

Later we would make a movie.
Title it North & South and it would
Star a tall handsome hero
In the movies of our own lives
We will be but extras

*

#5 Minus Marooned

What people tell you before they die
Lean sparse stories
Nuggets of information held close to the chest for a lifetime
Laid out suddenly unexpectedly.

In the glistening light of a wet street lamp you suddenly realize
There is no one to call
If you wanted them to come
Pick you up, rescue you
From yourself.

Anyone you could call would have to use at least three modes of transportation
This is alright, this is your choice and you don't need anything…
But. It makes you cold at the bone.

It sets the expression on your face each morning.
Recoiling from the minus the limbs freezing and cracking off.
Recoiling into brine soft salty tears
This is where I came from but
This is where I was left
 marooned
And here at the high water mark of the whole continent

Is where I am stranded
A strawberry birth-mark crushed on my ribcage like a fist
This is how my mother will know me when I get back.

Here you are minus what you were looking for.
Lacking what you came in with.
Armed with defunct maps and a buried astrolabe.
We have been dusted yellow
we have discovered uranium
we have been put on the map through the process of elimination.
The art of subtraction and the fate of a cockroach
whatever doesn't kill you
does it really make you

Old Man Winter

Bleached Albertan canvas, massive
storm-lain, wind-primed,
not a brush stroke of fox tail,
not a print of bird's rest.
Sculpted faces of mauve shadows
do not make a story here.

He brought her north,
vowing God’s country.
They bit into the downward curve
of a sugar-powdered donut,
the bank of the Peace River.
A son was born into blizzard and dust.
Three daughters and twelve winters.
He never thawed.

An artist displays untitled
a large white painting,
a grey or purple line.
When the observer discovers in it
a whole philosophy,
the rise of another day,
a poem in a prison as Rilke describes,

the observer becomes the true artist,

ever optimistic, finding beauty in the absence

of anything obviously beautiful.

The day came when all that could be said of Winter

had been said. The hoar frost dazzled once.

We romanticize the strong, silent night

but on verdant grounds where it never froze

she found that Summer speaks for itself.

The Coming Season

I stepped out on to the front porch and looked over the road to the park on the other side. The snow was coming straight down, thick and heavy. Tonight the scene of spruce trees and of the ice rink, usually visible across the road from my house, was cloaked behind a palette of white and grey. In the eerie silence I could hear the snowflakes brush against each other in the air and on the ground. I thought that the edge of the world could be right on the other side of the road and I'd never know.

At the bottom of the driveway I turned and headed down the hill past the fifteen or so houses that separated mine from Dave's. School was done for the week and my only plan for this Friday night was to meet up with my best friend down at his house. There was rarely much more of a plan than that.

As I walked, I kicked up the dusty snow and left a trail of vague footprints behind me. The snowflakes hovered around me like mosquitoes in summer. It was light and dry, not that wet sloppy kind that happens when the temperature is barely below freezing. This was a November snow – the first big one of the year, the kind you could get excited about because it was still something special. If it happened in April, the whole town would expel a collective groan but this was November and the snow conjured up images of Christmas, childhood and snow forts in the back yard.

I arrived at Dave's and rang the doorbell. While waiting under the overhang I brushed the accumulation of flakes from my shoulders and slapped my hat against my leg. Dave swung open the door and ushered me in. I ducked my six foot four inch frame in through the doorway. I felt conspicuously tall in Dave's home. His was a compact family and they lived in an equally compact house. Dave was the giant at five foot five.

"Leave your coat on," he said. "We're goin' back out."

"Fine by me. Where to?"

"Helen's working at New York Pizza tonight," he said. "She told me to come in some time."

Helen was Dave's latest crush. At sixteen years of age he had already amassed a long line of ex-crushes and even a couple of ex-girlfriends. It seemed he might eventually make an ex-something out of every eligible girl in St. Albert.

He quickly put on his winter coat and gloves. Dave and I had more to distinguish us than our disparate heights. In my knee-length dark coat and my fake fur hat, I looked like a deserter from the Russian army, quiet and serious. In contrast, Dave dressed the part of a modern playboy; his coat was a bright red synthetic bomber jacket stuffed with goose down. It had a hood tucked into the collar that he never used because it lacked the cool that the rest of the coat strived to convey. But with his skinny legs in bell bottom jeans protruding from beneath, I thought he looked like he was wearing an inflatable life jacket.

So the lanky Russian deserter and the playboy in the inflatable life vest headed off down Grosvenor Boulevard through the silent storm to drink a cup of coffee and watch a pretty girl go about her work.

We didn't get far before the serenity of the night was disrupted by the sound of a revving engine and spinning tires. A car was stuck in deep snow as it tried to exit the service lane that paralleled Grandin Road. We walked over to see what we could do, and as we approached, the driver's side window rolled down revealing a woman in her thirties behind the wheel with two children in the back seat.

"We can push," said Dave. "Which way are you trying to go?"

"Down the hill," she replied. "If I can get out of this service road I should be okay."

"Just give it a little gas, let it off, then gas again," I instructed, despite lacking the experience of someone who had actually been in the driver's seat of a car. "If you start moving, just keep going. Don't stop."

We went around the back and started pushing as the woman pumped the gas. The kids stared at us through the back window observing our heroics with awe. It wasn't long before we felt some forward motion. As instructed, she kept going and we stood and watched the car draw away. The two kids waved at us, then we saw their mother's gloved hand wave a thank you out of the partially opened window just before the entire picture faded to white.

We stood for a moment longer and I felt a pride come over me for having helped a stranger. It was the kind of thing that only happened at times like this; times when nature reminded us that we are vulnerable and thus dependent upon each other. I suspected that Dave felt something as well.

"Well, let's keep going and see if there's anyone else to rescue," he said.

And, indeed, in the short distance between Dave's house and where Helen waited tables, the woman and her children were but the first of three motorists that we would rescue that night.

There was the old couple in the Vauxhall that shouldn't have been driving at all, let alone on a night like this. They wanted to pay us each a dollar for our help. That would have more than covered the cost of our coffees once we got to our destination, but we declined. It would have taken the chivalry out of it.

Then there was the guy in the pickup. No matter what we said, he just kept rocking the transmission from first to reverse and back, while he turned the steering wheel left to right, flailing about like an upended beetle. When we finally got him going he headed off down the road, foot on the gas as the truck swung from side to side like a dog that kept turning its head to bite its own tail.

As we walked on, Dave spoke up. "Wouldn't it be great to have a job like this?" he said. "Walkin' around town, helping people out of snow banks, helping them out if their car breaks down. They outta have jobs like that."

I thought about my part time job, pushing shopping carts off the parking lot at Woodward's. Even though they paid me $1.44 an hour, it always felt a drag to do it.

"Yeah, they outta have jobs like that," I agreed.

When we finally entered the front door of the restaurant, my feet were numb and my hands were stiff from the cold. I knew they would be hurting soon as the blood forced its way back through the cold tissue and the nerves woke from their hibernation. We stomped our feet and shook off the snow before finding a table close to where we were sure our waitress would be hovering.

As we took our seats, Helen came through the swinging doors from the kitchen – a pizza balanced high on a delicate hand. Our eyes followed her across the room to one of the few occupied tables. After setting the pizza down, she turned and noticed us, smiled, and walked our way.

"Surprised to see us?" said Dave.

"I'm surprised to see anyone tonight," she replied as she glanced toward the door. "But now that you're here, d'you want to see a menu?"

"We just came in for coffee -- and to thaw out a little," I said.

"Coffee, too?" she asked, directing her attention to Dave.

"Uh, sure," he answered. "You don't mind, eh? -- us just having coffee, that is."

"No, I don't mind. I don't see a lineup for tables happening any time tonight."

Dave and I sat and drank coffee and watched Helen go about her duties, luring her over to our table on occasion with our empty cups. She'd stand and talk with us for a minute when she could, the round glass coffee pot dangling from her hand like gaudy jewelry. We watched the few customers slowly trickle out the door and into the night until only we remained.

"We're closing early," she said, "-- because of the storm. I'm gonna have to kick you guys out."

"Maybe we can wait and walk you home," Dave said hopefully.

"My Dad's on his way down," she said. "But thanks for offering."

We stepped out of the warmth of the restaurant and back into the world of swirling white. I heard the click of the deadbolt behind us and turned to see Helen giving us a shy wave before turning and walking away.

"Well, might as well go back to my place and shoot some pool," said Dave.

On the way back the streets were quiet. The snow was calf deep on the sidewalk and we trudged along keeping our eyes toward the ground ahead of us.

We came to the Grandin strip mall. There was a field just behind it that provided a shortcut back to Dave's house.

"We should go around," I said. "It could be pretty deep through there."

“I gotta take a leak pretty bad,” said Dave, “-- from all that coffee. Besides, my house is right over there.” He pointed toward a faint amber glow through the curtain of falling snow.

So with poor judgement and full bladders we plodded off through the empty space that separated the mall from the row of houses beyond. As I was taller and better able to plow through the deep snow, I led the way. I could see no contour to the ground and as I walked forward the snow became deeper until it was up to my hips. My long coat made me as aerodynamic as a four by eight sheet of plywood strapped across the grill of a speeding car. I looked back to Dave and could see that he’d fallen behind. In fact, he wasn’t moving at all. He was in over his waist.

“We’d better go back and go around the long way,” I said.

“But man!” he whined, “Look how close we are!”

I turned to face back in the direction of the houses. We had to be less than 30 yards from the line of fences.

“Put your hood up,” I said.

“What?”

“The hood of your coat – put it up,” I repeated. “I have an idea.”

He did as requested. “Now what?”

“Turn around and lie down on your back.”

He looked at me and shrugged in a manner that conveyed, in a single gesture, his lack of comprehension and his unshakeable trust. He turned and flopped onto his back. I reached out and grabbed the top of his hood and began to pull. He started flailing his arms and kicking his feet like he was in a swimming pool. All the motion was making him hard to pull and, like a guy struggling in quicksand, he was beginning to sink.

“Stop that!” I said. “You’re as bad as that idiot in the truck.”

“Hey – just trying to help,” he said. He struggled to his feet, turned away and lay back down for another try.

“Just stay flat with your legs straight out and your arms by your sides,” I commanded.

Dave complied and, without the animation of the previous attempt, he slid easily over the snow on the shiny surface of his red synthetic jacket. I struggled on through the field with Dave in tow. His contribution was to sing a twisted version of *Let it Snow* that we’d made up one night the previous winter while hanging out in his basement. A seemingly short distance from where we had begun, the land rose up until soon the snow was only up to my knees. It felt remarkably easy.

A few yards from the fence I announced, “Ride’s over!” and dropped my grip on Dave’s hood.

Dave rolled over, regained his footing and shook himself off. “That – was brilliant!” he exclaimed as we both made for the gap in the fence.

Two hours later, before my midnight curfew expired, I was making my way alone back up the street toward home. I looked up to see the bright disk of the moon make a brief appearance through a thinning patch of cloud and I knew that the morning would present us with a crisp, bright unblemished landscape of white against a pale blue Alberta sky.

Our bludgeoned gash through the field behind Dave’s house was already no more than a vague indentation on the clean canvas. Even the reckless determination of two teenage boys would be no match for the tenacity of the coming season.

The Rink

I watch from my kitchen window, my husband, standing in the backyard lit only by the moon. He is wearing massive black boots. A pair I bought him on clearance at the end of a previous winter. Size twelve, five dollars. He wears a balaclava too, something he never needed growing up in Halifax, but I can't see his face. In his gloved hands, he holds a hose. It empties into the yard, creating shallow pools. In the darkness, the water looks as though it has the viscosity of nail polish, or honey.

The hose is attached to the kitchen tap, which is on full blast causing the faucet to tremor. The pipes emit a steady mournful groan; a lamentation and I imagine the whole thing exploding. The hose is erect and strained like flexed biceps and the water rushes through, as though eager to escape, like children jostling to get outside a hole in the wall. The sliding door to the back deck is open—just enough for the hose to pass through. About two inches, like the crevasse in a glacier. Sharp and menacing. The cold air that comes in the house resembles nothing of his breath which appears like thought clouds above his head. It comes in short sharp spurts, like darts, striking me when I walk by causing my own body, like the hose, to become alert, heightened. It is after eleven o'clock and I am braless and barefoot. I don't wear slippers because I didn't need them in Nova Scotia. I shrug off the hardwood, which is concrete cold and collect dirty plates from the table but I can't rinse them because the sink is in use. I watch for a few more minutes, unaware that I'm hugging myself, wondering what he is thinking about. What, from within, spills out onto the tarp, which he's fixed to the chain-link fence with a dozen or so bungee cords, to form the first layer of ice on the backyard rink. Later on he joins me in bed, in our room over the garage where it is always cold.

A few times we took our kids to public skates. We had only two children back then, and my husband, who was still active in hockey, was anxious for them to learn how to skate. They wore helmets and fleece and snow pants that were too stiff. We paid twenty dollars and lasted, on average, ten minutes. Our son spent his time sprawled out on center ice crying, while our daughter crawled circles around him, licking the snow as she passed. My husband was disappointed, not by their lack of skill, but what he perceived to be a lack of effort. They should *want* to learn to skate. It was part of being Canadian. Part of being him. I followed him off the ice, my legs moving like a pair of scissors, the frustrated chants of my skating teacher commanding me to *bend my legs* replaying in my mind like a toxic loop. It was not a part of *me.*

A week later, I watch him again, flooding the back yard. He wears the same black boots but a toque instead of a balaclava. It's warmed up slightly, but after five days of temperatures in the high minus twenties, the rink is several inches thick and solid. This pleases him and he calls me out on the deck to

observe. It's impressive. The surface looks even and the underlying blue tarp emits a Crayola blue glow akin to a light sabre or disco. I tell him it looks good and retire back inside tripping over the hose and the empty bin he uses to store the hose in when he's not making ice. The bin will remain in the kitchen for the next five months and I will simultaneously tolerate it and want to set it on fire.

My husband plays in two hockey leagues and the ice times are obscene. Some games start just before midnight. Oftentimes, when he returns home from hockey, he is too wired to go to bed, particularly if he had a good game or scored a goal. He will stand in the open space of our room and ask if I want a replay of his *highlight reel* goal. I tell him I'm asleep but he carpet skates across the room anyway, giving me a play by play, his white legs, indented with sock lines, glowing in the light of a passing car. On one occasion, I wake up startled by the sight of him crawling into the room. I ask him what he is doing, disturbed by the scene of him dragging himself on all fours through the dark on a Tuesday night. He thinks his ankle is broken because he got hit with a slap shot. I tell him it is likely sprained and suggest he get some sleep. He crawls onto the bed messily, like he's climbing out of water onto a boat and collapses beside me. His right ankle radiates heat. Like there's a tea-light at my feet.

His ankle is broken. On one side he wears his winter boot. On the other, a grey plastic walking contraption with a bag fixed to the end. It's another late night and he's made progress on the rink. He's surrounded the perimeter with a snow bank that looks like the edge of a piecrust and he's extended the rink four feet to the left, freezing the back gate shut. It is the gate the older two kids use to access the bus stop. I'm irritated by this development but the extra four feet make him happy so I ignore it, like the bin in the kitchen, and go inside to make tea. I can't fill the kettle because the hose is still hooked up to the sink so I take it to the bathroom instead. The sink is shallow, the kettle wide and impractical. I get just enough water for one cup. I plug it in and continue to watch him outside making ice. I wonder again what he is thinking. It is just as likely he is thinking about spreadsheets as he is about love or fatherhood or hot sauce. By the time my tea is made, the backyard is a wet pool of thoughts.

My mother-in-law tells me about the time she took my husband to skating school unaware that by skating school, it meant *hockey* skating school. She sent him in track pants and skates and those thin magic gloves you can buy in a three pack from the dollar store. The rest of the kids showed up in full hockey gear. If he was bothered by his obvious lack of belonging, it did not show. He skated his heart out. So grateful for the opportunity to participate, he was oblivious to being *that* kid, as a sea of dads looked on. Hours later she took him to Canadian Tire and had him properly outfitted in hockey gear.

Midnight. My son has croup. He barks from his room, which faces the back yard. I stumble out of bed. Carry him downstairs swaddled in a blanket like he's an infant though he's five and lanky and spends

hours thinking up homonyms and odd numbers. I take him out on the back deck. It is silent and cold but there is no wind. Tolerable. The rink is still glistening from its earlier flooding. The sky awash of stars, like nightlights. I think of something I read about the impact of thoughts on water. How negative thoughts produced ice crystals that were gnarly and disjointed and fractured like broken glass in a storm drain. And how positive thoughts created ice crystals that were majestic and beautiful like sugar cookies or tree ornaments. I wonder what the ice looks like in the backyard. Do the layers differ like strata in the badlands of Southern Alberta or do they appear as a single homogeneous lump? A perfect spreadsheet with formulas and columns and tabs or are there cracks and errors and broken links? I think about my husband on that first day of skating school, skating like his life depended on it and return my son to his bed.

Today is the day. The backyard rink is ready for skating. My husband has installed a net against the back fence. There are hockey pucks and sticks. Elbow pads and jerseys. A sled for our toddler. My daughter, who has grown out of last season's skates, is wearing mine, leaving me sidelined in the kitchen. The older kids can skate now. Forwards and backwards. He pulls our toddler around in the sled. She lies on her back like a starfish, made immobile by her one-piece snowsuit. Her red bangs poke out beneath her hood. She shares the same placid smile as my husband. One by one the kids trickle back in the house, discarding layers of clothing and padding. Their cheeks flushed. I make hot chocolate like it's the law and send them to play. My husband remains outside. His ankle recovered and safely jammed into his skates. It is dusk now, but he remains on the rink, circling, taking shots on the net, clearing the ice with a shovel in precise lines. I smile.

It is April and the un-bungeed part of the tarp blows in the wind, at one point folding itself in half over the portion of the rink that has not yet melted. Along the fence, the ice is still eight inches thick. From the neighboring road it's an eye sore. I pull back the tarp; anchor it down with rocks like it's a picnic blanket. Methodically I chip away at the remaining ice. Assaulting it with a shovel, then flinging the blocks into the green space beyond the yard. It is both therapeutic and exhausting. I work alone in the quiet of the afternoon, undoing the layers. Stripping away the hours of time my husband spent in the darkness of winter building the rink. I can't tell if the ice looks negative or positive, beautiful or deformed. It is just heavy. Weighed down by the private thoughts of its maker, those profound and those superficial. Him. I debate whether to stop because it feels like I'm dismantling something sacred. Like I'm cutting down a tree. But I keep working because it's almost May and the grass beneath the tarp has been buried for almost six months. I suspect it craves sunlight and air the way we all do after a long winter. I detach the tarp, fold it into a shapeless heap by the edge of the fence and stand ankle deep in the yard. The remains of the rink, now a watery graveyard of thoughts, from which summer will emerge.

Letter on ice

Mama,

This is going to be the last time I write to you from my exile on the Glacier. Today marks my six thousandth year here and my only friend is a limping magpie. He still hasn't stopped smoking his pipe, no matter how many times I said it would kill him. Deep down I know that this little guy will outlive me. He will outlive all of us.

Mama, you may wonder why my letter is written on a block of ice. I had no choice. It is the only commodity here and the only currency. When I arrived, it was my first time to experience ice laughter and ice hugs. I did not like either. Can you believe that even the only colour other than white that you see on the Glacier is called "ice blue"? I know you can only believe it when you see it with your own eyes, but I also know that you are never going to visit. I understand.

Remember when I told you that I got stabbed in the heart by an icicle a few hundred years back? I am feeling a little better now. When the accident happened, everybody was diligently collecting snowflakes. They wanted to build a higher mountain on the Glacier in hopes that one day they can get to see the Great Sun. I chose to be silent and not tell them it was a myth. Nobody would have believed me anyway. You know, nobody noticed that day that it was THE day I shed my last drop of blood. I was chalk white, so I blended in perfectly. It is alright now. I found out that my life became a little more tolerable when that cursed river of crimson memories dried out from my veins. It seemed to transport feelings, and that was strictly forbidden on the Glacier. A flat line was a prerequisite for sanity.

Mama, to this day, nobody has asked me who I was. Actually, only one did. That strange limping magpie who turned out to be in exile too. He believed in the Sun, so he flew for thousands of light years just to feel Its warmth. When he landed on the Glacier, there was no Sun, no warmth and he never had the strength or hope to fly away. I think I now have a better appreciation of how the search for greener grass can make you do foolish things. The magpie never found any grass on the Glacier. I never asked him about his limp and he was kind enough not to ask about my stabbed heart. We did however talk about the lands he limped on and the people my heart loved back when it could identify feelings. Mama, I found out that no matter when you floated onto the shores of your exile here, the stories became similar to a scary extent. After the first few hundred years, there was no such thing as news. Flat line.

To this day, nobody knows my name. They only know of my curls. Unless there is a secret language that my curls and the frozen inhabitants use to communicate with one another, I don't understand why they stop to talk to them and not me. If my curls have interesting stories to tell, isn't it because I took them along on trips with me? So why don't the frozen ones want me to tell those stories? Sometimes I yell at my curls because I am so jealous of them. I threaten them with guillotines, but I've known them all my life and they have a way to talk me out of my blind rage. They never respond to me now. Their springs are completely frozen and they know that my threats are empty.

Mama, life in the snow globe is much harder than you told me it would be. Everybody who tried to fly away hit their head in the glass and fell back again on the Glacier. This time carrying more resentment and disappointment as you can imagine. I am by no means blaming you. How would you have known? Most of the frozen ones have never left this Glacier and truly believe in the Sun, but Mama, you and I have seen a million suns before. What they are waiting for is not real.

As I sit on the edge of this floating Glacier, trying to fish out any of my forgotten dreams and empathy, I realize that they cannot have possibly thrived in this ocean. They must have migrated a long time ago to warmer waters. People there don't need to fish them out because they simply jump at you when you least expect them. There are no forgotten dreams on the other side. All are celebrated and nurtured to be ever growing in beauty, colour and song. As I write this, I realize that I truly don't remember what colour was. Something between white and ice blue?

Mama, I have decided that today would be my last day here. I shall jump into that hollow ocean and let its wailing current drift me away. Tonight, I will pack my curls and go, hoping that they will find companionship with yours. Compassion, instead of the frozen curiosity and interrogation that drained their last drop of blood.

I'm coming home.

Bright winter coat

When I see her, goose bumps.

Not from the icy wind

but pleasure shivers born at the sight of a waist-length coat.

Dash of spicy, pink-red wool that transports me

far from this grey sky and snow covered path.

She is a beach

an ember floating from a July campfire

a fuchsia martini in a sexy glass,

cradled by a lean-fingered hand, tan.

I think of a painting, wish I could make one.

Trap her heat.

A slow melt, from inside, until April chisels in.

I watch until she's a magenta speck, far ahead.

What power, this colour, that can set memory

or wishes

afire.

Brumal

His flight is scheduled to leave at quarter to six. It boarded at 5:15 p.m. Thelonious Pinsky had dropped his kids off with his ex-wife, Nancy, and for the first time, didn't go in. He sent his regards. "Say hey to your mom for me," he said. Spense and Hope seemed fine with this. They lugged their bags into the house and there was no tension. No sharp words. No false civility.

Pinsky settles into his seat. He takes a deep breath. He thinks about everything waiting for him in Mexico – the bungalow in Tulum, his new-found friend, Hasim and his damned Turkish coffee experiments, the resort project he was managing, and Inka. He can hardly wait until he sees her, and holds her, and they are together in bed. He quickly realizes he's been breaking his own rule. He's been thinking about happiness. This was something he tried very hard to avoid. He believed if he was thinking about whether or not he was happy – he probably wasn't. He gives his head a metaphorical shake and refocuses on the present. But he is happy. He would never say this out loud. Not exactly. He might say he was partially happy, or almost happy. But the thought of Inka in the morning caused a blissful happiness in him that he could not deny.

He looks at the small video screen on the back of the headrest of the seat in front of his. The logo of the airline is on the screen and a small swirling line repeatedly highlights it. How many times has he made this trip home to Canada to see his kids in the past months? He can't remember.

Pinsky is not really paying attention to what's going on around him as the plane charges down the runway and lifts into the air.

He's surprised when the attendant walks directly up the aisle and stops at his seat, leans over the grey-haired woman next to him and asks him if he'd like a drink. The plane has barely stopped climbing but he would like a drink, so he orders wine. His wine arrives and he notices the attendant is pushing a cart, stopping and systematically making her beverage inquiries. He quickly finishes his wine.

The cabin lights are dimmed and Pinsky closes his eyes. He's not tired. He just wants to close his eyes for a couple minutes. It's okay to just drift for a couple minutes. Just a few minutes. He leans his head against the inner cabin wall. The low vibrations that occur in all airplanes send "sleep" messages to his body and Pinsky is okay with this. For some reason, he starts to think about ice fishing. He has not been ice fishing for a couple years and he suddenly, inexplicably misses it. Perhaps the desire to go ice fishing comes because there will certainly be snow at home and the lakes will soon be frozen. There could very well be snow in Chicago. He lets his mind drift through the thousand details of ice fishing he has stored in his memory and finally, he lands on one specific morning. This cold morning sticks and won't let go. It's as if his feet have become stuck to the ice of this particular memory and now the ice won't let go. It's not unpleasant to stand there and look around. It was late February and bloody cold. Minus 25C at 4 a.m. was borderline for Pinsky but he decided to go anyway. He'd tiptoed around the house – not wanting to wake anyone. Nancy slept through his getting out of bed – at least she didn't move. He's always been able to wake up whenever he wanted so there had been no need for an alarm.

This inner alarm clock worked for waking up early, but it wasn't so good for sleeping past nine in the morning, which Pinsky would have enjoyed occasionally. Even as a teenager, he wasn't able to sleep in.

He couldn't help poking his head in and checking on the kids. They were sharing the same bedroom – something that would soon have to be remedied. Pinsky loved watching them sleep. Every now and then, he'd just stand in the doorway and look at them – all their sweet potential and possibility floating with them inside a sea of innocence. He loved them profoundly in these moments. All the love he held deep down rose to the surface. His fears would come too but mostly it was unfathomed love. Spense was coming up on two years – his birthday was next month – and Hope was four. He kissed them both, pushing his daughter's hair off her forehead first. She has her mother's hair. Blond, blond and more blond. He had to whisper-hiss the cat's name to get her out of the room as she'd followed Pinsky in, looking for attention. "Kitcha," he hissed. "Kitcha! Come on. Jesus, cat, come on!"

The cat followed him into the kitchen and watched him from one of the kitchen bar stools as he pulled cold meat from the fridge. He'd purchased some nice hot Capocollo, and a few slices of the Mortadella at the Italian market the day before. He made four sandwiches on Sourdough bread and wrapped them in wax paper. Pinsky preferred wax paper to Saran wrap; he just didn't like it when plastic touched his food. He placed the sandwiches in a knapsack along with a couple Japanese oranges and three bottles of Heineken. For breakfast, he toasted two bagels and made cream cheese sandwiches, sliced them in half so he could eat them while driving. Once his lunch was packed up in a knapsack, Pinsky made a pot of coffee and filled the thermos. On his way out the door, the cat seemed to want out too. Pinsky opened and held the door. The cat sniffed and immediately backed away.

"I thought not," Pinsky says. "Stay in where it's warm." He locked the door and headed for his truck, which had been running for ten minutes – shaking off a middle-of-the-night deep freeze.

In this memory, he drives north out of Edmonton on highway twenty-eight for two hours. He listens to the CBC news, and then to a Steely Dan CD. He replays the song *Deacon Blues* a half dozen times. Then, he goes back to the CBC, which is playing a documentary on wolves. He veers east on thirty-six and keeps going – past Smoky Lake, and Spedden and Ashmont.

He imagines his wife and children asleep while he drives the narrow highway. He thinks about them waking up and being warm and safe. Maybe Nancy will get up before the kids and watch a movie in bed while she drinks her coffee.

The host on the CBC is talking about the word "brumal." It means "of winter." Pinsky likes this word – decides that, this morning, he is brumal. He knows using this word just once will not keep it in his vocabulary. It will take repeated usage, and soon – today. But the likelihood of his being able to speak the word to someone else today would be small. He'd probably be alone all day, with just the fish, the ice, the sky and the cold. The road is clear and he hopes it is also dry. There could certainly be black ice anywhere along this stretch. There could be deer or moose on the road too. There are not many vehicles; a few trucks pushing through the night, and a smattering of cars. It's not a divided highway but he does not have to pass another vehicle during the two-hours. Only once, around a corner, does he feel the truck shift a bit on the road. Near the turn off to the lake, he sees the glowing eyes of three deer in

the ditch. For the hundredth time, he makes a mental check-list of the cost of this fishing. The license. The rods and line. The augers – he has three augers. An auger sled. His shelter. The propane heater. And these were just the big things. He was not counting the little things that accumulated in a heavy canvas bag – hooks, pliers, hand warmers, the mouth spreader, the spud bar for checking the thickness of the ice and the first aid kit. Then there was fuel for the truck and time. By the time he'd taken his limit for the day, he reckoned each fish will have cost him about three hundred dollars. But this was not about money. It was a love affair. It was about chasing the fish. It was about being outside in the dead of winter. It was about breathing. It was also about a set of well-worn rituals that brought him back to himself. The sequence of unloading the truck was a comfortable pattern. It was something he controlled completely. He chose to do it in exactly the same way each time out, and he never wavered.

Well before sunrise, he starts to unload his truck. But something is wrong with the order of things. Normally, he would pull the auger out first because it's the last thing to go in but it's stowed at the front of the truck. It will come out last. And all his other gear is out of order as well. It's like he wasn't thinking when he packed the truck, or someone else did it. This baffles Pinsky but the lake beckons so he lets it go. Regardless of the order of things, the result is the same. Soon, he is on the ice with the auger. A good six inches of snow covers the lake and he is completely alone on the shore of Grosbeak Bay. He would not fish just one hole today. He is alone and so he will have the freedom to be obsessive. There was nobody watching and he was not in a fishing hut with other men. He began to pound holes into the ice, in pairs, starting close to shore and moving out to the deeper water. When he had drilled six pairs, he was sweating and giddy with anticipation. He walked in the dim frosted light back to his truck and poured a cup of coffee from the silver thermos. Now he had his grid and he would fish each hole until he caught something. Once he started to pull fish out at one depth, he would alternate from hole to hole at that depth until the fish moved on. Once a hole went quiet, he would work the grid until he found a school again. It was a delicious game of hide-and-seek and the fish were unpredictable bastards. It was his job to outsmart them.

This morning he pulls two walleye out of the second set of holes. He was fishing near the bottom of the lake with minnows, jigging – letting the bait rest on the bottom and giving it a little pull every ten seconds – mimicking a wounded prey. Walleye like the bottom. When he felt the heave on the line and pulled these walleye up he felt the old thrill of the first catch of the day. He marvelled at the colours – their yellow-green backs and brassy-silver sides. He thought they were about twelve inches, maybe a bit more. Pinsky places them side-by-side in the snow. There was no need for the cooler right now. He would pack them in the cooler with ice chips for the trip home. The school appeared to have moved elsewhere and Pinsky was going to do the same but then he caught one more walleye. Again, the hole went quiet and he was going to move farther out but pulled a beautiful pike out of the same hole. Not a huge pike but big enough to keep.

Just before sunrise a train moves along the far southern shore of the lake. Pinsky does not see it. He hears the low rumbling groan and the train's horn as it hurtles through a couple level crossings. He stops and looks towards the sound – follows the blue-grey surface of the lake until a sort of jutting peninsula of pines interrupts his view. He wonders which direction the train is travelling. Impossible to tell from this far away. He thinks he hears the horn again coming from the west but the echo and the

frigid air are tricksters. Pinsky cannot help but think about the Islamic call to prayer. Something in his subconscious makes the connection between this train sound and the haunting harmonics of the morning call to prayer. *God is Great, God is Great. There is no god but God and Mohammed is his prophet. It is better to pray than to sleep. It is better to pray than to sleep.* Perhaps it's his friendship with Hasim but he'd also been exposed to the ideas of Islam years before. There was a grade-eleven school trip to Istanbul, during which Pinsky had been exposed to the beautiful harmonics of the call to prayer. He'd had the flu the entire first week in Turkey so there were days that were hazy in his memory but the haunting sound of the call to prayer was something he'd never forgotten. He'd also been in a geography class at university with a woman named Nadira. She'd worn the hijab and was hesitant to speak with him at first. But they had been thrown together into a group of four in order to work on an exercise, so they connected. She'd been modest and shy and quiet. He would never know about Nadira's hair – it was hidden, always. He had, over coffee, asked about the morning call to prayer – about all prayer, in fact, and Nadira had let him know. She answered his questions, and more. They'd both done very well in the class but once it was over, his connection with her was done.

This morning, Pinsky thinks, I am ice-fishing rather than sleeping. But perhaps this ice fishing is like a prayer.

After twenty minutes, with sunlight pushing through the eastern forest and touching his face, Pinsky decides to move to one of the farthest holes and work his way in toward shore. He knows that once the sun comes up, or at least, the day brightens, he will have a chance at catching some perch. It's rare that perch will bite before sunrise. He hauls his gear out to the last set of holes and looks across the lake. He does not mind the sun in his eyes. He lets it splinter through his eyelashes. He wants to feel something resembling warmth on his cheeks. This is a hard-pressed wish this far north in February but he thinks he feels it. He thinks he feels the warmth of the sun on his face. This morning, it is more than just light. After a while, he raises his hand to cut the glare. Pinsky looks around. He tries to see the lake and the ice and the snow as if he were looking at it for the first time. He likes the way the snow seems to have been sprinkled with diamond dust. As if someone has tossed this dust across its surface – as if diamonds are ubiquitous and inexpensive and are thrown away on a whim. He also likes it that he can see his own breath and that his face is cold. Pinsky is pleased that there is still a half-full thermos of hot coffee in the truck. He feels blessed to be out on the ice – to be alive and paying attention to things. He will wait until noon before he eats the sandwiches and has a Heineken. He looks forward to making a little fire beside the truck, sitting in one of the canvas chairs and having his lunch. But before this, there is much fishing to do. He threads the hook into a minnow and slips it into the hole. Almost immediately, he has a bite. There is a strong tug on the line and he begins to bring the fish in. Except it is not a fish. Even before he sees the top of his wife's head, he knows this is way too heavy to be a fish. Pinsky pulls her out of the hole and places her in the snow. Nancy is wet and shivering uncontrollably. Dark blond strands of hair are stuck to her face. He remembers how much he loves her body. There is a fullness to her figure that says *I am a woman, not a girl*, which he has always loved. He removes the hook, as gently as he can, from the side of her mouth. She is quiet and only winces once as he does this.

"You don't even like fish," he says. "What were you thinking?"

"I saw you up there and you looked so happy," she says. "You were smiling. You used to smile all the time."

"And?" Pinsky says.

"And we used to be happy. I used to make you happy. We used to make each other happy."

"We used to do a lot of things," he says.

"Your smile is lovely," she says. "I miss your smile."

"What do you mean you miss my smile?"

"There is something childlike about it that I used to find irresistible. And it's still there."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your happiness. Your smile. The past. The things I miss."

"The past? The past? Hey, aren't you're supposed to be at home? Who's taking care…?" Nancy sits down, tips over into the snow and is still. "What about happiness? What do you mean you miss my smile? Nancy?" She does not move. It's as if she were at home in bed, rolling to her side, lost inside a dream. When she was upset about something – which, in his memory was most of the time – or if she didn't want to talk, or didn't want to make love, or if he'd inadvertently done something to hurt her – she would give him the gift of her back. For Pinsky, it was an almost insurmountable wall. But he remembers the times when he would kiss the center of her back – gently, tenderly. Sometimes these kisses would cause her to roll over. This memory aches a little. There would be no kisses today. She was half-buried in the snow and he was in no mood to do any coaxing. Besides, this was not the real Nancy. Nancy was home asleep and he loved her. He loved her and she loved him. She was finishing her MA, slowly but surely. Everything between them was fine and strong. There was nothing wrong with their love. He could not, and should not, bring the present with all the things that have gone wrong between them, into the past. They were fine in the past. On this day, when he fished the twelve holes of Grosbeak Bay they were very happy – they were fine. Everything was fine. Anyway, she couldn't possibly be here, swimming around in this lake, or lying on her side in the snow. There was no need for her to miss him, to miss their happiness – she still had it. They were okay.

The line goes taut and he attends to another fish. But again, the weight is wrong. He pulls Nadira out of the hole. She is completely covered with black clothing – imprisoned in a burqa – head-to-foot. A mesh covers her eyes. Pinsky does not know why he knows it is Nadira. But as this sopping figure begins to remove her heavy, wet garments and drop them in the snow, it is indeed Nadira who emerges, steam rising from her wet skin in the cold day. Pinsky wants to wrap her in his arms, to protect her, to keep her warm, but he can't move. The impulse is there but he can't move his legs, or arms. Nadira stands shivering, her bare feet hidden in the snow. Underneath her burqa, she is wearing only white lingerie – a lacy bra, panties, garter and stockings. Nadira's hair is thick and black and reaches down her back to the top of her buttocks. Her eyes are pale blue. This isn't right, Pinsky thinks. I should not be seeing this. He

starts to turn away but something is wrong. Something is amiss. Something beyond pulling two women out of a fishing hole in the middle of a lake in the coldest month of the year in Canada. He looks hard at her. Her face! Her face is deeply scarred – pockmarks and ripples of scar tissue under her right eye and curling under her chin.

"Your face," he says. "What happened to your face?" Pinsky does not remember Nadira having scars. She only wore the headscarf at university. He would have noticed these scars.

"My mother and father thought it would be a good idea if I went to school. But there are backward-thinking people in every culture. In my country, in Afghanistan, my former country, some believed girls should not be educated and one day they threw acid in the faces of those attending a girls' school." She takes a deep breath. Closes her eyes. "My daughter was attacked. Taliban cowards on motorcycles with water pistols filled with acid. She was one of many."

"Your daughter was attacked? So you weren't attacked? What happened to you?"

"When you harm my child, you harm me," she says, a hard line of anger and resolve in her voice. "They were just girls. They were just schoolgirls. I do not know when this country will ever be okay."

Nadira smiles, looks past him, and all around – she scans the line of trees along the perimeter of the lake. Her lips part slightly. In the places where the snow on the ground meets the sky, the colour is the same pale grey, false white and murky blue. The horizon is impossible. She turns slowly in a circle. She takes it all in and once her turn is complete, she smiles at Pinsky. Her smile is giving, kind and open. But her eyes are a ruin of blue, tired and damaged. This contradiction does not escape Pinsky. Nadira closes her eyes, brings her arms tight to her body and with a little jump, slips back into the lake without a ripple.

Pinsky does not want to fish anymore. He's afraid of what will come out of the water next. But he hunches over the hole and once again threads the hook into a minnow and drops it into the black water. He says a little prayer to whoever might be listening: "Please let there be no more women in this lake. Please. I can't take any more conversations like this. Let it be fish. Let there be a nice perch on my line."

Pinsky opens his eyes. He's not fishing. He drifted off. He's on an airplane and he's been sleeping – his head leaned against the inner wall of the cabin. He hopes to hell he hasn't been muttering, or snoring, or drooling in his sleep. He did not dream of Inka. She was not in this dream. But then this was not just a dream; it was a nightmare. It turned nightmarish. He side-glances the older women in the aisle seat. She's reading a fat paperback. He knows if he says anything to this woman he will likely have to sit through stories about her eight goddamned grandchildren and the pictures she keeps on her phone, or in her purse. He does not want to open this door. He ought to shut his eyes again and pretend to be asleep but he's a little bit worried in case he really does fall asleep. He quickly rifles through his carry-on bag and finds the ear-buds, inserts them into his ears and plugs in to the video system.

Meditation on Moose Lake

I have the urge to collect the sparkling crystals in a clear container. But having collected butterflies, bees, frogs, and dandelions in jars as a child, I know I cannot capture nature for later; it has to be revered in the moment. A moment like now; a morning when diamond crystals shimmer on every branch of the lofty birch trees as they reach up toward the perfect Alberta sky painted winter blue. Without exception, every spruce tree's needles twinkle in the late morning sun.

Overnight a cold snap plummeted unsuspecting thermometers. Ice formed on the lake for the first time this season. Not yet spanning all across but for several feet out from shore, white solid stillness, with ripples of dark water beyond. The last of the geese float by mutely. All the birds and animals are silent. No chickadee calls. No blue jay squawks. Even the squirrel is without chatter. All that can be heard is the cracking of the sunflower seeds that have been left for them to enjoy, followed by the sound of the shell dropping gently onto the glistening frost encrusted snow below.

A trail of tracks crosses the snow-covered lawn to the bird feeder. Deer tracks. The same tracks encircle the mountain ash tree. Yesterday a flock of a hundred cedar waxwings descended in the afternoon. A flutter of activity enveloped the tree as the birds attempted unsuccessfully to eat all of the berries. A bumper crop this year allowed leftovers to remain for some other creature to feast upon. The lower limbs of the tree are naked now. All the bright scarlet ornaments are gone, devoured by the two deer that came before I woke.

Clichés come to mind. How lucky I am to live here, how blessed. Taking a deep breath, I let the frigid air fill me; then let my body make it warm to flow back out. I am calm. I am quiet. I am home.

Permanent Residents

“At minus 40, the two competitors for our collective souls – metric slash British slash generally European, and American – converge. At minus 40 there is no difference between south and east, there is only west and north remaining. I get the sense both Russians and Santa Claus measure things in variations of absolute zero. At 233.15 Kelvin, everything is coagulated mass. All physical difference nullified in layers and toques and long underwear and layers. There is nothing human about minus 40.”

“What is your point?” I asked.

“My point is I am done.” My boyfriend replied.

He was done. He crawled into the spare bedroom with the cat. I mean that literally. He crawled on all fours. I tucked him in. The window was 40% frost. The cat perched on his stomach and purred. I left them to sleep.

The next morning I checked on him and he remained asleep with the cat on his stomach. I deemed him human enough to make his own decisions. I went to work in minus 40. It was dark. It was dark when I returned. He was still asleep. Worried, I called a doctor.

“He’s hibernating.” The doctor said. This doctor made house calls. This doctor looked to have been born when doctors routinely made house calls.

“Hibernating?”

“Third case today.”

“When will he wake up?”

“Spring time.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Doesn’t it though?” And with that the doctor yawned, slunk into the bed, and fell asleep.

The next day at work only half of the team was in. Nobody had called. I knew. They had gone to sleep.

At home I checked my boyfriend and the doctor. They looked comfortable, rested, warm. The cat was asleep too, still purring. The bed was big enough, I was tempted to crawl in and join them. But I didn’t. I thought of the economic effects of an entire population hibernating. I thought of American imperialism and what it would be like to wake up as the 51st state, annexed in absentia. I thought of the odd gaps in the birthday calendar that would form. I thought of tourists coming for the skiing and arriving in the airport and waiting for taxis that would never come. I pictured them: a line of temporary immigrants that grew and grew with every arrival until the terminal was full and it exploded from the pressure of too much natural-gas-fed heat and body temperature; a spray of ski poles and fashionable scarves that would not work in minus 40.

I returned to work the next morning. I was alone. I worked hard. I had the productivity of an entire province to make up. By 4:00 it was dark and I was tired. I walked home, in the 40th straight day of minus 40, and crawled in to bed next to my boyfriend, physician, and cat. I yawned, nudged for elbow room, and drifted to sleep.

It was mid-May when I woke up. Spring had taken its sweet time. There were helicopters in the air, speaking loudspeaker Russian. Christmas wrapping paper, in torn bits, littered the sidewalks. The snow was gone. I was rested. A ski pole was lodged in the window, the pointy end just centimetres from my boyfriend's face. The cat yawned, stretched, then hunkered down again. Still purring.

Anthropocene

Academics say we live in the Anthropogenic era,
our influence on the planet so profound
that we must name a geological epoch for ourselves.
Atmospheric evidence confirms the reality
of our actions, but I am not thinking about that
as my feet skim over packed ice and snow,
the dirty linoleum of a kitchen floor, running
with my orange-jacketed sister and her dog towards
the downward slope of the river valley,
smoke coming out of her mouth, her eyes
white-walker blue.

In the river valley, the setting sun is a broken egg,
oozing whiteness from the heart of creation,
light fringed by the silhouettes of conifers, which look
infinitely divisible, I say, noting the intricacy
of branches and needles. *You know*
you just described dividing by zero
says my sister, and tells me about her favourite trees,
one of which she thinks lacks *auxin*
because it's bent over like a lanky fourteen year old.

Her dog darts over the frozen river

a black splash on white snow, river and sky.

A muscle in my thigh freezes; the sound of cars

churn softly like a washing machine,

and we surface to a pink wash of sky

and the sea shell glitter of buildings

as cold soaks through flesh.

(Somewhere,

beneath the standing trees like strands of hair

and the dark figures of dog walkers,

are sixteen Papaschase bodies.)

promise

Sing praises to snow, to flowers,

to the buried promise of perennials.

Cover your garden with ice

crystals, snow shovelled off your stairs.

Insulate your plants with cold.

Blanket your lavender

and rosemary

and thyme,

oregano and coriander.

Protect them from a deeper freezing.

Let them teeter, topple over, fall

asleep, dream the dreams of plants, of herbs, of summer

here, under a sweater

of snow.

Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver.

Mon jardin, ce n'est pas un jardin, c'est la plaine,

Mon chemin, ce n'est pas un chemin, c'est la neige.

*Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver.**

Let that be enough, for now.

These days are made

for white nights

of northern lights,

the spell-binding brightness

of snow

lit by a winter moon – bathed in blue.

Cross country ski at midnight. Sing your star

song – the crackle and crunch of skis

swishing, scraping – accompanied by the steady staccato

of poles piercing an icy crust. Your trail, a sapphire

wake.

Embrace

the orange heat of homecoming,

the clothes-peeling invitation

of an open

hearth.

Drink

your childhood

– a mug, hot

cocoa.

We are

winter

people

cleansed by cold

purified by polar

fronts,

night brightness.

We shovel

and slide and glide

until our limbs are almost

numb

in winter, we are all white-

thumbed.

Let's tingle, together. Be pins and needles.

Feel our blood surge

as the mercury sinks,

inhale the kind of clean

that only strikes subzero

when nostrils pinched together

stick.

We are

lavender and oregano,

summer savoury

and sage, in our own mysterious half-

hibernation.

Surrender to winter.

To starlight and snow-dust.

To the blue moon,

the warm room.

The time will come for flowers.

Mice and Ice

It's not even 10:00 and my day is already going to the mice. I left a large chicken out to thaw overnight and this morning I found the kitchen counter littered with mouse turds and a hole chewed in the bag. When I put on my winter coat to dispose of the chicken, I caught the bottom of it in the trap I'd set in the closet. I slipped on ice on my way to the bin, landing in the snow that obscured the sidewalk overnight.

Now I'm on my way to buy something to serve company for dinner to replace the mouse-eaten chicken and something to get rid of the mice that seem to have decided to spend the winter in my condo. The other night I heard rustling in the garbage bag under the sink so I grabbed it and carried it, mice and all, directly outside to the dumpster. They probably just found their way back inside again. Besides the peanut-butter-baited mousetraps, I've tried moth balls, Irish Spring soap and plugging holes with steel wool. Nothing is working.

The hardware store has an amazing arsenal of traps and poisons. Some turn the mice into dust so you don't have to worry about having dead carcasses in the walls stinking up the place. They couldn't smell worse than the moth balls, or the Irish Spring soap for that matter, but I'm afraid of the neighbours' cats catching them and being killed by the poison. I finally settle on the Ultrasonic Rodent Repellers a friend told me about. These devices don't kill the mice, they just "repel them from the sound-protected areas using intense high-frequency sound waves," according to the packaging. Maybe they'll go next door and be eaten by the neighbour's cats.

I buy a bag of ice melt as well. The environmentally friendly sand I've been using isn't cutting it.

"I have ice and I have mice," I tell the cashier.

"You should write a country and western song," she suggests.

When I get home with my groceries and plug in the ultrasonic devices, I discover that the high-pitched squeal they emit is audible to my human ears. I had no idea I was so close to a rodent on the evolutionary chain. The clerk warned me it could send any gerbils and hamsters in the building racing

around their cages until they dropped dead of exhaustion, but I hadn't expected to be able to hear it myself. Now I imagine myself being driven to circling the block in similar fashion.

I turn up the radio until it drowns out the shrill noise of the repellers and commence marinating the pork chops I purchased for dinner. I hope that the mice will stay out of sight at least until the company leaves. After that, I'm tempted to leave myself. Leave the mice. Leave the ice. And leave winter.

A Falling Pink Heaven

Two weeks after the wedding we packed up and left my hometown. We moved twenty minutes down the highway with his ideas and my possessions. We were excited, horny and poor. It was paradise.

He was busy writing papers and I was busy working. We met up at odd hours, usually late at night.

We were bored that night and needed fresh air. Sleep was not coming. We had no television. No one wanted to read.

He peered through the plastic vertical blinds on our patio windows. It was snowing. The view of our parking lot had gone from depressing to fantastically pristine. There was only a hint of the cars sleeping beneath the cozy blanket of snow. I joined him at the window.

“I don't know. There is so much snow and I'm tired. Where would we go? It's late.”

“Oh come on! It's beautiful! We'll dress warm and get a coffee at Tim's.”

He had me. Let me explain:

He loves long, pointless, rambling walks. I also love long walks but I prefer a reason to go. It was so late at night, the only available destination was a Canadian cliché. It wasn't the wretched coffee calling, it was the goal that got me.

This was maybe the first, but definitely not the last time I'd hear, “The secret is layers.”

The layers consisted of something like this: two pairs of socks, two pairs of pants, a long sleeved shirt, a sweater, an ankle-length clay-coloured wool jacket, stretchy gloves, red and white Nordic-patterned mittens my grandmother had knit and sent from Denmark, a striped chenille scarf, whatever toque I could scrounge up and one pair of thick, rubber-soled hiking boots that were uglier than my whole outfit combined.

I had begun to sweat. Not because of the layers so much as the effort.

“Good Lord! Let's get this walk started.”

He smiled from behind his parka that was zipped, buttoned and wrapped up to his nose. He was in love and, apparently, so was I.

We made our way down from our third floor apartment and burst out the door. It was a relief to be outside, to cool off. I could feel sweat trickling down the centre of my spine and gathering at the small.

We had created a ridiculous amount of noise trying to escape the heat of our building but now it was silent - that winter silence when the snow absorbs every sound.

We turned our hot faces up to the pink heavens and let the flakes land and melt on our burning cheeks. We tried but couldn't resist the childish tradition of opening our mouths to catch the snow. We even stuck our tongues out to ensure success. We were kids after all.

I smiled. Breathed deeply. Grasped his hand. We walked, gently talking to each other over the quiet crunches of our boots.

Not a poem about snow

To sit in an Italian café, with an espresso, while the snow falls
past the window is a lovely thing – romantic even. Romantic
only if he was alone and lonely and mulling lost love. Romantic
only if he was playing the role of damaged lover, wounded poet.
Romantic only if he was scarred by love, scared of love, or muddied
in love. But this poet is none of these things.
This poet only struggles to find poetry in himself.
He might consider writing a poem about snow – finding some new
thing to say about snow. Some revelation, a confession,
a personal epiphany – about the snow, inspired by the perfect
equality of the snow. A poem about the way it gathers itself
in the crotches of the elms across the street from the café.
Or the way it makes the ground and the sky the same dull
colour of zinc, or pewter (pick from any number of clever
derivations of grey). Or the way it makes an easy, common ground
for the Italian men who come into the café, stomp their feet
in the doorway and complain about the snow.
Or the way it makes the poet feel tired and sad to see it falling
into a Friday morning. He closes his eyes and dreams about
a particular beach in Mexico, isolated and rugged – a place
where the beer is cold and cheap. A place where there are no
small Mexican children selling worthless trinkets and approaching
his table every four seconds. A place where the sand is
hot – a place for straw hats, shorts and sunglasses, a place for reading
Hafiz and Rumi. He sees himself walking on this stretching beach,
the ocean reaching toward land and retreating from the land in an
endless cycle. This is a place for drifting, drifting like this snow.

This unpoetic snow does not care where it goes, or what it touches.
It does not discriminate. This annoys the poet. It annoys him that
he has just personified the snow. The snow is just a thing. He knows
the snow is not beautiful by itself. It needs a poet to make it beautiful
and this poet is in no mood to give the designation of beauty
to this ridiculous falling snow.

The poet does not care about the snow. He looks out the window at it
and smiles, not because of it, but in spite of it. He is happy without

the snow. This snow is an asshole, he decides. It does not deserve a poem.
And he will not write one.

Modern Times

Four years old, I sprawl on the rug in front of our black and white console TV in the small, square living room of our small, square house on a winter afternoon in Regina. Dim picture tube images of the *Bewitched* Christmas episode dance and flicker on the hardwood floor my mom has waxed with crystal-clear Aero Wax as Darrin and Samantha decorate a huge tree set up in front of a picture window. Outside the sun shines, their lawn is lush, the trees have leaves.

"Mom," I call into the kitchen. "This show is wrong. It's Christmas, but there's no snow."

"It's in California," she calls back. "They don't get any snow."

"Not even at Christmas?"

"No. It's warm all the time there."

I think about this, look at our frost-edged windows, at flakes whirling without end from the white sky. No snow in winter is too much for me to comprehend at age four.

When I get a little older, walking to school in the dark as the wind blasts over the plains and bites through my snowsuit and my layers of clothes, I often think about this no-snow-in-winter idea. I think of beautiful Samantha and her sunny, green yard and her sleeveless dresses at Christmas time.

"When I grow up, I'm moving to California," I vow through the scarf frozen to my nose and mouth.

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My family moved to the financially and meteorologically balmier climes of Calgary the year I turned eleven. Since then, many Christmases I've seen here haven't exactly been white, or green, either. Many are brown, or grey, thanks to Chinook winds. Also called snow-eaters, the winds sometimes spread sparks from rogue cigarettes into huge grassfires in the winter months in Southern Alberta. And if our winters aren't dry and brown, they're often dry and grey; dirty ice is all that remains of snow that melts by day and freezes by night.

Finally, though, at age forty-eight I have my first green Christmas. My husband and I decided to take our two teenage sons on a one-week Christmas trip to San Diego and Hollywood, the first time we'd ever travelled at Christmas. After thirty-seven consecutive Christmases in Alberta, it was important to me that Christmas 2011 be different from any other. My mother had died in the spring of that year after an eighteen-month struggle with ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease. Not only was her illness and death and then dealing with her estate a difficult emotional experience that I was just beginning to emerge from, it also underscored the fact that our time in this life is limited. And since I

was little, I've wanted to go to Hollywood. I especially wanted to see the stars' hand and footprints in the forecourt of Grauman's Chinese Theatre. And so we planned the trip around visiting Hollywood Boulevard.

It's a bit of a pilgrimage for me. I come by my love of movies honestly. My parents met while working at a movie theatre. My father was named after Ronald Colman. After my grandfather, Walter, came back from World War II, he travelled around southern Saskatchewan showing cartoons, shorts and newsreels, and eventually took a job at the Capitol Theatre in Regina. When I was little, the highlight of extended family get-togethers at my grandparents' house at birthdays and at Christmas was movie time. After the dinner dishes were done, we all piled into the basement to watch home movies, Charlie Chaplin one-reelers, Max Fleischer and Walt Disney cartoons. We sat on kitchen chairs and folding chairs in the dark, dark except for the screen and the projector and the glowing orange discs of aunts' and uncles' cigarette ends. The projector whirred into motion over the faint clink of ice in glasses. I'd smell the mandarin orange I'd brought with, and the damp dust scent of downstairs, as we counted down the numbers on the film leader.

On our Christmas morning flight, the boys watch action / adventure epics while I watch *A Fair Exchange*, a 1914 Charlie Chaplin one-reeler, on the tiny screen on the back of the seat in front of me. Thank you, Air Canada. How could they have known?

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My mother didn't learn to drive until she was well into her thirties, after we'd made the move from Regina to Calgary as part of the great 1970's Saskatchewan exodus to Alberta. She might never have learned if we hadn't moved. Winter driving in Calgary was easier than winter driving in Regina; Chinooks usually keep our roads from turning into ice-covered ruts. On dark winter afternoons before I was old enough to take my siblings to the movies, Mom took us matinées downtown on the bus. Only she was never too concerned about getting to the theatre at a particular time. Most often by the time we had lunch, got dressed for outside, caught the bus and got downtown, the show would already be started. After buying popcorn and Cokes and chocolate bars we'd brush past knees in the dark, runners sticking sometimes to the dried-pop floor, to find seats in the side smoking section, so Mom could enjoy a few Matinée Lights (did she buy them just for matinées, I wondered?). More glowing orange discs that reminded me of Walter's basement. I didn't realize until I was older that it was odd to come part way through, stay until the next show began and watch the trailers and the beginning of the movie through to whenever we'd arrived and then leave. Maybe this is where my skewed sense of story structure started to develop, for better or for worse.

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When we land at LAX we rent a car and drive directly to San Diego, which takes up most of the first day. We spend a couple of days in the museums and on the beaches there, stopping of course at Coronado Island, where *Some Like it Hot* was filmed. Another day is taken up with the drive along the freeway back to L.A.; we stop at La Jolla, Long Beach, Santa Monica. On our first day in Hollywood we visit Universal Studios. And then, finally, comes the moment I've been waiting for.

The night before we visit Old Hollywood I have trouble sleeping. In the middle of the night I pull aside the curtain in our 17th floor hotel room, look down at the never-ending traffic on the Hollywood Freeway. Partly, I'm excited. But I realize after a while that it's more than that: I'm also homesick. I miss Alberta. Right now, I would love to be back home, in our bed with my cats and my dog (and my husband). I'm not really sure why I'm so homesick. I'm enjoying myself, and we haven't been gone that long. Still, there it is, and I didn't expect it at all.

It's 10 AM on sun-soaked Hollywood Boulevard. On this last day of our surreal Christmas holiday in California, it's still jarring to hear carols in this endless summer place, to see strings of Christmas lights on palm trees. And although it's the end of December, heat already rises from the concrete squares in front of Grauman's Chinese Theatre. A group of people stand and talk on Greer Garson's square, oblivious to her gracious presence. It upsets me that people just stand on these squares and talk. I feel like they should have some respect for the stars, or at least some courtesy to those who want to see the prints. As the sun gets higher, more and more people gather. Crowds tend to make me feel a little edgy. Still. I've come a long way and I've waited most of my life to see this place. I try to be patient so I can see the squares of the stars I want to see.

I thought finally seeing this would be exciting. And it is, but it's also sad. It brings home the humanity of these movie stars, their frailty, most of them long dead. So many of them were small. My fingers splay out over many of the female stars' handprints. The women all wore heels of course, so it's hard to tell what size their feet actually might have been, but most of the footprints look tiny. Even the men – a lot of the old-time stars, like people in general then, were smaller than we are today. And I think about what life in Hollywood did to them. Some of them handled the pressure, the fame, the lifestyle. But many were destroyed by it, one way or another. And what remains are these prints in the concrete walked over and stood on by people. People talking on cellphones and thinking about shopping on Rodeo Drive who don't know or care who these folks were, for the most part.

My spirits are lifted, however, by our tour of the amazing and meticulously preserved art deco *chinois* interior of the theatre, built in 1927. Luis, our guide, is as big a movie freak as I am and he seems to know everything about the theatre; stories about its ghosts, the gorgeous murals by Keye Luke and Xavier Cugat, the art deco silk curtains. Even the facilities are breathtaking. In the ladies powder room, red velvet ottomans sit in front of delicate glass tables and full-length mirrors separated by pale yellow hand-painted panels sprinkled with blue butterflies. I sit at one and imagine Ingrid Bergman or Greta Garbo using it at an Oscar ceremony, which were held at the Chinese Theatre for many years.

Back outside at the end of the tour, Luis gives us some highlights of the forecourt. He tells us that Chaplin's square was the only one that was ever removed, in the McCarthy era, when he was accused of being a communist. In 1952, Chaplin left the US to attend the London premiere of his new movie, *Limelight*. While he was gone, the FBI had his re-entry permit revoked, and he decided not to return. He came back only once, twenty years later, when he was given an honorary Academy Award. What a way to treat a man who practically was the movies for many in the early days of the industry. But then, maybe happy endings only happen in the movies.

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We have lunch at the famed Musso and Frank Grill, Hollywood's oldest restaurant, open since 1919. Their patrons have included Chaplin, Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks, Orson Welles and a host of great writers who drank here when they were working as screenwriters. So many -- Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Raymond Chandler, to name a few -- that it became known as the Algonquin West. Woody Allen apparently still dines here when he's in town. The interior looks almost unchanged from 1919 – mahogany paneled walls, booths with red leather seats. The gravely friendly maître'd and wait staff wear tuxedos. The extensive menu, too, is from another era – Chiffonade Salad, Welsh Rarebit, steaks, sandwiches, consommé. And martinis, of course.

After lunch we wander back down sleazy, hectic Hollywood Boulevard. My mother and my youngest brother visited California after my father died in 1990, and Mom said Hollywood Boulevard was sleazy. I'd heard that it was better now. Maybe it is, but it's still kind of weird. Every few feet someone tries to talk you into a guided tour of the stars homes (all the stars are dead, I want to tell them). This street offers entertainment of all kinds, from adult-only shops, XXX movie houses and massage parlours to costumed movie characters who try to lure you onto bus tours. And street performers: percussionists on industrial-sized plastic paint drums; a walking, talking bronze statue; and Mr. Muscle, who draws a big crowd by lifting a small car.

I begin to lose some steam as we tour the overwhelmingly artifact-crammed Hollywood Museum in the old Max Factor Building, my eye is caught by a large poster in one display case for *Pride of the Yankees*, the movie in which Gary Cooper portrayed Lou Gehrig. After that, we're ready to take a break for coffee.

Over coffee, I think about how glad I am that we decided not to visit Forest Lawn Cemetery, the resting place of many of the stars. I'd hesitated partly because the cemetery frowns on the presence of tourists on its grounds, although they get over a million visitors annually. And if we had gone, too much of this visit would have been focused on the past, on the dead.

Back outside we wait for the light to change on our way back to the parkade near the Chinese Theatre, and I wonder if it was a mistake to come here right at all now, with my grief still fresh. I wanted to get away from thinking of death, and yet that's what this whole Hollywood Boulevard excursion has turned out to be – visiting the haunts of dead actors and writers.

The sound of laughter snaps me out of my thoughts. Beside me, a man sits in a wheelchair, howling with laughter. Then I look again, realize he isn't in a wheelchair at all; he's in a garbage can. A trash can, as they call them here, He's sunken into a trash can, head, arms and legs splayed out the top like a hapless actor in a slapstick one-reeler. It's hard to tell how old he is. His clothes are torn and dirty, his matted hair might be red or gold. Although his face is grey with dirt, he's handsome, and his eyes when open are an astonishing blue. He can't stop laughing. He laughs so hard that tears streak his face. Taped to the trash can is a sign written in green crayon on a piece of torn cardboard: "Please help me get trashed".

I can't help laughing along with him. Partly, it's his contagious laughter, partly, it's his ridiculous situation. Partly I laugh at myself for hallucinating a wheelchair. Yes, this man may be sitting in a trash can. But he's alive. He's alive and he's laughing -- for whatever reason, he's laughing. Unlike the long-dead stars who draw the crowds to the sidewalk a few feet away.

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On New Year's Eve we return to the land of low sun and deep shadows, and it's a classic Calgary winter day: dull grey skies, glowing orange disc of sun peeks under the Chinook arch, dry brown grass dotted with patches of dirty melted and frozen snow. We saw more snow in the Christmas area of the Universal Studios theme park than there is here. Not that I don't already miss the palm trees and the beaches and the warm California sun we'd said goodbye to a few hours earlier. Yet somehow I can't think of anything else I'd rather see than grungy grey ice when we land at YYC. As our plane taxis down the runway to our gate, I have an odd feeling. Here I am back from realizing a lifelong dream – I visited Hollywood, and I finally spent Christmas in California, just like Samantha on *Bewitched* – and somehow it seems like it wasn't Christmas at all. Like we missed it.

After we get settled at home, we all pile onto the couch to eat take-out pizza and watch Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, the last movie he did as his Little Tramp character. I can't help thinking of the many Christmases when my family watched Charlie Chaplin, and cartoons, and home movies at my grandparents' house. At the end of *Modern Times*, Chaplin and his real-life love Paulette Goddard walk off into the same Hollywood Hills we just returned from, while his composition "Smile" plays. *Smile, though your heart is aching* -- that one. I think again of the man – the tramp? – in the trash can. And somehow, I think he had the right idea. Eat, drink and be merry – laugh hysterically, why not? -- for tomorrow we die.

After the movie I realize it feels more like Christmas. Why is that exactly? The smells of mandarin oranges and the Christmas tree? Relaxing with my loved ones, remembering loved ones past, Christmases past, casting an eye to Christmases yet to come? Maybe the why doesn't matter. Maybe the important thing is to enjoy Christmas present, like we are right now. The present of Christmas present.

Maybe Christmas is about traditions, whatever your traditions are. In my family, loving movies is a big tradition. Maybe it's about being home, wherever your home might be -- Regina, Calgary or Hollywood. So much of California was fantastic, especially the weather. But home isn't the place with the best

weather. Canadians know that. And Alberta's been my home for many years now, for most of my life. Is it too corny to say, "There's no place like home", like Dorothy did in *The Wizard of Oz*?

Okay. There's no place like home.

Winter

Winter. Dark at five.
Dark like sleep.

I want to curl up on the loveseat
beneath a woolly red throw,

nod
        over a book,

drift

        suspended

When spring comes
I will wake hungry.

Waxwings

Descending in a gale from the north,

A thousand racing heartbeats

In a cloud of wings and beaks and little claws,

Crying out into the frigid air

As a cacophonous electric buzz,

Their feathered bodies alight on leafless branches

And feast madly upon the frozen fruits of last season,

Then--in a sudden fluttering gust

They rise as one,

Wheeling into the cold grey bowl of the sky,

And are gone.

BUZZ

A snow packed winter field
Motion is something that flew south
with the vagabond geese
This day, this moment, is defined by stillness
The quiet stands of poplar
keeping vigil through the cracking moons
now witness a man standing

He is the beekeeper
and he's looking for signs easily lost
in the white solitude of the landscape
A slight hummock, a telltale hole
There

Dancing carefully in bushpack ballet slippers
he approaches and leans in
As a master tuner adjusts a baby grand
he applies his auditory senses to this
most necessary of diagnostics

A moment
While the crunching echo of his footfalls
recedes in his auditory memory

And…there, the buzz

The buzz, oh the buzz!

And not just any buzz

but the buzz of a healthy hive

toughing out another Alberta winter

The buzz, oh the buzz!

The social networking of the hive

Alive, we are alive

Our stores of crystalline energy

are sustaining our fuzzy existences

The buzz, oh the buzz!

The sound of a few thousand bees

dutifully flapping two sets of worker wings

to keep their queen alive at a steady 26 degrees

Smiling, he dances away

the buzz still vibrating in his sternum

Only 234 more hives to check

White-Out

The bus arrived late at the Jubilee Auditorium and Zoe didn't get home from rehearsal until nearly midnight. Along the length of Whyte Avenue, the blue lights in the bare trees glittered. Plumes of exhaust rose straight up in the frosty air.

Grant was already in bed, covers pulled around his chin, watching *The Daily Show*.

"How was rehearsal?"

"Awful. The director keeps changing his mind about the staging in the second act." She chucked her skirt and sweater in the corner, hurried into her flannel pajamas, and crawled into bed, snuggling up next to his warmth.

"Cold hands," he complained. After a pause, he said, "Aunt Thelma died."

"Who?"

"My great-aunt. The funeral is Saturday afternoon. In Calgary."

"I have rehearsal Saturday night."

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry." Grant slid his hand under her hair, massaging the knots in her shoulders. "We could drive down on Friday and leave after the funeral. It would mean a lot to my mom if we show up. You'd be back in time."

She didn't want to go to a funeral. But she owed him; he'd gone to her father's funeral in September. And met her mother. What type of portent was this for their relationship—meeting the family at funerals? At least she had a black dress.

They arrived in Calgary late Friday night. Grant's parents lived in a 1950s bungalow in the north-west quadrant of the city.

"You're late." Grant's mother gave him a quick hug. "I thought you'd make it for supper."

"I didn't get off work until five. And the roads were awful."

"You should have phoned."

Zoe stood uncomfortably in the back entrance, her mittens and hat dripping with wet snow. She was holding her coat in one hand until Grant took it from her and slung it over a kitchen chair.

“Mom, this is Zoe Willis,” Grant said, deflecting his mother’s attention away from himself. “This is my mom, Mrs. Bowland.”

She was a short woman, much shorter than Zoe, dressed in a dark-brown suit. Drab brown hair cut in a short bob. Her face was square and white, with small brown eyes peering out. “Call me Shelia.” The words were friendly, but the eyes weren’t. They were appraising, summing up Zoe’s worth and coming up a few zeros short.

Zoe bent to unlace her boots. Usually they made her feel confident, the square heels, the silver buckles at the calves shining aggressively. Now she felt like a biker chick crashing a bridge party. She wanted to say, *I’m not that person*. Whoever it was his mother saw. But maybe she was. Maybe she’d been deceiving herself about her worth all this time.

The kitchen was a dark cave, with dark brown curtains shutting out the storm outside. Zoe sat down at the table, uncertain what she was expected to do.

“Let me get you some tea,” Mrs. Bowland said. “Unless you prefer coffee?”

“Tea is fine.”

“So where are you from, Zoe?” she asked as she poured tea into a set of Esso stoneware, with pictures of Calgary landmarks etched on the side. The Zoo. The Calgary Tower.

Where was she from? All over, growing up in Germany and Ontario, university in British Columbia, and then teaching in Korea for two years. Two years in Vancouver after that. But she wasn’t going to tell Grant’s mother about her past.

“Right now, I’m from Edmonton.”

“But where do your parents live?”

“My mother lives in Kelowna.”

“Are your parents divorced?” It felt like being interviewed by Oprah. Maybe she should have said, “In Kelowna, Sheila,” but she couldn’t bring herself to call Grant’s mother by her name.

“My dad died last year.”

She saw the surprise, quickly masked. His mother thinking, *She can’t be that old*. Zoe didn’t offer any further details.

“I’m very sorry to hear that. Are you the only child?” Fishing for details. Was she was youngest, was she a trailer, was she years older than Grant? Zoe felt like yanking her chain, claiming to be forty. Hadn’t Grant told his parents anything about her?

“I have a younger brother.”

“And you moved to Edmonton last summer. Was that for school?”

Grant interrupted. “Zoe had some problems with her last boyfriend. I told you that.”

Squirming under the scrutiny, Zoe knew herself to be unworthy, a tainted woman trailing past relationships like cheap perfume.

“I’m in the music program at the U of A,” she offered. Anything to stop the questions. “I’m doing my Master’s degree.”

“In piano?

“No, voice. I sing opera.”

“Opera. Well, that’s different.” Not very practical.

“She’s a member of the Edmonton Opera Chorus,” Grant boasted. He would tell this to anyone, people at work, strangers he met. “They’re doing *Bohème*.”

“I’m just in the chorus,” Zoe was glad that Grant was standing up for her but oddly embarrassed. “I’m one of the street people.” She was making things worse.

“Well,” said Sheila. “How interesting.” She checked her watch. “Visiting hours end at nine. We should get going.”

“I didn’t think we’d go tonight,” Grant said. “I’m beat from the drive.”

“Oh, you have to go. It wouldn’t look right to miss visiting hours.”

Ten minutes later, they were following Grant’s parents south along Shaganappi Trail. After insisting that Grant had to show up, that his cousin would be insulted if he didn’t, Sheila had wondered whether it was sensible to take an extra car, but Grant had won that point. Zoe stayed quiet. More than anything, she wished that they could afford a motel, but even the cheap ones in Calgary were over $100 a night.

The funeral home was a concrete building in the south-west. In a sterile reception area with a grey carpet, two huge arrangements of white mums and lilies stood like attendants.

They followed Grant's parents, turning right into a small room that smelled of lemon furniture polish, overlaid with a bitter note of embalming fluid. Just inside the door stood a couple in their forties, the man in a black suit, the woman in an incongruous pink blouse and a long blue skirt. Zoe shook their hands, barely hearing the introductions. Wooden pews lined either side of an aisle with a red carpet. At the end was the open casket, with fuchsia curtains looped back with tasseled cords on either side.

The great-aunt wore a black crepe dress with a shiny butterfly brooch pinned at the shoulder. Her crossed hands were speckled with large brown age spots. Skin like a crumpled moth. Unable to stop herself, Zoe reached out and touched the cold hand.

The cloying perfume of lilies permeated the room. Zoe swayed, images spilling across her mind. Her father in ICU, his face drained the cheeks sunken like a paper mâché mask. The respirator with its automatic timed breaths: whoosh, click, whoosh, click. In, out, in, out.

Her knees buckled. Grant grabbed her elbow to hold her up.

"Are you okay?"

"I need to go outside." She could feel Sheila's disapproval pulsing towards her.

Snow was falling on the blue spruces clustered outside the entrance. Zoe took a deep breath, the icy air a slap to her face.

"It's like the scene with Mimi and Rudolpho. *Your little hand is cold.* Her hand was so cold." She was babbling, her mind skittering away from the edge of nothingness. They'd had a closed casket at her father's funeral. But the smell of the funeral home was the same.

Grant held her hand and gave it a quick squeeze, his fingers warm and comforting.

She held on tight. "I don't think I can go back in. Can we leave?"

That night she curled up alone in a single bed. She'd been given the guest bedroom, two single beds with crocheted white spreads, white sheets, white shag carpet, white walls. In this blank space her mind whirred, a film projector ratcheting over images she couldn't control. Her father in a hospital bed, his skin as white as the walls. Her mother shivering uncontrollably in the private room when the doctor gave them the news. Her brother hadn't visited once.

She'd read a piece in *Wired* a few weeks earlier. A man in France had stolen $1.4 billion of art from a museum. A Breueghel painting: "Cheat Profiting from his Master." A Watteau drawing, a seventeenth-century violin. Stashes of medieval weapons. He had stored them in his mother's house. Canvases stacked in his tiny bedroom. Ivory statues hidden in a wardrobe. When the man was arrested, his mother chopped up the paintings with a stolen axe and threw them in the Rhine-Rhone canal.

Zoe imagined the pictures floating slowly to the bottom of the murky canal, water seeping into the canvases. The utter waste of it all.

Her life reminded her of that story.

She woke up, smelling coffee and bacon. Zoe lay still for a moment, her head stuffy from the lack of sleep. Eight-thirty. Seven more hours of being polite. The funeral was at two and the wake after that. By three, four at the latest, they would be on their way home.

Grant's father had his face hidden behind the *Calgary Herald*. Zoe sidled into a chair beside Grant.

"Just coffee for me, please." Should she get it herself? Or would Sheila resent this?

"Oh, you need more than that. Let me make you some eggs."

"No, please, don't go to any trouble." She was hoping to stop at the Tims on the way to the funeral and pick up a blueberry muffin.

"We have cereal, if you prefer."

"No, thank you, just coffee." Why didn't Grant say something, instead of just sitting there, forking in mouthfuls of egg?

Sheila set down a cup of coffee, and then sat down herself. "I was thinking, Zoe. You're a singer, aren't you? Well, maybe you could sing something at the funeral. Aunt Thelma loved *Amazing Grace*. Do you know it?"

Her mind blanked. She couldn't think of an excuse.

"Would her family want me to sing?" she finally said.

"That's why I'm asking. I talked it over with Dan last night and told him you're a singer."

Zoe nodded. Dan must be the man she'd met at the funeral home.

"Umm, okay." She knew she sounded ungracious, but she didn't know how she could go back into that funeral home and keep her composure.

On the drive over, she asked Grant, "Why did your mother put me on the spot like that?"

"What do you mean?

"Arranging for me to sing without even asking me first."

"You know the song, don't you?"

“Of course I do. I’ve sung it at funerals before. But I don’t know the accompanist. I need to practice.”

“She thought it would be a nice gesture. I think she was trying to include you.” He was staring straight ahead, not looking at her. He sounded unconvinced by his own argument.

“I don’t think I can sing right now. I’ll mess it up.”

“No one will care how you sing.”

She cared. She shut up and looked out the window. Snow covered the sidewalks in front of the strip malls, softening their inherent ugliness.

At the next red light, Grant put his hand on her thigh. “Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad.”

The funeral was in the same room as the night before. About forty people crowded into the back pews, avoiding the front like schoolchildren in a classroom. Zoe and Grant sat in a corner next to a woman whose rayon skirt spread over the seat. Looking around at the white heads, Zoe saw that she and Grant were the youngest people there, except for Dan’s two teenagers, sitting forlornly in the front pew with their parents.

The minister had that ubiquitous haircut, short on the side with a floppy brown wave over the forehead. He stuttered over Thelma’s name and didn’t seem to know any details of her life. As he prayed that Thelma would be graciously received by the Lord, Zoe wondered if the great-aunt had believed any of this. She didn’t know what she herself believed.

Memory grabbed her again, the ICU waiting room with its grey low-backed couches and the TV constantly turned to CBC news. Nights drinking stale coffee. Whispering promises over and over. Let him live. I won’t complain anymore about my lack of success. I’ll switch to a sensible career, so he can be proud of me. I’ll stay away from losers, date a normal guy, so he can stop worrying. She didn’t know just who she’d made those promises to. She hadn’t kept any of them, unless Grant counted for normal. She reached over and squeezed his hand.

Dan, dressed in the same black suit, came to the pulpit to give the eulogy. He spoke of his mother’s famous hospitality, inviting twenty people for Thanksgiving dinner, her love of quilting, her practical jokes, her sense of humour. Zoe looked at the program, with its white dove on the front cover and the picture inside of the great-aunt in a blue dress, smiling a big toothy grin.

She’d been here and now she was gone.

The minister was back at the pulpit. “And now, Zoe Willis will sing Thelma’s favourite song, *Amazing Grace.*”

He'd pronounced her last name wrong, making her sound like one of the crazy dead women from *Giselle*. As if she'd dance a man to death for betraying her.

She walked to the front. "Give me a four bar entry," she whispered to the organist. Her throat felt tight with nerves. She should have brought a bottle of water. The pitch on the organ sounded high.

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me." Feeling the quaver in the fourth line, she tried to push through, lost control of her breath, and swallowed the final "free." If only the organist would play a little faster.

Her mind blanked on the third verse. She'd sung the song hundreds of times before, but she couldn't remember the words. The organist started into the chords, recognized her problem, and improvised a solo, adding trills and bridges. Under the cover of the music, he whispered, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares." The words flooded back and she came in on the entry as if the interlude had been planned.

When the mourners filed out after the coffin, Zoe went up to speak with the organist, a small balding man with a trim mustache. "Thanks for the save," she said. "I don't know what happened. I've sung *Amazing Grace* a hundred times."

"Think nothing of it." He waved his right hand dismissively through the air. "I play for funerals all the time. Most of the singers are amateurs."

Zoe smiled weakly. After the way she'd performed, she couldn't protest that she wasn't an amateur. The adrenaline of performance had ebbed, leaving her shaky with exhaustion. She only had the wake to get through now.

Grant hugged her shoulders. "You did great, hon." No one else commented. Shelia avoided them.

At four, Zoe stood with Grant at the back door of his parents' house. The sun was already setting though a haze of blowing snow, a weak yellow glow.

"We should get going," Grant said to his mother. "We'll be driving in the dark as it is."

Zoe stood beside him, frantic with impatience. Her practice started at 7:30. She'd been pushing Grant to leave since 3:30, but his mother had insisted they come back to the house for coffee.

"Why don't you stay," Sheila asked. "It's Saturday night. You don't have to work tomorrow."

Zoe glanced over at Grant. He wasn't saying anything. "I have to be at rehearsal by 7:30," she said.

“The roads will be terrible, Zoe. It’s been snowing all day. And I don’t want to drive in the dark. Couldn’t you miss rehearsal, just this once?” His brow was wrinkled, that implacable look that said she was being unreasonable, that he knew better. A flat stubbornness.

“No, I can’t. I have to show up.” She couldn’t believe her tone. She sounded like a *prima donna.* Really, she just couldn’t stand another hour with Grant’s mother.

“Fine, okay.” Grant turned to his mother. “I guess we have to get going.”

“Well, it was nice meeting you.” Sheila clearly hoped that it would be the last time. “Be careful driving back.”

Grant waited until they were in the car before speaking. “Why do you always do that?”

“What?”

“Make your life more important than mine.”

“You said we’d be back in time for rehearsal.”

“I didn’t know the weather would be so bad. Would it kill you to stay another night?” He fiddled with the dash controls, cold air blasting through the vents. “Look at it coming down.”

She said nothing. Sometimes he made her so angry she couldn’t speak. There was no room for compromise with him. He always thought he was right.

“Fine. Have it your way.” He got out of the car to scrape the ice off the windshield.

By the time they reached Airdrie, the sun had set. The long tunnel of the road, lit by headlights, was pitted with ruts of frozen ice and snow. On the right hand, the darkened ditch waited. A truck loomed behind them, headlights illuminating the snow swirling around them, a tungsten glare. Grant slowed to fifty. The truck careened past in the fast lane, sending waves of gravel and snow over the windscreen. Zoe grabbed the side handle, bracing herself.

Another truck slid by them in a whoosh of snow. The Sentra bucked and rocked, caught in the backdraft. Grant gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white.

“Can’t we pull over?”

“We’d slide into the ditch.”

A single taillight appeared in front of them, a motorcycle or a car with a broken light. All she could see was the red glow, like a warning or a stop sign.

“Look out!”

“Shit.” He took his foot off the gas, but the car was right in front of them, half in their lane and half on the shoulder, a long black car with a low bumper, the single taillight gleaming like an evil eye. Grant swerved into the passing lane and the tires slid on a patch of black ice, pulling them towards the opposite ditch.

She’d heard that in an accident your life flashed before your eyes. She didn’t have time to think. Grant cranked the wheel in the direction of the skid. Halogen beams illuminated those few seconds, the skid to the left, the wheels sliding under them, the windshield wipers whipping madly back and forth.

The tires hit ruts of packed snow, jarred the car sideways, then caught and corrected, pulling the car back to the middle of the road. Grant slowly eased them over to the slow lane, crawling to twenty.

“Fucking asshole! What the hell was he thinking, stopping like that?” Sweat slickened his forehead. “We’re turning around at the next overpass.”

On the drive back to Calgary, Zoe replayed those few moments over and over. The red headlight appearing out of the darkness. The slow slide towards the ditch. She felt frozen. Her fault, everything was her fault.

Neither of them spoke until they finally pulled up in front of the house. Then Grant turned off the ignition and leaned over, putting his hand on Zoe’s thigh.

“Are you okay, hon?”

She nodded, shivering. “I’m sorry,” she said. She wasn’t sure why she was apologizing. She was sorry for all the flaws in her life. For all the problems that trailed after her like plumes of car exhaust on a winter night.

“I’ll just tell Mom the roads were too icy.” He didn’t need to say they would avoid mentioning the near accident. Zoe knew she would be blamed if Sheila ever found out. She blamed herself. When would she learn to stop making bad choices?

Zoe took a long hot shower, and then went to bed. After what seemed like hours, she rolled over and checked the illuminated red glow of the clock radio. Two-fifteen. Nights of insomnia had taught her coping mechanisms: get out of bed, read a detective novel, drink a cup of peppermint tea, watch a late-night movie. Anything to distract her from the night terrors. Maybe she could tuck herself into bed with Grant in his bedroom, a childhood sanctuary still decorated with Bruce Lee posters and Star Wars memorabilia.

He was her hot-water bottle when she couldn't sleep, on the nights when worries about her ex stalking her in Edmonton, her mother alone in Kelowna, her increasing student loans and her stalled career buzzed along the nerve endings, truths she couldn't ignore in the dark. At three in the morning, she'd try to visualize the next year and see a fuzzy TV screen, grey and indistinct. She'd stare at the ceiling, the same thoughts repeating over and over in her head. Then she'd roll over and slide her hand along the comforting curve of Grant's stomach. Feel it lift and fall, listening to the slight wheeze of his breathing.

Zoe pulled on her track pants. Her door creaked as she slowly opened it. She paused, but no one stirred. She tiptoed down the hall towards Grant's room. Her hand was on the doorknob when Sheila opened the opposite door, clutching a green terrycloth robe tight at the neck.

"I heard a noise. Do you need something? Another blanket? A glass of water?"

Sheila stared her down, daring her to make a move.

Zoe wanted to ask, *Who do you think I am? You know nothing about me*. But she was afraid of the answer. Whoever she was wouldn't be good enough. There was nothing that she could say that would make Sheila accept her.

She opened the door to Grant's room, went in, and closed the door behind her. A streetlight shone through the blinds, casting orange stripes on the wall. She lifted the comforter and crawled into the single bed. Grant rolled over and she nestled against his back. Placing her hand on his stomach, she breathed slowly, in and out.

grip

The North,

flung out in the throes of extreme civilization,

shudders at the coyness of the fur hood.

Between the sky and the village,

its stoic woman stuffs the panting chimneys

under her shirt,

and community blood

hides in the reaches of a yellow chestnut brain.

The plain buckles and unbuckles.

The heat in high boots

arrives to massage her out of a cold skin coat.

Flattered for a moment, the metropoli preen,

flashing their supplies and means

to depart on tour with happy slave dogs.

Not even the North sucks

the white birch bones

or scrapes the china tundra with a compass.

Its stoic woman lathers a soapstone.

Alongside its inhibited dogs,

each northern city squats in the snow.

Snug

I drive like a grandma but I park like a demon. Holy moly, you do not want to get in my way when I'm parking. I've no patience for those halfhearted slower-downers who don't understand why my right turn signal is on as I pull up aside a car on the curb. I don't wait for comprehension to seep through your sluggish brain and for you to magnanimously pull around me and give me room to maneuver. While you're still rumbling towards me I'm sliding up past my target, hitting the brake and slipping into reverse, and pulling back with a casual flip of my ponytail over my left shoulder.

I've caught more than one look of panic through the rear windshield. Shit! Ah! God! Parallel parking! By the time you've realized what's going on and start easing back onto the gas, looking to change lanes, it's too late. I'm there, snug in my new home.

Sure, yeah, in the beginning I parked like everyone else. Listing into angle stalls, or pulling awkwardly up against the sidewalk when there were two long spaces available. Why parallel park when you don't have to, I mean, who needs that? Especially in the winter when churning wheels leave little snow ramparts crusted all around prime spots. I love crunching over the walls like a conquering army as I wheel back and straighten out. Once I realized I was good at it, I mean, why *not* do it? It's easier to find parallel spots anyway when so many people seem so frightened of them.

And from that point on, angle parking got boring. Rushing to school for class or the tutoring sessions I give. Back home again, errands in the middle. The doctor's office. Safeway. The vet's, the library. Grinding down the road, flinching at traffic circles, sure. Getting gas 'cause you need to eat. Why not get a thrill where you can, maybe show off a little too? I can parallel park like a bitch. I can parallel park like a goddess.

It takes me that little bit longer, of course, to get to school or the doctor's or the store. I can't always find the right spot right off the bat. Or maybe it's too big. Where's the challenge in that? Sometimes I have to go a few blocks down to find something just the right size. Snug. Then the little flip of my ponytail and I slide in and there you have it. I don't mind being that little bit late. Some days it's the only time I have to breathe.

I rent out my parking stall at my apartment for a little extra cash. That's one benefit. Also when I drive friends around they could be in the middle of the most exciting and dramatic story that happened to them ever and they'll shut up when I put the blinker on. No one wants to mess up a parallel parker. Holy god. There could be ice. Then when I'm done I get a nod, like, "good job." That's another benefit.

A few weeks ago I decided to take the bumpers off. It's not like you need them unless you hit something, which I never do. I couldn't get it on the first try. I thought I'd need a power drill or something but it was actually bolts. Bolts and clips holding up that big plastic shield. I went to Canadian Tire and that was an ordeal because it's on Kingsway Ave and has this huge parking lot full of straight

lines. I had to go around 119th street to find a place to park and then trudge back in the snow. I bought a ratchet set with a 10mm socket and a pry bar, and those did the trick. I left them on the curb.

I skipped school the next day. I showed up, I meant to go, but when I felt how tiny I was without the bumpers and how easily I fit into the spot, I couldn't stay. I had so much room around me. I pulled out and went cruising around, looking for something smaller. Usually you always find one of those mirage spots, just a little too slim for you to tuck your car in. Followed by a round of cursing against whoever parked off-kilter enough to spoil the line of cars. That day, though, I couldn't find anything. I had to skip the next day too.

Finally I found it, off Whyte Ave, two blocks south of Mars & Venus. No bigger than my new bumper-less car. Exactly the size of my car, actually. I wondered if it was physically possible to parallel park in a space exactly the right size. I took deep breaths and sat with my blinker on for longer than I really needed. I studied my own eyes in the rearview mirror. Then I flipped my ponytail and crunched back over the icy ridge.

Perfect, first try.

I've been there ever since. The car, I mean. I couldn't bear to move it. That park was so perfect. Taking the bus isn't so bad, not really bad anyway, and I come down on the weekends to admire the fit.

A few days ago I got a notice that my car had been left unattended too long. I guess the city considers it abandoned. I went down today and saw the sticker on the windshield. I got in the driver's seat. I had to move it, I knew that. But I didn't know where I'd park next. I don't think I remember how.

Finally I climbed in the backseat. It's snowing pretty heavy now. The windows are covered up with thick flakes and the light in here is dim and grey. I can hear the tow truck driver moving around outside, and I have a feeling we'll be moving pretty soon. I'm just going to stay here under my jacket until I figure out what to do after we stop.

moon boots crunch

five lights refracted

in a constellation of icy drips

a foggy curtain of twilight gauze

is my Milky Way

so far away sub zero

as seen through icicles on my eyelashes-

and my moon boots crunch

here, sub zero

actually

minus thirty

reality

minus forty with the wind chill

painfully

it has to be a certain temperature

a certain type of dry cold

to hear your moon boots crunch

at ninety decibels loud

and this isn't the moon

it's Alberta

exposed skin freezes

in three minutes frostbite hurts like hell

or you don’t feel anything

‘til you thaw out after

they cut it off

cover up, layer

insulate with

Thinsulate

out on the town

in feather down

wear your moon boots

and go crunching

through loud snow

if you dare

or stay inside your capsule

outside elements

cause strange sounds

when moon boots crunch

at ninety decibels loud

and I see through icicles on my eyelashes

that other moon boots

want to crunch

Albertan bodies

paddle cold elbow elkwater ghost

whirlpool snaring rocky fiddle battle sylvan muskeg

headwall hidden pembina

saddle spirit westprairie pelican house

buffalo belly smokey spray

moose peerless pigeon sand

whitemud heart bow panther

badheart sterling rosebud

wolf meadow primrose skeleton

goose sulphur powder coal sturgeon kananaskis

driftpile swan

thunder vermilion sunwapta chip

bighorn gull lobstick

birch horse abraham beaver keg

athabasca spruce slave raven clearwater

crowsnest castle

blindman calling cardinal peace jackpine

wolverine pyramid

snake-indian highwood

hay milk death garden sheep lesserslave reddeer

elk baptiste medicine barrier oldman cascade ram redwater

Hopeless Causes

You need a bar like this in Alberta — maybe more here than anywhere on the green earth. Because here it's not green for most of the year. It's white, like a bone picked dry. It's white, and when it's white with the blue sky above, it's colder than you want to know.

He remembers the faces of the drinkers toward closing time. Tough faces with stares fixed on the far distance. He would try to maintain a conversation with the men for a while, but inevitably things would degenerate.

“That asshole over there cold-cocked my buddy.”

“It’s OK, James, he’s leaving.”

“If no one else will deal with it—”

Outside there were often blinking blue lights thrown against the walls of the bar, and someone being loaded into an ambulance, everything shrouded in swirls of exhaust that were especially gigantic on a frigid night. He kept his distance and asked himself questions to which there would be no answers. Which of those people were in the fight? How badly is that guy hurt? How is his face going to look in the morning?

One night, he went to the bathroom and saw a drunk guy who had fallen over into a pool of urine on the floor. The guy’s pants were pulled down and he couldn’t get up.

“Peace! Peace!” the drunk yelled. Or maybe it was, “Please! Please!”

It was important to not look at the shriveled part between the drunk’s legs.

“Do you need help?” he asked.

Before he could figure out what to do, somebody else came into the bathroom. Now the drunk had an audience of two. The newcomer asked, “What happened?” “I just found him like this,” he replied, finding himself strangely proud to be the one on his feet, the one who could handle his drink. The newcomer said the drunk on the floor was an embarrassment and he was going to get the bouncer to do something about it, but not before taking a piss.

During the day, there were no longer any crowds on the street, just lots of traffic. Young men would pass by in trucks that cost more than a down payment on a new house. He knew they worked hard for a living but he still had uncharitable thoughts. People will regret pissing away so much money on trucks and liquor. Someday I will be able to tell people, *I told you so*.

But now, with the perspective provided by time and space, he knows he would take no pleasure in it. Because it would be handy if there were always some place where people can go and make a bit of money. Even if so much of that money gets blown on hopeless causes in the dead of winter.

Head-Smashed-In

As we drove towards Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo Jump some primitive instinct overtook me. The concrete blurred under our wheels as Greg accelerated into the horizon. We seemed to be tripping over ourselves into the future. Run because we all run. In the fear and the frenzy, the buffalo ran, the ground ran out underneath their hooves and... What a feeling, what a sensation it must be to suddenly be free of the ground under your feet, to fly into the sky and become one of the constellations. There is one named after the buffalo, isn't there? I would have asked Greg, but I didn't think he had much to say about it. His square jaw was stoic, frozen in place, blue eyes on the road.

We'd been driving for what felt like a couple of hours but wasn't. My attempts at conversation were lost on the winds, swallowed by the endless flat plains, muted with a soft dusting of snow. I guess we'd been together long enough that we didn't have to talk, that we could be silent and still be together but today it was getting to me. I spoke and he didn't hear me, almost like I was thinking out loud. I'd catch myself wondering, did I really just say that, or did I imagine I'd said that, or did I say anything at all. I couldn't think of anything important to say.

"Nice weather," I said. "Not bad for driving."

A slight nod.

"The roads are pretty clear still," I continued.

Uh-huh.

"I hope you don't mind driving all this way." My hand fell lightly on his arm for just a second and retreated.

"It's okay, Ruth," he said, staring blankly ahead of him.

The silence was stifling and cold. I started babbling as though my words could cut through it, scissors through rock.

"I'm so excited I'm finally going to get to see this place. Can you imagine chasing a herd of buffalo to their death? Like lemmings, they get lost in the stampede with each other. Can you imagine the vibration, the earth shaking under their hooves? The feast when it's all over. Can you?"

He looked for a moment like he was trying, trying really damn hard to conjure that picture in the backwaters of his brain, but he couldn't quite see it. Or perhaps it was just that he was asking himself: what is the minimum possible response he needed to successfully conclude this social interaction? There might also have been a passing thought: does she ever stop talking?

And then he answered: "Not really."

Not enough. I let his words hang there.

Where was he under that thick skin of his? If I pinched him till he bled, would he even scream? React, goddammit. Say something. I watched as his blank, blank face eyed the blank, blank road.

Then he handed me a white flag, “But it will be neat to see it.”

I exhaled; a heavy sigh. We must be almost there but we’re not.

I stared out the window beyond my life. The weather was trying to decide what to do. The snow came down in harmless flecks, the kind that dissolve when you touch them.

I shifted my weight in the seat and my hand landed on his thigh, searching for the only reliable reaction. There are many ways to communicate. We don’t always have to talk.

“What are you doing?” he said, but he didn’t object.

With something to do during the drive, I felt better, productive even. I warmed to Greg a little. He had his pluses. The road was flat and guileless. There weren’t too many people out for a Sunday drive in bleak November so there was nothing much to worry about unless we hit a prairie dog or rambling cow.

I zipped up his fly as we pulled into the parking lot. He seemed better now, kind of relaxed, the little twitchy muscles around his jaw were looser and he was half smiling a Mona Lisa smile.

When I got out of the car, he came around to meet me on my side, pulled me to him and kissed me.

“You’re great,” he said. I was just so happy to be out of the car, to stretch and stand and breathe, even though it was freezing-cold-bleak November and all I wanted to do was get inside, I still kissed him back, scratchy weekend stubble chaffing my skin. The pounding of his heart reverberated through me and I lost myself in the rhythm. I don’t always feel that. Someone watching would think that the illusion was real.

That was if there was anyone there. A smattering of lonely cars dotted the lot. The wind played with the wispy snow, blowing it in streaks across the concrete this way and that. In his arms, a chill set in. Only 2pm and it already felt like dusk. The day had hardly begun before it was over. Greg’s fault, even though we had planned this for weeks – he seemed to have forgotten this morning when I tried to drag him out of bed, but now we were here, and the cold was creeping in.

I play-pushed Greg away so I could button my coat, slip my hands into white mittens. He pulled my toque down over my ears, clasped my hand and we went forward across the concrete, down the path, into the museum.

The fiftyish First Nations man at the front desk smiled at us with gaps between yellowed teeth, asked us where we from.

Greg was slow to answer, fumbling with his wallet.

“Calgary,” I said.

The man started talking, brown eyes glowing. I could tell there hadn't been many visitors here today; he was just dying to talk.

"That's a long drive for a Sunday. A long drive for any day, unless you like the road. Me, I kind of like the road, the freedom of just driving and driving, roaming the plains. Maybe that's how it is for you too," he said, as Greg slipped a twenty across the counter.

That's it, I wanted to say, that was the sensation I was hoping for; the sensation I couldn't quite feel as we drove across infinite plains. Instead there was emptiness, a gaping chasm between expectations and experience.

"It will be a long drive home," said Greg.

But when he turned to me, he brightened. The museum was new, all glass, at one with the sandstone cliff where the buffalo used to race towards death. I could feel it in the air, the height of the chase, the thrill, that feel of so much going before. How many hopes and dreams hung on the buffalo hunt?

"They spent days gathering the buffalo," I told Greg, as we took the elevator to the top floor of the exhibit. "Cajolling them like cows into a herd, coercing the buffalo to go where they wanted them to, gently, kindly. Then, when they were all gathered, the braves would turn on them, let loose with their war cries, set them stampeding, corral them down the path to this cliff. The buffalo would flee madly to their death."

Greg nodded, counting the hours until the hockey game tonight. He was a good sport, but he hadn't really wanted to come. He never said so, of course.

The museum was oddly empty. We descended stairs to the first exhibit on plains ecology. He breezed through, hands in his pockets, restless already, even as I became entranced by this other world, these endless plains, this disappearing past.

The next floor down, Greg made quick work on the lives of the Northwest Plains people, fleetingly captivated by the weapons exhibits, the spears and poison darts, bows and arrows. He'd probably be up for a game of cowboys and Indians, though he left his cowboy hat at home. The teepee excited him, and I followed him into the dark. My eyes were slow to adjust, I could hardly see him. But I could hear his heavy breath.

"There's no one here," he said, pulling me to him.

"Are you sure?" I asked him. I didn't feel alone. I felt a hundred hungry eyes on me, a trespasser in this sacred place. This was someone's home, a home that went with them where ever they went. A home that doesn't exist anymore.

I can't help but feel that I am somehow to blame, for being white, for knowing and not knowing about everything that happened and still happens, for being the ones who build the museums.

Greg feather-kissed my neck in the shadow of the teepee, and I sensed the ghost's dismay. It was too easy, I knew, to stand there and let him kiss me, just let my whole life happen before my eyes.

"Not here," I said, ducking out of the teepee.

I waited for him in front of the men and woman's clothing exhibit, trying to picture us as a family, me with a papoose swaddled in striking red and yellow cloth, the red iron colour from the earth, the yellow distilled from the gall bladder of the buffalo. And Greg, beside me, with the black streaks of a warrior on his face, feathers in his hair. I couldn't picture it, not us, not together.

I didn't realize, didn't notice, that Greg had followed me out of the teepee, and the entire time he had been standing just inches behind me, trying to see what I was looking for. He couldn't see it either.

Down another flight of stairs, we saw a stuffed buffalo, an immortal buffalo trapped in time, forever in the here and now. It towered over me with his humped back, a majestic beast with glassy brown eyes that saw forever. I reached out to touch the straggly brown fur, as if by touching, I could understand. Greg took a photo of me beside it and for a second, I felt as though I too was an exhibit in the museum, something captured to be put on display for visitors on a dreary day. But that doesn't happen to people like me.

At last we reached the bottom floor, where I learned that it was not called Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump for all of the crushed buffalo skulls at the base of the cliff, but for a brave who perched on the cliff, like a shelter under a waterfall, to watch the buffalo rain down over him to their deaths. Only he too was pulled into the current, pinned against the wall of rock, buried under the weight of the buffalo. They found him with his skull crushed.

But it was obvious many of the buffalo also had their heads smashed in, or worse. In the bottom floor under glass we could see buffalo bones, where they fell. A pile of white bones and dirt, death on display for everyone to see. For 6,000 years, the buffalo fell time and time again.

Even Greg was moved. He took my hand for a moment, gave it a squeeze as if to comfort me. His hand felt so heavy and light all at once. Even as he held mine, his substance seemed to slip away. I felt as though he wasn't really there, as though he was a ghost even as we walked hand in hand to the exit.

Outside, the snow was falling seriously now. Greg wanted to hit the road, suddenly anxious about the weather or the hockey game or both. But we'd come all this way and I was going to see everything. I wanted to imagine how it was, these vast plains, these ancient peoples, their elaborate deadly ruse on the buffalo. We hiked five minutes to the top of the hill and looked out. Shadowy mountains succumbed to the nothingness of the plains. A brown fence kept us hemmed in, saved us from falling over the edge. Snowflakes speckled Greg's hair and he brushed them away.

I looked out into the prairie and suddenly I yelled my name, "Ruth" into the void. Seconds later it came back to me: "Roooth. Rooth, Ruth."

Your name is Ruth. What are you doing, Roooth?

Greg yelled his name too, but only because I did it first. The echo was weak, like the hollow thud of a buffalo on the earth. “Greg.”

Greg walked out to a point of rock. The snow was falling so quickly now, he was a shadow. I couldn’t trace his form, didn’t know who he was, what he would do. If he kept walking, he would just vanish into the fields, become a dot on the horizon, and then nothing at all.

But instead, he turned back to descend the path, turned away from the vastness to the road back to where we came from.

It would be a long drive home. I stood a few minutes longer so he could warm up the car. The plains stretched into infinity. I could hear the ghosts chasing the ghosts, the war-whoops and the catcalls echoing. I could taste the fear of the buffalo, sense their spirits, feel the thundering earth beneath my feet. I tried to tell them the truth: you don’t need to go that way, you don’t need to run so fast, you can choose your own direction... but they couldn’t hear me.

They did what comes naturally, what we all do.

and sometimes in the cold

and sometimes
in the cold we do crazy things:

we shout into the back yard

and watch our words form like cancer or

cotton candy

in the sky

each syllable dangling dangerously
in front of us

frozen signifiers

coldly signifying

that we might have

said something

briefly

over all these things
that should have been put away.

Champagne Powder

I've lost Barry. Thought I saw his orange boots below me but they have disappeared into the blizzard. Alone on this un-groomed black diamond run, I curse myself for not studying the map, for letting my friend plan our day. I pick my way down a steep pitch, plowing through snow so heavy I almost leave my boots, then slam into a mogul and fall hard on my right shoulder. Where the hell is he. Why can't he wait?

I have been downhill skiing since I was twelve. In the eighties, I skied most week-ends, at Sunshine or Lake Louise. In the nineties, I managed once or twice a month. Now, most of my friends having stopped skiing — because it is too expensive, too hard on their bodies, because there are too many gangs of snowboarders scraping off the good snow. Only Bar and I are left. We both have arthritic knees. His are worse than mine. Two years ago, I tore my meniscus and only managed a couple of half days at Nakiska since. But I've agreed to drive to Colorado with Barry where he's researching ski hills for a newspaper article. He promised good roads, sun, spring skiing. He promised I'd be back in time for my sister's reunion in Victoria in April.

Why did I say yes? Because thirty-six years after I first put on a pair of neon yellow K2s, I still love going downhill. When I am skiing well, the universe falls into place. My knees don't ache. My quads don't burn. My body sheds years like unwanted pounds. And I had yet to ski the thing for which all skiers yearn: powder up to ones knees, thighs. The smooth, dry champagne powder for which Colorado, with elevations over 12,000 feet, is apparently famous. And which I've encountered just a couple of times on Alberta hills.

On a grey March day, we pack up my little Kia and leave Calgary, heading for the Montana border. I have known Barry for twenty-five years. We "put up with" each other's idiosyncrasies. A desire to eat messy sandwiches while driving (his); an insistence that one be able to see half a kilometre down the road before attempting to pass anyone (mine); a belief that there is no need to pay more than $40 a night for accommodation (his); a belief that even the smallest towns has a coffee shop that can make a decent latte (mine).

Barry grew up an army brat in England, Germany and Canada, moving every couple of years. I grew up in Williams Lake and Kamloops. His family vacations consisted of driving to distant destinations, staying a day or two, then driving back. Mine involved going to our cabin at Chimney Lake. He likes to drive. I don't. He does extensive research and route planning. I read novels about the destination.

We like the same books, movies, art. We both have rebellious streaks. And as siblings and malcontents will do, we can drive each other crazy.

My parents had four girls but they always wanted a boy. My sisters and I wanted a baby brother. A baby boy we could dress up, show off. We had "pseudo-brothers:" my parent's friend's son, Kimmy, whose

idea of a fun was to tie us up with our skipping ropes. Dad hired fatherless teenage boys to mow the lawn and shovel snow. But we did "boy work," too.

Barry grew up on army bases in England, Canada and Germany. A music-loving hippie kid living in military housing, he didn't have to do much "boy work." I've helped him do things like put up a shower curtain or screw legs onto a coffee table. If he were my brother, dad would have whipped him into shape.

The light is flat and wind whistles snow across Wyoming highway 30, polishing it to an icy sheen. My shoulders are aching from clutching the wheel.

"Rock Springs coming up," says Bar, looking up from the map.

"The book."

"Umhm."

I stare at trailers strew across the side of a hill and think about Richard Ford's characters. Ranchers down on their luck, small boys betrayed by their parent's lust, realtors and drinkers, eccentrics, misfits and dreamers. Characters driving through this hard bitten landscape, en route to a place of better fortune.

Steamboat is still hours away. We are the only vehicle on a narrow stretch of black macadam leading to, Craig, Colorado. The desert falls away on either side. There's little vegetation to stop the howling wind and blowing snow. We ride along a black tunnel of tarmac, wind rattling the windows and buffeting my little car. The snow turns to ice and freezes on the wiper blades and headlights, leaving only a small circle of vision. Past Craig, there are a more vehicles, mostly trucks with chains. I don't have chains. Finally, twelve hours after setting out, we reach the deserted main street of Steamboat Springs.

"Spring, huh?" I grunt, unfolding my stiff body in the motel parking lot.

"Springtime in the Rockies."

The breakfast buffet at the Rabbit Ears Motel features dry Wonder bread, precooked eggs, and overripe bananas.

Barry's happy because it is all you can eat. I tell him there's an organic coffee shop and bakery down the street. But he says we have no time.

"If we want to ski champagne powder, we have to be on the hill when the lifts open. It'll be gone by noon."

I finish the brown water disguised as coffee, and follow him out the door to wait for the ski bus.

That night after six straight hours of skiing, we lie, sore and exhausted, in our beds, watching T.V.

“Change the channel,” I say. “Let’s see how much more snow we’re in for.”

“How does this remote thing work?”

“I dunno, press the arrows.”

“I don’t see any arrows.”

“Throw it here.”

There are arrows.

I could call Barry a Luddite but doesn’t describe him, because I can’t imagine him destroying machinery, other than accidentally crashing his computer by pushing *enter* too many times.

But without Bar, how would I get my pop culture fix; where would I learn about British comedies: *I’m Alan Partridge*, *Blackadder*, *Ab Fab* and *Little Britain*; who would keep me amused on long road trips by reading aloud books by David Sedaris, Jon Lee Anderson, Paul William Roberts, bios of Ronnie Spector and the Pet Shop Boys. A history of Joy Division.

After two days at Steamboat, we drive to Vail. We haul our gear from our hotel through the faux Swiss village to the lift line. The queue chatter is about the seventeen inches of snow that has fallen. There are fewer wool clad telemarkers here than at Steamboat, more folks in designer ski suits. I glance down at my ensemble, faded blue Goretex jacket and black snow pants, just slightly more stylish than Barry’s red bomber jacket and torn wind pants.

“Wow, I haven’t seen those skis since the 80s,” a guy with skis, cul-de-sac’d for powder, says to Barry.

“They’re from the 90s.”

We ski the blues and then the blacks, Barry ahead. I ski fast to keep up.

“My quads are mush,” I complain in the lift line.

“You’re turning too much, holding your edge too long. Let your skis run more. Your legs won’t get so sore.”

Bar learned to ski in Europe where I imagine they put you on long skis, gondala you to the top of some steep piste, and said “Folge mir.” Follow me. I learned to ski at Harper Mountain in Kamloops where gentle instructors outfitted you with short skis and taught you to make wide, frequent turns on the bunny hill, before graduating you to the intermediate hill. I liked this method. I like being in control.

Garfinkel's is the "family" restaurant we've compromised on because I insisted on dinner out and Barry wanted to dine in on his stock of tuna sandwiches from Calgary. A group of frat boys treat our section as their personal party room, yelling at each other and at the waitresses for more beer. Computer generated snowboarders do tricks on multiple TVs. Metal blasts from nearby speakers. I ask Barry about skiing in Switzerland in the seventies. Could you really ski from village to village? Did he and the other skiers really all share a table in camaraderie eating spatzle and schnitzel, toasting each other with schnapps, before falling into a dreamless eiderdown sleep? Yes, they did.

Those were the days.

At nine, my battered body is ready for bed. But Barry wants to go to the outdoor hot tub in the hotel's courtyard. We have it to ourselves. It is snowing lightly and the sky is dense with stars. Music wafts from hidden stereo speakers. I recognize a few songs, Elvis singing *Kentucky Rain*, Barry Manilow's *I Write the Songs* but Barry knows them all*: Tower of Strength, Baby Work Out, Sealed with a Kiss*, one of his favourites. I can picture young Barry sending a letter to some exotic beauty, some utterly unattainable object of desire. If I'd known him in his youth, I would have warned him, given him some sisterly advice. That kind of girl is high maintenance, Bar. That kind of girl will break your heart.

In Aspen, we stay at the Limelight Lodge, a hotel that Barry visited with his mom several years ago. Refurbished after a fire, it features high ceilings, a massive stone fireplace, blond wood, steel appliances and cushy beds.

"Wow, this is nice."

"Liked it better before. It was comfier. Homier," he grumbles, sniffing and clearing his throat.

"Are you getting sick?"

"Maybe."

"What kind of sick?"

"A cold."

"You better not give it to me. I've got my sister's week-end coming up, remember."

"How can I forget?"

I show him which designer towels are mine and threaten punishment if he uses them. I put the hand sanitizer in a prominent position on his side of the night table.

The next day, he's worse.

“Did you sleep?”

“Not much.”

“You don’t look good. Better stay in bed.”

“I’m skiing.”

“Don’t be ridiculous”

“I have to write my article.”

“I’ll take notes for you.”

“You won’t ski the blacks.”

“I will.”

The following day, Barry’s face is grey, his eyes bloodshot.

“You look terrible. And I’m buying you some cough syrup.”

“I don’t have a cough.”

“You cough every two minutes. And you need to drink more, you’re getting dehydrated. You better stay in bed.”

“I have to ski Snowmass for the article.”

“I told you, I’ll ski all the runs, I’ll take notes for you.”

“I’m going.”

We ski the first run at Snowmass in a white-out. This time, I’m out in front, stopping frequently to check for Barry. He’s having trouble turning, falls several times, something I’ve rarely seen him do.

I wait for him this time.

“What’s the matter? “

“I don’t know. I can’t turn.”

“You’re too sick to be out here.”

“Maybe, but I have an article to write.”

That night, Barry is asleep by six, medicine and Kleenex strewn around his bed, the room smells sour, yeasty. I doubt he bought travel medical insurance. We need to get back to Canada.

Highway 70 to Denver is lousy with potholes. Pick-up trucks, SUVs and semis, fly by in the passing lane. Snow blows across the tarmac, black ice shines where canyon walls shade the road. At Denver, we head north to the Wyoming border. The highway was closed yesterday because of a heavy snowfall and now semi after semi pass us, streaming south. I stop to let Barry drive, but he is coughing so much that I make him pull over so I can take over.

I drive through a wide Wyoming plain, round snow-capped mountains on the

horizon. The wind hurls snow across the road. The road is empty now and, as Barry dozes, I think how easy it would be to get caught in a snowstorm here, to turn down the wrong road, to be snowed in. It is lonely country to be traveling with a sick friend who is turning greyer by the minute.

At the Sheridan Super 8 (the lowest quality hotel that I will stay in), we take separate rooms so I can get enough sleep to drive the rest of the way home.

I bring Barry food and drink from the MacDonald's across the highway.

"I can't eat."

"At least drink some water," I say. "You're getting dehydrated."
"No."

"Don't be stupid. Here."

I get up to check on him in the night. He doesn't answer the door. I knock again.

Nothing. Cough would you, I think, so I know you're alive.

In Calgary, Barry goes to the hospital, diagnosed with throat abscess and dehydration and put on IV fluids. I do not get a throat abscess. They are notcontagious. I do go to my sister's place in Victoria for our week-end where it is spring; red and yellow tulips wave their pretty heads, and the cherry trees are full of new pink blossoms. The grass is green, the air warm and lilac scented. It's hard to believe in winter here.

At Steamboat Springs, we skied champagne powder. The trees were bowed under nature's excess. I followed Barry down the pristine slope, skiing beside his tracks, letting my skis run. A cloud of snow hovered about my knees. I was floating. I thought: this is why we suffer through the white knuckle drives

to the mountains, the long line ups, the gangs of snowboarders. This is what we are looking for. A few minutes where the mind shuts down and we are only our strong and beautiful bodies, dancing, dancing.

Trans-Canada Highway

In a faux cedar outhouse
half-way between Banff and Lake Louise,
November wind
lies in wait for passing women,

its idea of tenderness
to whistle up and clutch
their trusting flesh in talons of ice,

my beloved! mine! drained
of all sweetness by breath
bitter enough to congeal
sunlight.

Listen, wind,
I know you are lonely
but in winter, a house must be heated,
every morning stoves fed
dry kindling, fresh coal.

Love, my friend,
is a furry earmuff,

is a hot water bottle

a woman slips into the chilly bed at night,

is the man warming his hand

before he reaches for the woman.

December

In winter, loneliness weighs less outdoors.
Wrapped against the cold, I walk up the river valley
backwards, not to lose sight of the horizon
holding fast to the tree tops.

The canvass unfolds leisurely and for me alone.
Afternoon sun, veiled by a thin band of cloud,
guilds my eyes. Not a hint of red today –
peace in the heavens, and mine for the asking.

I focus on a young aspen where the path
curves back on itself. Distorted lattice
of black twigs, and between them
everything empty arms could wish for.

POWERLESS, ALMOST

"You're awake?" he asked. "You're up now? You're sure?" Her head was mashed on the pillow, eyes open only enough to register darkness. She felt the weight of the newborn beside her, heard the loud, steady breathing of her older son.

"Mmmm-hmmm," she said, letting the phone drift to the pillow. She'd climbed in the extra bed in their son's room after changing and feeding the baby. A phone call had driven her husband into the frigid night, the sheets too cold without him.

"It's important. You have to get up." His voice was authoritative, yet plaintive. "It's -47 degrees, plus the windchill," he said. "The power is out all over."

She breathed the fresh cold air of the room, and dreamed him in his truck gripping the steering wheel, leaning forward, talking to her.

"You're awake then? You'll go do it?" he asked. How was he in his truck and talking to her? Could he call her with the radio?

The sound of an engine. A man's voice on the dispatch radio. "2-6 are you by?"

"Yeah," she said. "Bye." She brushed a button on the phone.

She saw the power lines tight in the cold. Knew how fragile they were, how the weight of frost could make them snap. She heard the constant, zinging hum as they vibrated in the subtle breeze, the sound so pure in the dense, winter air. She knew the danger. Why did he want her to fix the lines? She didn't know how to fix them. She was the mom. He was the fixer. He could fix; she would sleep.

She dragged her eyes open. Muffled ringing. The phone. Under the quilt. "He's not home," she said. "Working." She pressed it off.

It rang again. "Sue! You have to get up! OK? Are you awake?"

"Mm-hmmm. Yah, I'm awake. Thanks."

"I started the fire in the basement, but you need to see if it's still going. If not, you've got to re-light it. Light some paper and stick it up the flue first, to warm it. Like I showed you. You remember?" He spoke rapidly, urgently.

"Uh-huh."

"If the furnace goes out, the house will freeze up." He paused to give her time to comprehend. "That line isn't secure. It could go any time. Do you understand?"

"Yeah." The lines blurred.

"Get up!" he commanded. "Stand up! Right now."

"Yes." She was awake now, her voice impatient, on the verge of anger. "OK!"

"You might want to start a fire in the fireplace, too. Just in case," he said.

God, what was wrong with him? Worry, worry, worry. She squirmed from the heavy quilt. She wouldn't answer the phone if he called again. She made sure the baby was covered, cinched the chilled robe around her waist and shoved her already socked feet into slippers. Why did she have to keep the fire going? She could feel her eyeballs sinking into her skull, pressing against her brain. The baby would soon be awake for another feeding, and she had to spend her sleep time crawling on a cement floor starting a fire? This was stupid.

The polished steps curled to the kitchen. She remembered to duck her head in the dark, unlike the time her son had croup and she'd smashed her forehead into the lathe and plaster carrying him downstairs. Why did she get stuck doing everything?

She felt the ice of the kitchen floor through the slippers and socks. She flipped a switch. The power was still on. She touched a hand to the iron heat register. Hot, but not too hot to grip. The double hung windows in the porch wore a fur of lacy frost thick enough to cast shadows. Ice had begun to form around the edges of the kitchen window, the way it will on a lake in the fall. She cupped her hands around her eyes and peered into the darkness as if it might give her a clue about why the house was so cold.

She spooked when a loud crack shot through the walls. When had her husband left? How long had he been out there? Was he alright? Of course he was. He kept phoning, didn't he?

"Southeast 13-71-7-6," she repeated aloud, practicing the address. In case she had to phone in. In case the light she'd turned on, suddenly went out. She'd need the address to help them find the fault.

She touched match to wick. Replaced the chimney on the lantern. Put it on the table. Just in case.

She snapped up a second light switch. Unused reluctance, its echo threatening in the still house. The dog lifted her head, then dropped it again into sleep. The basement door groaned open. The flat brass handle thudded against the wall. The door crept against her shoulder as she stepped down. Into the faint light from the bulb above the door. Twelve steps. Painted battleship grey where they hadn't worn through. As steep as a ladder. The latch clicked. The door shut.

What if the baby woke up now? Would she hear him? How would she get to him? Two flights of steep stairs. He couldn't roll out of the bed, could he? Would his crying wake his brother? Would he tend to him? Would he be frightened? He wouldn't try to bring the baby down the stairs, would he?

She shuffled in the near darkness. Moved her head from side-to-side, and waved her hand in front of her like a blind person as she sought the string that hung between the floor joists. She found it with the back of her hand, yanked it. The naked bulb illuminated the fieldstone walls, sparked off the silver chimney of the woodstove in the corner. She felt no heat.

Only dread.

She splayed her hands wide, hoping to feel something. A tendril of warmth. She placed both hands flat on its surface. Warm. Not hot.

Barely warm.

She twisted the handle. Pulled open the small door. Pent up, grey smoke puked on her. It ripped out the lining of her nose and throat. Her eyes blurred. She stepped back. Blinked rapid tears. The smoke alarm. The smoke alarm did not go off. Had they changed the battery? Was there even a smoke alarm down here? What if she passed out from the smoke? What if the fire got away? How would the children get out?

She held her breath and waved her hands in front of her. The fire struggled for breath. Small, lazy flames teased the bottom edge of the log. She blew long and steady. Aimed it at the fire. The flame died.

"No," she said. "you can't do this! Listen to me! You can't do this."

She stirred the ashes, jostled the wood. She found a likely coal. Ignited it with her breath. She selected a piece of rough hewn tinder. Leaned it against the charred log, just out of reach of the flame. Gambled on its greed.

The phone rang. Over and over and over. When it stopped, it began again. "Shut up," she said. "You will wake the kids."

She stood and she watched and she waited. A sentinel in the smoky room. The children two floors above.

The stick crackled beneath the flame. She added another, then another, until flames rolled around the log, and attacked another. She adjusted the damper to the full open position and clamped the door. She yanked the chain into darkness.

She climbed the steps, stretching, awkwardly off balance, to reach and turn the knob. She unlatched the door and passed through. The dog lifted her head. A motor, the rattle of a ladder and coiled wire. The crunch of tires on Styrofoam. The dog thumped her tail.

A door barked. Boots on the steps. The dog sat up, ready.

Wisps of snow curled on the railing, moving like desert sand. A rush of frozen air. A glimpse of clear darkness pinned with light. The smell of cold radiating from him. Raw, crimson cheeks and nose. His eyes relieved. His mouth smiling.

Hers, too.

Warmth.

Close Call on Highway 43

Driving through the reserve
in a blizzard, blinded by whiteout

Just over a rise snow shifts,
reveals an oncoming semi
passing another semi
despite double solid lines
hidden under the snow

So I drive on the wide shoulder
my knuckles white

The trucks roar past, and
as I pull back into my lane
the shape of a man appears

A dark shadow in the beam of the headlights
walking through the storm
just before the sign
to watch for pedestrians

A funny thing about memory

That winter there was a massive blizzard and the road drifted shut and school was cancelled for a week. It took four days for the plow to get to our place, so the school bus wouldn't have made it anyway. We were driving Mom crazy, the three of us, with arguments over Lego pieces and Monopoly rules, so after lunch she found our ski pants and boots, our hats and mitts, and sent us outside saying not to come back for an hour - an hour of peace with her cup of coffee and a book.

We set out, explorers in an unknown arctic, with our sled dog team of one who refused to pull the toboggan and bounded ahead through the deep snow with exuberance. We found solace from the biting wind on the river, where drifts had narrowed its already meager width and packed the snow hard. Soon we were scrambling back up the bank for shovels, and we spent our exile carving out tunnels and hideaways.

What is missing from these memories is the sting of snow on my cheeks, the numbness of my fingers when we forgot to go in at the end of the hour. The way the bottom of my earlobe, which had escaped from my toque, puffed up when

we finally did go back to the warm house, after Mom sent Dad to look for us.

Where does the cold go in these memories? Even now, as I make myself remember, the edge is softened, the pain gone. The bitter cold - that character in so much of Alberta's lore - is missing. All that is left is the joy of creation, the smell of the snow, that white, white sky.

Minus 27

“It’s broken!” my dad announced one December morning after checking our outdoor thermometer from the kitchen window. It was his first visit to Canada from Poland.

“What happened?” I asked while putting the kettle on.

“Your thermometer is broken,” he repeated with the confidence of a plumber assessing a broken pipe.

I looked out the kitchen window. The world was sleeping under a duvet of snow, fluffy and voluminous. The sky was periwinkle blue, unhindered by the smallest cloud. The sun, just above the eastern horizon, cast long, crispy shadows. Nothing moved – the air seemed frozen still. The only sign of life were wispy towers of smoke coming out of the chimneys, like quiet breaths of the neighbourhood furnaces running in overdrive.

The thermometer was attached to the side of the house, with no signs of distress.

“What do you think is wrong with it?” I asked, curious about what’s on his mind.

“It’s showing minus 27!” Dad exclaimed exasperated, impatient with my lack of understanding.

I looked at him trying to see if he was joking. His face looked worried. He definitely wasn’t joking. I had to suppress a laugh.

“Dad, it’s showing minus 27 because it’s minus 27 outside.”

He looked at me, then out the window, then at me again. “Really? Are you sure? I have never seen a thermometer showing this temperature. And how can it be that cold if it’s so sunny?”

“Well, Dad. Unfortunately, that sunshine is just a tease.”

“Wow, your heating system is good. You can’t feel the cold in the house at all. In Poland this temperature would bring life to a stand-still.” Dad shook his head in disbelief.

“Yes, people get used to living in this cold. They didn’t even close the schools, not to mention offices and stores,” I reflected, almost proud of my own adaptation in just a few winters.

“I am going outside to see how it feels,” he decided. He dressed in his fancy fur coat, hat, and gloves, coiled a woolen scarf around his neck and face so only his eyes were visible, and went out.

He came back faster than a boomerang, looking like Father Frost. His face was red from the cold, he had hoarfrost on his moustache and eyelashes, and looking over his instantly foggy eyeglasses he smiled ear to ear. He was evidently enjoying the experience.

“Boy, this *is* cold! I like the crunch of the snow under my feet. It’s so thick and packed, it feels like walking on styrofoam.”

He rubbed his hands and stamped his feet… he was a flurry of movement as he tried to bring warmth back to his body.

“And you were right – the sunshine *is* just a tease.”

Dayshift

The electrical crew pulls cable today
just as it has for the last
eight, twelve hours at a time
as the sun makes a bored
cameo, warms nothing,
retires again.

Billy follows its lazy
progress, how it never
bothers to rise higher
than the horizon to help
keep track of time, the coils
of cable getting yanked

all over the place, wearing holes
through his work gloves
to cook blisters underneath.
Pick a fight because nothing
fits, because everything
bursts: then,
go back to work

laying down the heat trace –

slim cable the size

of ballpoint pens, to cuddle

the cold pipe and keep it warm

on these days that bend

quietly into night.

Roadside Special

Many people didn't look past hammering the stick in the ground, as if that was all there was to it. Vera was used to this kind of ignorance, and was tired of arguing against it.

She leaned on the stick, sawing intently. It rested on two worn kitchen chairs in the garage, a box of cat litter stabilizing the taped end. There were three sticks to saw. Michelle had only given her two, but Vera had a big plastic bin of extras. Everyone in town knew to prop old hockey sticks on Vera's front step.

She chose a tall one for the base, hauled it out of the bin, measured and marked the pencil line carefully, then set it on the chairs. Clean cuts, Vera reminded herself. She sawed steadily through the stick, not easing up until she felt the worn blade drop into the baby bathtub that caught the pieces and the sawdust. Carefully, she angled the saw, chipping the end into a point.

Mike, from next door, always offered to do the cuts with his power saw.

"It'd only take a second," he said, miming the action, "*vvrrip*, *vvrrip, vvrrip.* Done." He and Mary knew about Vera. They'd have been happy to help the old lady out.

Vera never took him up on it. It didn't feel right cutting corners. Hand-made was hand-made.

She straightened, turning stiffly to the two sticks that Michelle had given her. Darren's sticks. Lefties. Blades that were curved sharply, probably illegally. Typical. She rubbed the handles gently with fine-grain sandpaper.

This was usually when she thought most about the dead man. It was almost always a man. Or a boy. Usually old enough to drive, anyway. Vera closed her eyes, bending at the waist and holding the stick like she was waiting for the puck-drop at a face-off. She held it for a full minute, concentrating. Nothing. She tried the other one, slapping it down a couple of times on the concrete. Nothing.

Most times she got something. Some residual thrill of the person alive, a faint tremor of recognition, a sympathetic rush, *something*. But these ridiculously curved leftie sticks were obstinantly mute.

She hadn't really expected anything much from Darren. Nobody ever had.

She shifted the chairs, and picked up the saw. Two more blades dropped into the baby bathtub. She picked them up, put the long, pointed stick-butt under her arm, and headed inside.

She turned and clattered down the bare steps into the basement. The cat slipped past her, his tail held high, padding softly down into the dark. Her hands were cold. It was October, most of the mornings frosty, and the forecast calling for snow.

She had to hurry.

* * *

Even Michelle had found it hard to grieve him.

When Vera heard he'd rolled the truck onto the side of highway 44, she thought, *oh, shit, here we go*, and grabbed a loaf of banana bread from the freezer. Her Joe, calling from the side of the road where he'd stopped to get the truth, said it was over, the RCMP were cleaning up the last of the mess.

When Vera got to Michelle's they just looked at each other, more in bleak exasperation and disgust than in horror. Michelle shook her head and turned away, leading Vera down the hall to the kitchen.

"Ah, well," Vera said, patting Michelle's massive back. "Ah, well."

Michelle had her hair scraped back into a ponytail, which emphasized her overplucked brows and small, puffy eyes. Vera had known Michelle's mother, and had watched the only child grow and have babies compulsively. She'd loved the babies, the love dwindling as they grew bigger and more complicated.

They drank coffee and ate Vera's semi-frozen banana bread and tried to feel something. Vera's seat faced the family room, a chaos of toys and laundry. A tidy woman, she shifted her gaze out the back window where a rusted-out swingset listing in the backyard.

Michelle stirred, as if prodded.

"He was a cute baby," she said.

"I'll bet," said Vera, picturing his lively, innocent adult face. She couldn't truthfully remember any of Michelle's babies as individuals. Darren had been the fourth. No, fifth? Anyway, before the twins. Michelle's kids had always been the pack of wild kids on the block. Darren really only singled himself out when he started to steal. He'd have been in grade four or five, she thought. Newspaper collection money, Halloween decorations from other people's yards, smokes, hubcaps.

Michelle hauled a photo album off a pile in the family room. She flipped, then stopped.

"See? There. The one on the left. That's Darren."

They both bent over the old picture. Cheryl, Danny and Devon sat on the couch, Cheryl holding baby Darren uncertainly. It was a lovely baby that looked out of the picture, dark, sparkling eyes and curly hair. The kind of mouth where the lips always look red. And innocent still, the innocence of a small, immobile baby.

"Aaah, now he *was* gorgeous, wasn't he?" murmured Vera dutifully. She refrained from asking about the kids, where they were and whether they were coming home for the funeral. The house was quiet. There was so much not to say. About Darren's woman and the baby. About the outstanding warrant. And other things.

Michelle sighed, idly flipping the pages of the album. She fixed on one, and pulled it out.

"Could you make one of your specials for him, Vera?" she asked, sliding a picture of Darren across the table.

Vera nodded, looking into her coffee.

"That picture ok for it?" Michelle asked, and then, without waiting for an answer, "Oh, and you'll need his sticks." She got up and lurched down the three steps into the back entrance, fighting boots and coats to extract two hockey sticks.

"Some of the family'll be driving in from Lac La Creche on Monday for the funeral," Michelle said. "Be nice if we could get it up by then."

It was Friday. They were in for a dump of snow on Sunday.

"Ok. I'll get on it right away," said Vera.

She patted Michelle's hand, the small gesture starting up the tears Michelle couldn't summon for her son.

"We'll go out, just the two of us, and plant it tomorrow."

* * *

Vera tested the cross on an old kitchen table in her unfinished basement. She'd hot-glue gunned the blades to the tall stick, winging upwards. The sharp left bend of them made the cross look as if it was straining to twirl perpetually to the right, like a child's plastic windmill. The pointed base was shiny with deck varnish.

It was dry. She took long swathes of duct tape, and wrapped it in figure eights around each joint until the whole thing was solid. Then she covered the duct tape with black hockey tape. It was the kind of detail that made Vera's roadside specials famous as far as Goose River.

She settled down to the finicky work of glue-gunning dollar store flowers down the main stick. Michelle wanted red, white and blue. The whole family were Habs fans, Vera remembered.

Methodically, painstakingly, Vera glue-gunned, until the basement reeked of melting plastic and hot glue. Four fake white lilies, four fake red roses, two fake blue generic flowers not found in nature. There was only a small stock of blue flowers in her plastic totes, so she'd had to do some calculating.

When all the flowers were done, she blanketed the length of the stick with fishing line, reeling it around tightly with a practiced hand. It saved most of the flowers from blowing off that first winter. Better a few squashed petals than a bare stick cross.

Vera made crosses to last. She aimed for two to three years. Barring vandalism and animals, it could even last a few years more. Some people thought a little string would keep the thing together on -30 days, with the wind skimming snow across the barren fields. She'd seen those depressing carcasses on highways before, and shaken her head.

She left six bare inches at the junction of the blades and stick. For the picture, the centerpiece of the whole deal.

Darren's picture. She looked at it a long time. It was a couple of years old, he was about sixteen in it, and clearly tanked, Vera considered. Maybe because of that, it was a good likeness.

She cast around for something positive to think about him, about him as a person. Not just the "he was a child of God" platitudes. She finally thought: he was not a violent man, and felt relieved.

She sighed, slapping the photo face down, encasing it in the thick plastic her neighbour had salvaged from a new mattress set. She duct taped the picture firmly onto a 4X6 inch piece of plywood. Then with a ruler, she framed him slowly and carefully in thick, black marker.

* * *

Michelle's car smelled of stale smoke and artificial pine. Vera slid the cross, encased in a green garbage bag, along the back seat, and slipped in beside Michelle.

Michelle glanced over her shoulder.

"Thanks for this, Vera," she said, slamming the car into reverse.

They drove out of town in silence. Ten minutes later, when they turned onto highway 44, they could have been anywhere. Tendrils of snow danced erratically, disappearing and reappearing, across the highway as the car slowed. A sharp drop off the shoulder to the ditch, fifteen feet of snowy grass, then the post-and-wire fence. Beyond that scrub bush led into endless fields of beige grass poking through their dusting of snow.

"Larry said about two kilometers from the turn to town, heading south," Michelle murmured, pushing the odometer knob. "Said he left some police tape where it happened."

They crawled along the shoulder searching the right side, the hazard lights thumping rhythmically over the hiss of the heater. One kilometer. One and a half. Two. Nothing.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Michelle muttered. "Did we miss it? You see anything?"

"Nope," said Vera. "But it's gotta be here. Go on up a little farther…"

Larry, the area RCMP, was pretty reliable. It had to be here.

At three kilometers, they decided to reverse, park at two, and get out and walk. The wind hit them hard as they staggered down into the ditch. Vera had been grateful more than once for the knee-length, red downfill Joe bought her a few Christmases ago.

"Keep you warm, and with red, you won't get hit by a car or shot or anything," he'd pitched it like he was selling it to her.

Michelle was shivering in a leather hockey jacket, blowing on her hands.

"Now where in hell…" she trailed off, looking down the frozen highway. She was ready to hammer it in anywhere along in this general area. They'd made the effort.

But there was Vera, like a fricking, scrawny little bloodhound, leaning into the wind, staggering along the highway, her red hood turning right and left. Michelle shambled after her.

They hunted for twenty minutes in the cold, Michelle stumbling several times on the uneven ground. Both the knees of her jeans were white, like a little child who'd been playing in the snow without her snowpants.

They found it nearly buried by a thin sheet of snow. A truck's roll from the highway, a small piece of police tape, just the "po" part, was hammered into the ground with a nail. The exact spot where Darren died.

"Jeez, Vera," Michelle exploded, ripping out the small square and handing it over disgustedly. "Could Larry have made it *smaller*? Is this stuff expensive or what?"

“Mmm. Maybe he was trying to be sensitive,” said Vera, “you know, not wanting three yards of the stuff flying in the wind.”

“Look at it Vera!,” she pointed, yelling against the wind, “An *eagle* wouldn’t have spotted that! Freezing our asses off for *that*…” She started to giggle, then to full belly-laugh, tears streaming down her face. Vera laughed, too, helplessly, compulsively, doubled over, hands on her knees, the cross dropped at her feet.

“Ok,” Michelle coughed when it passed, and they were still shaking with residual, suppressed giggles, “seeing as we’re at the *exact spot*, let’s get it in.”

Vera took the mallet and the railway stake out of her backpack. She used them to prime the spot, and tapped it in carefully, wiggling the stake around enough so that she could pull it out. Michelle was still shuddering with laughter.

“Oh, you just shut up,” Vera smiled, trying to concentrate. The ground wasn’t anywhere near totally frozen yet, she saw with relief. She wrestled the cross out of its garbage bag shroud and poised it in the hole. Michelle held it straight as Vera pounded it in a good eight inches. She scuffed up dirt and stamped hard all around it.

They stepped back to look at it.

“Well, Vera, it’s gorgeous. A real beauty,” Michelle said, running her eyes up and down the cross, noting the wicked, curved blades. She looked at the picture, felt the familiar rush of anger and bewilderment, and shut her mind down on him.

Vera looked at her monument, planted here, in the exact spot the life left him. She felt the satisfaction and relief of somebody who’s done all they could. She was cold, her face, hands and the small sliver of shin between her boots and jacket. She glanced at Michelle’s tight, closed face. She held up the square of police tape, waving it in front of her face.

“For your scrapbook?” she asked, and the laughter that had died down in Michelle erupted again.

As they turned, the wind snatched the ragged garbage bag from Michelle’s slack hand, filling it up like a body, sending it skidding and sailing crazily, whirling and protesting down the highway.

The two figures, stumbling and laughing, had the wind behind them now, too. Like the garbage bag, they got smaller and disappeared eventually into the frozen highway.

The cross held. It swayed, flower petals ruffling, blades tilting slightly in the bitter wind. Darren, perpetually 16, leered up at the passing cars.

To the insulated passengers and backseat children, the cross was a split-second's red, white and blue blur by the roadside. The mark of private tragedy brought them a fleeting, voyeuristic moment of awareness. Somebody died back there, and somebody else cared that they did.