

FEARNOCH

By Jim McEwen. A Creative Thesis submitted

to the School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English (Creative Writing)

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Abstract

Fearnoch is the story, or stories, of the inhabitants of Fearnoch, Ontario, a fictional rural Ottawa Valley town on the cusp of disaster. It is an interconnected gathering of small stories swept together and dependent on each other. A boy watches pigs getting castrated and worries about his aging father. A young woman is nervous to return home, having not delivered on her promise. A socialist government employee plots a revolution and feuds with his former friend, a conservative farmer. And a depressed man tries to find his spine while working at the Fearnoch dump. They love each other; they hate each other; they forget and they remember. The disputes between the townspeople swell into a catastrophe that cuts through town. Before the end, each character remembers their humility, the humanity in their neighbour and their place as a piece of something bigger than themselves.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not be possible without the help of Lisa Moore, Robert Ormsby, Nancy Pedri, Andrew Loman, and all the staff and faculty at the Memorial University English Department. Thank you to the School of Graduate Studies for financial support. And a special thank you to John McEwen, Elizabeth McEwen, Annie McEwen, Ted McEwen, Phil Moreira and Conor McMahon for letting me steal their words and memories.

Fearnoch

The day was done and John took off his hat and went out and stood on his road. The sun slid, a pink meniscus on the hill and he looked down at his land. Light left from the field and bush. John was the sixth John Younghusband in his line of John Younghusbands and he lived on Sixth Line Road. He remembered the day the pigs got free.

He was a boy helping his dad fix the fence by the road. One moment there were no pigs and the next moment there were many pigs. The elm trees were dying and collapsing on the fence.

El-lums, his dad said. El-lum and also fil-lum were duo-syllabic in his father's dying vernacular. And all the el-lums were dead, with thirsty cancerous fingers stretching up and up. It was a cedar fence with little cedar teepees every ten feet filled with rocks. They ran three logs between these teepees, tapped in long nails and lashed it all together with wire and pliers. Bark particles and larva bits and such things stuck in the sweat under John's t-shirt. He bled under his nails as he pried up rocks, scraped himself on the wire-ends and twisted the pliers with his tongue sticking out. He worried he wasn't working hard enough. John the fifth was quiet as he worked. And then the pigs—the pigs they made their impression on the land. An ungulate orgy descended and celebrated, casting noise and dust; they trotted, chortled, screamed, busted the fence, knocked John into the ditch, maybe a dozen of them, grinning beasts with their ears pinned back. They were free.

The farmer from across the road gave chase and was not unlike a pig himself in his movement. His great plaid stomach shook out over his pants as he emptied all his swear-words onto the road. John listened with interest from the ditch. He then tucked his head in his knees and hugged the dirty earth when the pigs flocked and funnelled back. But his father caught a pig neatly, flipped it on its side and the animal was calm. Of course, tackling pigs had been a large part of his own childhood. He helped the farmer load his truck full of the objecting pigs.

You need a good fence, his father said.

John remembered another day; he was in high-school then and deeply upset about something. Maybe it was getting cut from the AA All Ottawa Valley hockey team, or because it was his fault the hay got wet, or it was Anna Berube putting a note in the hood of his hoodie that said she was sorry she couldn't go to the semi-formal with him but, to save her a dance. Maybe it was all three of these things at once. He walked in circles in his socks in the basement and didn't know what to do.

I don't like it, he said, oh I I don't like it at all.

Don't like it? said his dad. He had been over in the tool room and thought John was talking to him.

What? said John, who didn't know he had been talking.

You're not gonna like everything, his dad said. When have I ever said you're gonna like everything? Or if it matters if you like something. He was eating a cookie. He bit it, held it up and frowned at it, then replaced it in the tin.

You like that cookie? John asked.

Doesn't matter, said his dad.

John walked in the dark through his field.

John's son Johnny VII, a stubborn five-year-old and capable of breaking anything, got up from his mother's garden and watched an old car come down the laneway. He looked out at his world from under a heap of curls and poked at everything with a mighty and reckless interest. A tall and dark man got out of the car and walked up to him. The man had wet blue eyes and the stare of a man who knew terrible things.

Hi Johnny, the man said. ...What're you working on here?

The man and boy looked down at a pile of excavated orange flowers and a toy front-end loader.

Working, Johnny said. I'm working. He sneezed a burst of dirt and wiped his hands on his shirt.

Yes. Good, said the man. Good work. He didn't know really how to talk to children so small and worried they didn't like him. Do...ah...Do you think your mum...

John came out from the barn. Mikey G'day! he said. He had his hockey bag and sticks but got tangled with a deer carcass swinging from the rafters like a punching bag. Frig, he said backing out.

Johnny gave his front-end loader a good kick and ran to carry his dad's sticks. They all walked to Mikey's shitty car, Johnny leading the procession, a filthy bandmaster trying to twirl the hockey sticks.

John looked at his son and said, what is that, an ant? Are you eating an ant? He sat the boy on the trunk of the car and hunted around in his mouth. Johnny opened his mouth wide and craned his neck upwards.

A flying ant, said John throwing a wet bug on the ground.

On the road to the arena Mikey felt very thankful for hockey. The gift of an hour to think about nothing but pucks and sweat. Someone gets in your way and just pile-drive them into the boards. Spray the water bottle into your face-cage and spit everywhere. Everything on a vicious cold beautiful hell-bending slide towards goal. And then after, steam smoking off your shoulders and back, have a beer, leaned back against the cool cinderblock wall of the dressing room with five decades of paint on it, just have a sit and smell awful. It was September and this would be their first exhibition game: against the hated team from the Pontiac on the Quebec side that dismantled them in last year's championship.

But here John was saying: he's got good frigging hair eh, Johnny? Great hair.

Like Gretzky, Mikey said. Like '82 Gretzky.

Yes, said John. I love him. You know Peace said to me—what's the best thing about having a baby? What's the best thing...she kept saying it. When she was drunk at the barbeque there.

Mikey looked out the window at a short and fat and highly silly pony that lived a few farms up from John's, which he always enjoyed looking at, but now he didn't feel very good.

I didn't want to say to her, John continued, you know it was the...transcendent love, like the love that I have that will never ever die. He looks at me and I know he's thinking that I'm the best—my dad's the best. I mean—he's wrong—but I appreciate it. So I just said something about his perfect hair.

Mikey was quiet and tilted his head. John felt he'd been talking about himself too much.

Do you want this Mikey?

What?

Wife, kid, eating flying ants?

Mikey stared up the dark long road. There was a rotting sign in a farmer's field, faded and half-covered in Virginia creeper that said: Renfrew Porn Barn Over 10 000 XXX Films.

Yes, he said. I want that so bad I feel like I'm drowning.

Oh, said John. Oh shit.

Anna began her days early, twisted up in the sheets, blasted to consciousness and scared to be conscious, with a sweaty sentiment of OK what am I doing oh boy. This morning she dragged her brain drooling out of a dream about driftwood on a beach. Blue diamond water on white volcanic sand with no weeds or people. An old log was worn smooth and pulled with the tide along the ripples in the sand. An ancient serious lady was narrating the dream with haughty grandeur: old log, why do you keep rolling so, on and on, in the water all these years, what do you have to tell us...? Something like that. Jesus

Christ, thought Anna, moving on tiptoes with her toothbrush stuck out her mouth, that is not a suitable dream to have. She made a terrible face at the unopened envelope on the kitchen table.

Matthias' black hair spilled over his ear and Anna looked at the ear stuck out the top of the duvet, spat pink in the sink, thought about kissing the ear, gathered up her own hair, decided against kissing the ear, and against opening the envelope at this moment. She steadied herself against the wall putting on her boots, fumbling with her finger for the little loop at the back. Then she opened the door of her St. Henri basement apartment and took all the grease and sex of Montreal on the chin. She stood, the whole way to work, on the metro. She thought 28-year-olds should stand if they could, when there were still world-beaten teary geriatrics with five Dollar-Plus shopping bags and canes and legs full of dropsy swaying around out there.

She got off the metro and it was a short walk to a tall, pale yellow townhouse that had a noticeable lean to one side. Moss and mould traced up its siding and shit and feathers piled up from the pigeon activity above. Anna crossed herself and let out all her breath. The rusty door creaked open when she pushed the buzzer. She knew there was a very finite number of times she could go through this door and leave with her mind. This house was an open custody/detention residence, the Centre Bourassa it was called, for offending males age fifteen to nineteen. Inside there was anywhere from three to ten of them. They were awaiting sentencing on, or serving time for, a crime. They were exceptional at Xbox and drank lots of thick cherry Kool-Aid. There were also two or three social workers or

youth workers or community workers inside, exhausted, and wearing lots of rings, pendants and bracelets. Anna was a part-time/on-call youth-care worker staff. She had trouble keeping up with all of the mental health methodologies and modules that kept these particular youths out of the larger prison. Maybe they'd get killed in there.

The boys were also superb at hiding drugs in baseboards and vents. The workers looked at their phones and worried about funding. The kitchen knives and scissors were locked up in a safe in the office. Sure as any house can be haunted, this one was. It remembered what happened between its walls: the hangings, overdoses, a boy stabbed with a pen, the schizophrenic meltdowns, all the blood and shit, burn-marks and gang-signs. At night the house was alive with moans. Mice fought for their lives on glue-traps, chewed their arms off, squeaking their mouse-screams. Anna felt ghosts spying on her during her overnight-awake shifts. But she loved Ebenezer, and it was his birthday.

I want Anna to take me, Ebenezer said. Miss please. He had his hands together and stood in the doorway to the office. For his birthday programming he was allowed a chaperoned day-trip outside the leaning, haunted, yellow house with all its pigeons. He wanted to go to the mountain to see trees and shit.

A full-time staff, Miss Natalie, top heavy in cardigans and scarves, looked at Ebenezer and considered, then swivelled in her computer chair to hand Anna two metro-passes.

Bless, said Ebenezer. He was now seventeen, a very little seventeen-year-old, smallest in the house, but his record was the worst. He was in love with Anna and he said 'bless' a lot. He was born in Haiti but came to Montreal when he was young. His only

memories of Haiti were a goat tied to a boat on the beach and lots of empty pop bottles. He stared at Anna, the soft curve of her mouth as she concentrated on the zipper of her raincoat, then figured he'd been looking at her too long. Anna had remembered to wrap his birthday present in blue wrapping paper, not red, because he was Crips, not Bloods.

Ebenezer walked the trail over Mount Royal tentatively with his arms stuck out like how Anna might, as a young girl in Fearnoch, test a frozen beaver pond, clear black ice over bubbles and suspended leaves. Ebenezer's blue hat and blue sweater and blue pants were all looking very clean and correct.

Where the fuck...I've never been up here, he said and tripped on a root.

Anna came here sometimes to eat hummus and put her head in Matthias' armpit. You've never been to the enormous and beautiful mountain in the middle of your city? She was teasing Ebenezer.

No, said Ebenezer. His was a different Montreal—Montreal-Nord and its public housing apartments, not famous for bagels and bachelor parties. He had been down this way before but that was mainly to sell 40\$ flaps of baby powder to loaded drunk men in Boston Bruins sweaters and run into the night before they snorted any. He had never picnicked on the mountain.

Then Ebenezer howled and covered his head. He felt a great shadow, the percussion of wings; a branch snapped, and what he might have described as a feathered dog sat on a bough, twisted its head clean around to look at him, its eyes on fire and shuttering open and shut. What is that! he said.

That's an owl, said Anna. Look, see— an owl. She pointed with a stick.

Owls are real?! Ebenezer said. His eyes were wide: he'd been living under the understanding they were a mythical beast from Harry Potter. Anna laughed and grabbed his arm. A birthday owl, she said.

Later and back at the house there was a cake for Ebenezer with all of the icing stuck to the top of the plastic covering. Anna thought cake, hugs and owls probably weren't much relief to Ebenezer. She knew people were threatening his mother and sister at knifepoint in the elevator of their housing tower and promising to kill him once he freed up. Her present for Ebenezer was sleepy-time tea.

At Fearnoch Memorial Arena, John and Mikey sat in the home dressing-room. Their home dressing room since back when their dads tied their skates. A pile of zamboni snow was heaped in the centre of the floor for beer and the walls and stalls were lacquered thick with the Fearnoch Syrup Kings black and yellow home colours. Kirby, their friend since kindergarten, came in late and let his bag slide off his shoulder. John, as captain, was waiting until everyone was there to give a speech. Once many years ago Mikey tried to rip Kirby's toenail off at a party.

Ahh, I dunno here boys, Kirby had been skeptical.

It must come off, Mikey said, staring at the toenail and clicking a pair of pliers together. He was drunk, with cocaine filtering into the blood membranes behind his nose. The idea of ripping off what he saw as evil had him enraptured. He'd seen the toenail a number of times now and he hated it. It was halfway there anyhow; it opened slightly, stuck on Kirby's sock when Mikey pulled it off, hinged on a stubborn purple cuticle with

a fluffy milky residue underneath and it smelt unbelievably bad. John guided Kirby into a chair, gave him a plastic jug of Alberta Premium and went to find something for him to bite down on.

There's gonna be a lot of blood, said someone.

I don't...Kirby trailed off, eyes wide and pleading, mouth full of rye.

Yes, blood, Mikey hadn't blinked in a while and had the pliers chomping. He straddled Kirby's legs and moved in on the toenail while John put a calming hand on Kirby's shoulder. Kirby tipped his jug to the heavens and sweat from his temples. Mikey growled as he got to work.

This, said someone else, is chaos.

OK! said Polly, who would one day marry John. Let's just think about what we're doing here. She made a motion with her arms like an umpire calling a run safe.

Mikey was dejected and went and fell against some garbage in the garage.

Do people think about things like this when they look at me? Mikey wondered. Kirby sat next to him and yawned in his glasses and sweatpants. John stood, shirtless, wearing hockey pants and flip-flops, and attempted his speech. He said this was our barn, the lads from Fearnoch, Lévesque and his fuckers from the other side of the river embarrassed us in our barn, pucks on net, bodies on net, and on he went like that. There were about four Codys and three Coreys on the team. They thought about the game, which they were sure to lose, but also about jobs, divorces, if they were getting fat, why their kid pushed other kids at daycare. And over all the hopes and troubles of these men who still thought they

were pretty good at hockey and took it too seriously, the arena arched, with beer punch-cards in the canteen, advertisements on the boards for Fearnoch Pizza, Fearnoch Granite and Tile, fertilizers and animal-feeds, and above the score-clock a dusty framed picture of the Queen. The players looped around the ice stretching their groins and exhaling great refrigerated clouds.

The Pontiac team put up four goals in the first period and Kirby wondered why they were in the same division. The top Pontiac playmaker, composer of this merciless beatdown, had white Nike skates and ringette pants, which drove the Fearnoch bench insane. John caught his skate in a rut, snapped his knee back and felt sick. Mikey sent John what he thought was a very clever and cute pass, but it was soft as a muffin; a Pontiac forward picked it off, took it the length of the ice and buried it in the Fearnoch net. Mikey hit the post twice and knew it was not a night for glory.

What am I? he shouted, scrambling to cover someone much better than him. Left wing? I'm right wing? Who in the fuck is playing centre?!

I don't know. Fucking...just play hockey! John said, and got whistled for slashing.

Kirby scored a goal: as shocked as anyone else when a shot from the point sang in and deflected off his penis and in, and he celebrated by lying on his side in pain. That made it 7-1. By then the puck was largely forgotten and the game veered into cultural warfare. Mikey hacked at the French goalie's trapper just after the whistle went. This was an unsporting thing to do but he was frustrated.

Désolé, he said. Pardon.

And was promptly struck from behind by a crosscheck of such magnitude and significance he imagined later that night, wincing as he got into bed, its energy had originated on the Plains of Abraham and gathered ferocity along the centuries, waiting in the dioceses and patateries of Quebec for a chance to come across the river and find the proper Anglophone recipient. He wheezed on his knees by the net and felt his kidney had been exploded and was draining into his abdominal cavity. A giant from the Pontiac defence stood over him.

Kirby wanted to help his friend. On the drive home he thought he should have cross-checked the defenceman. It would have been the right thing. But he didn't really want to hurt anyone and anyway he froze looking up at this exhaling mastodon Québécois blueliner. John did not freeze, and pushed Kirby and crosschecked the defenceman. The man turned and dropped the mitts, and John dropped the mitts, and they both fell immediately on top of Mikey, who hadn't yet figured out if he could stand or not. Kirby picked up the gloves and sticks off the ice and John stared at him from the penalty box.

When the game was over, 9-1 it was, and both teams shook hands at centre ice. The big defenceman patted Mikey on the chest and said something he didn't understand but it sounded friendly.

John said to Lévesque, the French captain: sorry I called you a Peasoup. They knew each other from midget hockey camp. Then they had their beer and drove home all under the same moon that spilled onto the only intersection of Fearnoch.

Kirby dug around in the freezer for a frozen bag of hash browns to put on his privates. His partner Peace showed him her progress on her beadwork. She was finally pregnant again. She had pissed on the stick and danced out the bathroom naked from the waist down. But it was too early to tell anyone and her last miscarriage still loomed over their bungalow. They lived on Wind Chime Crescent in the newest Fearnoch subdivision, just behind the Younghusband farm.

You shouldn't play hockey, Peace pointed at his privates with a sewing needle. I need that for more babies! More! She sang and conducted with the needle. Kirby sat beside her on the sofa. The thawing hash browns started to make his lap wet. No more hockey, Peace whispered to her stomach, holding it.

A tractor pulling a hay-wagon rattled past their living-room window, the farmer no doubt adding yet another empty to the ditch in front of the house, Kirby figured. John's cows were making an awful mewling racket and then a donkey contributed its ghoulish heehaw. Peace had never got used to this place and she looked out the window alarmed, one hand toying with her nose-ring. Kirby stared at the carpet and thought how in the morning he had to get up early to drive an hour into town and pretend he knew what he was doing at his well-paying government job with Human Rights & Complaints Authority Canada. He was praying for North Korea to explode the internet or for the socialist revolution to begin overnight.

On the other side of the fence and across a cornfield and a soybean field, John—who Kirby and Peace secretly or not so secretly thought was a bit of a capitalist patriarch—

was watching a children's movie with his boy and his dad. For his part, John thought Kirby and Peace were becoming socialist-hippie-aggressors who could believe what they wanted but just leave him out of it. John's dad now lived in the small cottage behind the bigger farmhouse. The younger siblings had moved away long ago, sensible enough to see the future.

The film about robot anime puppies mercifully ended. The actual dog, who was named Tippy, stared at John with his head cocked. Tippy just showed up one day and became the dog. He was ancient and lousy with one bottom canine missing. He was very calm and despised thunderstorms.

John's dad was asleep. His face folded; smushed and grey into his chest, a butter tart with one bite out of it in his hand. He looked vulnerable, even like a child. John touched his shoulder to wake him and when he did wake up he couldn't find his hat.

Forgetting about the hat, he said: Goodnight, goodnight, patting his grandson who was asleep on the floor and breathing in tiny whistles.

John watched at the door as his father limped up the lane to the cottage. This man had been a great amateur boxer of Fearnoch—he hospitalized two fellows who came after him with pry-bars when he worked the railway in his youth. In the basement there were yellowed clippings from the *Fearnoch Valley Press* coverage of his bouts. His pants were always up high, higher and higher, so that about three-quarters of his body was pants. He spoke slowly and quietly in the old Valley way, like he may as well have had a piece of hay stuck in his mouth. He'd put his hands in his pockets and talk soft and low, shrugging and flapping like a chicken, staring ahead, swaying almost like he was surfing. It would

be a little strange to an outsider. And to complicate things he spun around a lot to look at whatever needed looking at with his good eye, the other knocked sightless by a hockey puck in '75.

John was much taller than his father because his mother had been a giant. A real towering Manotick beauty, his dad would say. He wasn't ready for his dad to get old and forgetful with the bottoms of his eyes sagging open and glistening blue-pink.

Across Fearnoch Road and past the Fearnoch Convenience where people bought their beer and cigarettes and crosswords and ham, and you could still rent DVDs, and beside the barn where the farmhand hanged himself during the Depression, Mikey climbed up into the loft over the garage at his parents' house and got into bed. He shifted his weight off his deflated kidney and pulled the quilt up to his chin. He slept on an ancient horse-hair mattress it was said a great aunt of his with Down's Syndrome died on. His parents said he could stay in the loft so long as he continued to see a therapist. He had a stutter that wasn't as bad as it was when he was a kid. Words that started with 'd' could be tough when he was nervous or excited to say them. He was a labourer at the dump.

Mikey decided to get up and re-tape his hockey stick. Sitting on his bed, he ripped the puck-marked tape off the blade. God hockey fucking rules, he thought. He wound the new tape on carefully, ritualistically, snipped the excess and waxed the blade. His alarm-clock sat on its face on the night-table as Mikey did not need to be reminded about time spinning into the future and out of reach. His orange cat, Mrs. MacPherson, was dead, and his one plant was dying. There—beautiful fresh white tape-job, right to the toe like

Ovechkin. His plant, name of Robert Plant, had moist, velvety delectably moist soil, but was dying. And you couldn't say Robert Plant was overwatered because Mikey hadn't watered Robert in a month. He was positioned in the sunniest quadrant of the loft as well.

You gotta frigging dig deep here Robert, Mikey said, putting a finger in the cool soil, and picking up three papery brown leaves. He rubbed his kidney in a circular motion.

Mrs. MacPherson had been a true battler. Mikey found her out front of the barn, an abandoned barn-kitten sneezing by a puddle, her orange fur wet in the rain, eyes full of white shit and her tiny nose bloodied. He took her to the vet in a towel and she got better but never lost her barn-cat heart. She bounded around the loft like a psychopath with her tiny tail straight up; she slept in a ball on his back or attacked him in the night. Mikey thought it was hilarious to yell Mrs. MacPherson! at her when she did something bad. She howled to be let out so she could be free and kill a lot of mice and birds. Mrs. MacPherson bit and clawed at everything, particularly plastic bags. Always licking and chewing at plastic bags. She terrorized small animals, toyed with them, and Mikey didn't see why cats had to act like serial killers. Eat it or don't but no need for the sadistic torture. He tried to save mice from her wrath; he caught them with a pail and piece of cardboard and let them outside all dopey and dozy and traumatized, surely to die of a heart attack momentarily. Probably he should have dropped a rock on these mice but he wasn't tough enough. Mikey liked when Mrs. MacPherson was calm, purring in a rectangle of sun on the quilt with her eyes closed in feline symmetry. This barn-hooligan trusting in him.

Now Mikey wanted to watch videos while he fell asleep because that way he wouldn't think about anything in the dark. Burn his brain out on the acid blue midnight

glow. Maybe his future wife was out there in the dark somewhere, in Quebec or Winnipeg or Bessarabia also debating putting on a Youtube. That was a nice thought.

No, we should not watch videos in bed, he concluded, I doubt Teddy Roosevelt or One-Eyed Frank McGee would have watched videos in bed. They had too much to do. I should try to be a more interesting person. The quilt kept coming up and making his feet cold. He found some classical music on the computer, something with harpsichords and a picture of powdery baroque ladies jewelled-up like easter eggs, and thought it was more suitable than hockey highlights. He found his great fat book about Ireland and fell asleep with his face stuck to a page about elderly lifelong celibates on the rugged coast of County Mayo, Ireland. Waking in the middle of the night, he remembered things he didn't want to remember.

Back across Fearnoch Road, past the elementary school and a farm with bloated pigs lying around flapping their ears, nearer the river now, where historically the Catholics, then poor people in modified, three-season cottages, and now both rich and poor people lived, Anna's mum pulled the chord on the lamp by her bed and thought about when she might have a grandchild.

And far from sleepy Fearnoch, over the border into Montreal, Anna flipped her pillow and watched city light fan through the curtains and slice on the wall. On top of the yellow mouldy Centre Bourassa the pigeons tucked their heads in and bunched up fat together on the roof. Inside Room #7, Ebenezer pretended to be asleep when the night-staff opened his door to check that he was there and alive. He was looking at a naked picture a girl

from his high-school had given him and this was contraband. Maybe there was some weed or pills left in the new hiding spot under a tile behind the toilet or maybe the other boys had taken it all. It was four in the morning and he drank a cold cup of his sleepy-time tea. He thought about his mum and his sister.

There is little you could say that would distinguish Fearnoch from any other small Eastern Ontario town. A Great Fire licked across it and the Great War took half its young men. The town had its brawls in the beginnings, like all the others, clashes of tribes. Scottish, Scots-Irish, Irish Catholics, Orangeists, Anti-Orangeists, French-Canadians, all raising and drinking their rums, another toast, another toast, filling pre-industrial taverns with their oaths, then going outside and beating each other with sticks and rocks. They bloodied one another over canal-dredging jobs until it didn't matter who was who and besides everyone needed a set of hands from the neighbours to get the hay in the barn.

There was a church, then another church, a schoolhouse, a community centre with an outdoor rink. It was a small quilt out on the line— Fearnoch Road, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Lines running east-west, McHugo and Storytown Side Roads cutting them north-south. People enjoyed hockey, bingo and euchre no more or less than any other town along that stretch. Old men stopped their trucks in the middle of the road to talk until someone politely honked behind them and they'd wave and continue on. Farms and bungalows were laid out from the one intersection, with a streetlight now, that had on its four corners: a plaza with a gas station and convenience store, a defunct cheese factory, a field, and a field. It was a one-hour drive to Ottawa, but they were going to put in a new

highway which would change things. John loved Fearnoch, got very romantic about it. Kirby was embarrassed by it. Mikey was trying not to think anything bad about anything. Anna was afraid of it because everyone there expected her to be successful and famous.

In some places there are kinkajous or narwhals or ocelots. Or bioluminescent atoll skinny-dipping, or mounted falconers hunting golden foxes with golden goshawks, or walking boardwalks and holding someone's hand, feeling the rings and the sweat-suctioning, looking at this hand, and maybe you'll fuck tonight, sweat everywhere with your clothes together on the floor but, that is, after ice cream at Coney Island.

Fearnoch is not any of those places. Although the sun and moon still visit, like all the other places and all the people and creatures in them farming, falconing, swimming, crying, fucking. And also there are many places just like Fearnoch, with swamps and dead farms and dead elms hanging over rusted Quonset huts. But Fearnoch is still a place, a piece of the planet, even if no one knew where it was, and even if Peace once called it a cousin-fucking colonial cow-shit-hole.

Samuel de Champlain might have been the first white man to see any of this in 1615. Or at least the first white man to take notes. Algonquins took him in their war canoes up the river. Then the great white pines dominated both shores. Relations between the settlers and the Algonquin further up the line were uniquely friendly in the Valley.

Champlain's men camped on an island where Champlain figured mosquitoes must have been invented. There were no settlements on the river, no nothing, just bush and insect. But when Europe found out just how much it desired beaver, the river was then a

key artery for the fur trade, pumping the pelts and pemmican. All sorts of folks ready to slaughter for fur descended on the area. And at the end of that century there was a great slaughter just up the river from what would one day be the Fearnoch intersection. On a night with no stars, a war party of French and Algonquin snuck around behind and slaughtered a war party of Iroquois, who were planning on slaughtering them. The Iroquois woke with hatchets in their brains and knives in their sides and the sand filled with their bones.

By the 1800s, timber replaced beaver in importance and now the British sent lumbermen to buck the great pines, float the logs down to the Quebec boom, and turn them into masts for warships to fight Napoleon. Retired officers got land-grants. A Frenchman had a store and trading post where two wagon paths met but he disappeared and then there was a post office and a cheese mill there. A sign on a post read 'Fearnoch Corners', in honour of some diseased fish-drying hamlet in the Scottish Highlands someone's second wife cried for as she died of typhus during a winter colder than anything Scotland had seen in 250 years.

And none of these people could have guessed that one day the town would swell to a thousand souls, Anna would catch a catfish with her bare hands on Champlain Island and present it proudly to her mother, who screamed, and skidooers would drink and piss in the trees there; the French-Canadians would conduct another slaughter, in the hockey arena this time, built in the same sand that held the Iroquois' bones, and in high-school Mikey and John would ignore the *Speeding Costs You Deerly* sign with the deer on it at

the Fearnoch intersection as they piloted the dark Fearnoch roads hot and drunk, spilling their Max Ice in a Dodge Omni.

The first of the John Younghusbands was the seventh child of a failed Glasgow hardware merchant. At age fourteen he was told, like the others, he had to leave home because there wasn't enough food. And like the others, he boarded a boat. His boat would go to Canada, which made no difference to him, and the payment for passage was five years' service in farms and lumber camps. He saw Scotland from the sea for the first and last time, watched the hills lie back in the fog, did not cry, but went below deck and got cholera. After a month and a half on the boat and a year and a half on a quarantined island, he made it up to the Ottawa Valley. Due to the delay, his sponsor recalculated his service then to seven years. He thrashed in the summer, shantied in the winter, he lost two fingers on one hand, one on the other, and was terrible at the fiddle. Maybe in Glasgow they were walking to the shops, putting coins on the bar and talking to girls. But John was sunburnt or frostbitten in the alien bush thinking about shops, coins and girls. He didn't ask a whole lot from life. He knew better.

An old and maimed man in the lumber camp, Mr. Cyril Munro, brought salvation for John and all the future Johns. In the bunks one night during John's seventh winter in the shanties, the man next to him was caught in a violent dream and gave him a savage kick on the kneecap. John slid away and rubbed his knee. He lay on his back on the pine boughs, watched his breath rise and heard wolves singing to the cold. Then he rolled over

to look down where Mr. Munro sat in front of the wood-stove. He held his face in his hands and studied the old man. When a younger man, a felled tree had hopped and crushed Mr. Munro's shoulder, making one arm hang useless ever since. The cook pitied him and took him as a helper. Mr. Munro stared into the fire and produced a bottle from his pocket before looking about suspiciously. He held the bottle up in the firelight to see how much was left. After a great wet cough he allowed himself one small drink.

Ah, he said. God...then he spoke some Gaelic softly and coughed again.

Mr. Munro had worked the bush since he was ten, and now he was dying; everyone knew it, most were tired of his coughing. John thought how nice it would be to have a drink, then the man next to him kicked again.

Next morning the teams of buckers and sawyers shouldered their axes and cross-saws and walked to work with their beards frozen. The snow whined, coming for them through the trees, collected and whipped up under and over the men. John tucked his chin and sunk to his hips. The man walking alongside him, a man new to their shanty, had a moustache of ice and, John noticed in shock looking down, the old man's bottle peeking out of his coat pocket.

Maybe this is a different bottle. No, this is the same...Mr. Munro's bottle. The injustice sat poorly with John.

He thought about the bottle and this new man all day, and concluded he should not have the bottle. This new man takes whisky from a dying man and also, John thought, I don't get any whisky.

John sawed, squared, hauled the pine, and tried to lead the horses through the snow-drifts. He knocked tobacco out of an old cigar end and chewed that in place of the more expensive chewing tobacco. Yes, I hate this man. And that's all I can make of that, thought John dropping his axe in the snow.

Then immediately he sought out the man, located him having a break in a tree-well and hit him, knocking all the fluffy snow off the tree and down onto the two of them. Fights didn't rouse much alarm with the lumbermen, and no one rushed to aid a new man. John took up the bottle. The man reached for it and John shoved him back in the tree-well.

It's Mr. Munro's, said John. The man with the ice moustache said nothing. John narrowed his eyes in the falling snow.

You're nae Scottish are you, he said.

John snuck one drink before getting back to the hauling. For a minute in this big white new land, old Scottish whisky glowed in his guts and behind his eyes.

Later John held the bottle in his bunk surrounded again by snoring men sleeping in clothes they didn't change for months. The smell of the shanty was unpardonable. It existed as more than a mere smell and hung in auras or hauntings over the stove. John felt for the bottle. He had decided to keep it, he liked it too much, and he would ignore the old dying man. But he saw Mr. Munro down by the fire as always, done for another day with all the porridge, biscuits, beans and salt-pork-fat cubes. A defeated skeleton, he cracked with coughs, his limp arm shaking around. Mr. Munro knew death was at the

door and spotting his handkerchief. Soon the door would bust in and admit a blizzard and he'd be dead and all he asked was his little bottle to ease the end.

Fuck, thought John. He couldn't endure the eyes on this man. Blue and beaten, on the fire. He climbed down the rough pine ladder and handed Mr. Munro his bottle. The old man spoke in Gaelic to John with his eyes rheumy blue and John rolled away in his bunk wishing he still had the bottle. Two nights later and Mr. Munro was stone-dead, frozen and smiling with his eyes open and the bottle empty.

The cook had a piece of paper from Mr. Munro for John.

Cyril said for to give it to the man who gave him his bottle, the cook said. You are this man? He got some beans from his hand on the paper.

I am, said John. He tucked in his shirt and pulled on his suspenders.

The cook handed the paper to him. John couldn't read, so the cook took it back, held it at arm's length and frowned at it.

It's a deed, he said. You have been deeded...he tightened his eyes which made his mouth open. One hundred acres. In Fearnoch, down the road a piece. You know where it is?

Aye, said John. He did not. It could be anywhere; he was very happy. Never had a Younghusband been able to measure his land by acres.

Well, good lad, the cook said. He watched young John float away dreaming into the snow and remembered all the times the old man had said that even an Irishman wouldn't want his stake of shit in Fearnoch.

But one hundred acres.

The next summer John made it to his acres. He beheld a great dirty rhombus of un-cleared bush and swamps between exposed bedrock, dropped on his knees and rolled onto his back and laughed. The back of his shirt and pants got wet in the swamp and he shook and breathed thank you to the thorns and milkweeds. Up into the cloudless sky he submitted some very fond words about God, the people in Glasgow and Mr. Munro with his bottle.

John set about clearing his acres straight away. He had no ox or horses. He hacked into the bush by himself, burned the stumps and he spaded the thin earth and planted potatoes and wheat.

My land! My land! he sung out and swung his axe.

In what came as a minor scandal for Fearnoch, he fell in love with a Catholic girl and she loved him back so fuck everyone else and they got married at a ceremony with four people at it and lived in an eighteen-by-eighteen foot log cabin. She was wandering the township in rags trying to sell a lame old cross-eyed billy goat and came up to John's acres. When she opened her mouth the Cork accent that came out was so strange, a series of songful bleats, he thought she was playing jokes on him. Her goat's ribs and coccyx tented though its skin and it sat in the mud. John bought this goat and it died soon after.

And by the time he was old and sat down in his field and died, John Younghusband I had roughly eight acres cleared, one son who survived infancy, cows, and one horse.

The second John was a cheat, a liar and a drunk; he cleared few acres, enjoyed the dance-halls, nearly lost his land in a wager with the McHugos, Kirby's mincing Presbyterian forefathers, survived the Great Fire by hiding in a well while his wife and children and animals ran for the creek, and he died relatively unmourned and soon nobody was quite sure where his grave was.

The third John lied about his age, went to Flanders at sixteen, saw his friends showered down onto the earth in little pieces, returned home incommunicative and prone to screams and long walks with the tired dog, and became another veteran who limped through town, scaring the children or making them giggle.

The fourth John cleared the remaining acres, expanded his barns and his herd, considered ingestion of turpentine to be the cure for every ailment from insomnia to tinnitus, and the only nights he didn't spend in his own bed, as he never wanted to be far from his cows, were when he was off sinking U-boats.

The fifth John worked his farm, was quiet, rarely drank or swore, was kind to people and animals, enjoyed reading, privately wished he had more friends he could talk to about reading and ideas, and was inching closer and closer to a possible psychotic collapse, with his hippocampus deteriorating, but hadn't told anyone he felt off.

And the sixth John inherited the one hundred acres at a time when all small farms were dead or dying.

The Fearnoch Community Association held a meeting in the parish hall attached to the Anglican Church up the road from the Fearnoch intersection. They were filling the locals in on what they knew of new land developments and potential government assistance packages. Land prices were jumping with all the new rich High-Tech people looking to rusticate and make everything too expensive. Peace sat on the board of the Community Association and helped table some of their more ambitious plans.

The dying farmers came out from their dying ratty lands, filed in and sat on those old metal and wood stackable chairs. The hall had fake wood panels lining the walls, and long thin windows with dead bees in them. Needleworks and quilts commemorating Jesus and the wars and the harvest hung about on hooks and wire, over folding tables and over the piano. There was a kitchen full of teacups and saucers with roses on them that didn't match and a general musty, geriatric inertia throughout.

These were secretive, independent, tribal folk, hard-to-know country people forever suspicious of the government. The old-spotted heads of the old clans: the McKenzies, MacKays, Mulrooneys, Wilsons, Cheesemans, the Younghusbands and McHugos. They tacked Back Off Government signs to fence posts and trees along their property. The only thing they wanted to do, regarding the government, was to vote Conservative, which they did, and would do until they died no matter what, like how someone might cheer for a hockey team. Little was forgiven or forgotten, and grudges spanned the decades. Something they did forget though was that most of them came from people who wouldn't have made it through the first winters without government emigration-assistance provisions

like blankets and biscuits and forks. They grew up without electricity and their grandparents warned them to mind the faeries and their mischief. Now the faeries had departed, deeper into the bush.

These people could be generous and charitable: give away old trailers, a ladder, an egg. They helped each other in the needy times, opened their door into the parlour with beer and buns on the tablecloth, unless they suspected some form of outside authority might come in. Their sons and daughters had left for cities, no interest in getting out of bed before the sun and artificially inseminating cows for a living.

John was a true outlier. When he was a boy his father got him to bring an old milk-stool over to the McKenzies across the road as a gift. Mrs. McKenzie saw John and said: if you bring that cursed milk stool over any closer I'm going to burn it. The Younghusband milk-cows had an udder disease back in the fifties and she hadn't forgotten. But she gave John a muffin after he dropped the stool. The McKenzies, grey and sleepy, sat with the others, crossing their arms above their stomachs and awaiting whatever loon-shit fate the Community Association had in store for them. John was the only one under 50 in the hall and he sat with his dad, nervous and as sad as the fake-wood panelling and teacups.

Out in the pot-holed gravel parking lot, Peace concentrated on her breathing in the passenger seat of her and Kirby's SUV. She held her purse on her lap and didn't want to get out just yet.

It'll be alright, look I promise, said Kirby, trying to kiss her. People do change, they do. Eh? he said.

Peace came from one of those little islands between Vancouver and Vancouver Island that didn't have a stoplight. To her, something as alien as conservative hicks had been an abstraction, something for old books, like Visigoths and minotaurs. She was not equipped for how to process these old-timers pushing their hats back, voting conservative and smelling like pigs and all types of animals' semen. She taught their grandchildren or great-grandchildren, sometimes, part-time at the daycare and kindergarten at Fearnoch Elementary.

Recently John yelled at her for indoctrinating Johnny. He yelled at her over the fence when he saw her in her garden.

I don't know if it's my place, John said and gripped the fence-wire, just please don't poison the young lad. Don't indoctrinate him!

What are you talking about? Peace said. She stood up and walked towards the fence with sweat and dirt stuck on her forehead.

He came home crying again. He said the world was going to die, he said we killed the planet. What in Christ are you teaching over there?

Well we have about ten years.

Ten years!

Maybe twelve.

Twelve years until what—we're all dead?

Yes.

No, no please don't tell him this shit. He brought home a poster with the Earth painted but it looks like a skull...

He did a very good job on the poster your Johnny.

John stared at her and then said: You know what I think, I think we don't know shit about the climate but that won't stop us from putting each other in concentration camps over it because it's just the new religion.

Look, said Peace, ignoring what John thought. He seemed excited as the rest about the field trip...

Field trip?

Field trip downtown to Parliament, she continued. The whole school's going. To demand climate action—hold those sons of bitches accountable! She took her gloves off and slapped them against the fence to get the dirt off.

He's five!

Well, John, he's the future. And he's gotta know the old ways aren't working anymore.

This is child abuse, John said. All of you. I want him to know what two plus two is, and don't hit, and listen to adults. Not scream at politicians with earth skull posters.

They both continued to yell at each other for a while about a world neither one knew very much about until John turned and walked away slow through his field with his shoulders drooped down. A calf then let out a woeful waning five-second-long moo of such sorrow and frustration it served to exemplify John's condition. John sighed and turned back to Peace, who watched him with her arms crossed.

Sorry about the calves, he said. They miss their mothers. And he walked away.

Sometimes when she was falling asleep Peace could smell the Pacific and the mountains and felt them pull at her. Ferries in the fog, cedars in the rain, pulling her tenderly by the leg, pregnant and prone, away from the hay and pigs. But if she had to be here, at least she could help people help themselves to make Fearnoch a better place.

What kind of hat is that you got there? Kirby asked, and Peace slammed half her massive skirt up in the greased SUV door when she got out. Her hat, a new fashion choice, sat somewhere on the beekeeper to pheasant-hunter spectrum.

Peace strode into the hall with what she felt was a glowing compassionate look and her skirts swirling. She noticed John with his dad and then a lot of people with glaucoma and ghost white puffy hair. It looked like some of the old boys were having a competition for who had fewer fingers. Several were enormous, one, instead of a leg and a foot, had a skinny metal tube stuck into a New Balance. Many of them wondered privately and wearily when these city people would just frig off. An old lady with her head hunched down so far it looked like it was growing out of her chest waved up at Peace like a child might, perhaps thinking she was one of her grandchildren.

Peace helped the community association with the presentation. Kirby got up and turned the lights off and Peace pushed play on the PowerPoint. She switched the slides at the correct intervals because no one else knew how to do it. There were a lot of exciting opportunities on the slides. A new park with a play-safe playground, federal subsidies for windmills and solar panels built over unused pasture. A large Eco-Wellness Hospice,

built into the old wetlands. There were plans for a new cafe, something called the Pussy Willow Cottage that looked quite sweet. Peace continued pressing click and the seniors' white hair and glasses lit up blue and green under the images of bike-paths and wetland boardwalks slated to replace the land they could no longer farm.

After the last slide, Kirby turned the lights back on and said, I work downtown at HRCAC and if anyone has any complaints or questions I'd be happy to sit around and just talk. He said this like everyone knew what the acronym meant. He was wearing sandals.

Wherever there are folks down on their luck there's always someone who shows up in sandals and thinks he knows how to fix them, thought John.

Well, said a Mr. MacKay, all ninety-three years of him popping and creaking while he rose from his seat, I'm glad I'll be dead before I see any of this.

My land's going to be a golf course, I think, said Mr. McKenzie.

Paintball course, said Mrs. McKenzie.

At least it'll be some money for the young lad, said the old lady with her head in the middle of her chest, whose name was Ada Honeywell. She patted Mr. McKenzie on the shoulder and tried to dig her cane out from under the seat in front of her. Ada looked like she was crying, or maybe her eyes were always like that, wet and filmy.

Wish we'd gotten in on that gravel pit, said a lady in a wool sweater who looked like a teapot.

Pussy Willows Cottage? Eh?

And so it went and they all left the hall without saying very much to Kirby who stood by the door with his sleeves rolled up and his hands on his hips, nodding and trying to make eye contact. The locals knew their culture was dying and they just wanted to go home and enjoy what little of it they had left. All cultures die in the end and what can you do? Have a Labatt 50 in the garage and go to bed.

Angel Mae, a Filipina caretaker for old Mrs. Mulrooney in the wheelchair, stopped in front of the dusty picture of Jesus and put a hand to the tiny crucifix on her necklace.

C'mon Angel, you got plenty of pictures of the Lord at home, said Mrs. Mulrooney, and she wheeled towards the exit.

Angel Mae looked embarrassed and followed her client. She got mocked for her piety to blue-eyed baby Jesus but if you hadn't seen your five children in years and your husband had a new girlfriend at home but wanted you to keep sending money and you washed shit out of the deep wrinkles of well-intentioned but mildly racist old white ladies' skin and the only time you remembered really that you were human were the one or two nights a year you could put on tight sparkly jeans and go dancing with your Filipina girlfriends in the Market downtown even though you felt old and used-up and your faith was the only thing stopping you from just machine-gunning everything, you might pause in front of a picture of your Saviour too. Besides, everyone had some type of god they protected, didn't question.

Kirby then walked over to where John was still seated, with his face in his hands. John rolled his face off his hands and said, I'm not in the mood Kirby buddy. He mumbled incoherently about government, city people and fuck off.

Kirby sat down and slid his hands in his pockets. It's a good look for Fearnoch, he said. The government will help... we can fix some of the problems.

I don't want the government to help. I don't wanna castrate myself for the government dole like everyone else does— I'm already dead if I do that. Government takes ten years to put in a culvert.

Well fuck, Kirby processed that and glared out a window with a fantastic spiderweb in it. I didn't castrate myself—

You take this place for granted, said John. You'll remember one day.

Why don't you just work in trades or government like everyone else. Any normal person would have stopped farming eons ago, said Kirby and he left very sour. Peace hugged him in the parking lot. That was not bad! she said. I think they get it. I thought someone might throw an egg at me.

Kirby was still angry at John for the castration comment. He swelled with a bellicosity unbecoming a pacifist, and when someone touched his shoulder from behind he made a fist. He turned around and saw it was John's father who'd touched him.

Kirby, John told me about the...the baby, the miscarriage, he said. I didn't know. I'm sorry. He nodded at Peace and put his filthy hat back on.

John's dad helped Peace with some stump removal when she first came to Fearnoch. He said the words tool and pool with such a loving lingering delicacy, they were more sung than spoken. Like he was trying to push a large fragile flower out of his mouth intact.

The water will poooooool here. I'll get my toooooools.

And the old man had a dead earnest look so long ago and forgotten it felt like a mild assault to be looked at like that. He'd look at you and look at you and still look at you waiting for you to speak first until finally he'd stand up and say, Well, I've got work to do.

When he was in a bad mood, such as when he drove through luminous fields and flirting barn swallows with the sun rising up their wings and long shadows on the hay-bales, on his way to sweat at the dump, Mikey tried to remind himself of all the other people who were, as he saw things, worse off. People get *spina bifida*, and get attacked by pirates. And people like Wilson. Mikey drove past the charred foundations of what had been The Country Mouse, a bar on the old highway that may as well have had a sign on it that said drinking and driving is fine. Once he found three teeth under the table at the Mouse.

He thought about Wilson, and did not do so unemotionally. Foolish old Mr. Wilson stacking wood in front of his trailer and waving at every car.

See, he thought, worse off. People said a lot of things about this man. He was cow-eyed and he had rickets. Both his parents had the last name Wilson. A barn door fell on him when he was a boy. His eyes pointed outward, away from each other, a dazed bovine look, a look full of cud. He was simple and friendly. He wandered Fearnoch doing odd-jobs, none of them very well, enjoyed beer and talking about skidooing.

Once Mikey woke up with one shoe on and so he drove back to the river, where the party had been the night before, to see if he could find the other. He tried to keep the car

out of the ditches with his bare foot on the gas pedal and his face hot and greasy. Fearnoch Road ended at the river, not so much in a beach but a road of grass and gravel culminating into the water. A grove of willows bowed over a pile of scuttled concrete water-breaker blocks. These willows and concrete blocks made for great climbing as a child, but Mikey's mum hollered at him from her towel on the grass with her diet Pepsi.

Mikey quit your monkeying up there. She worried about broken beer bottles and condoms from the teenagers. Mikey listened to his mother and came back out of the tree in his bathing suit using his feet like chameleon pincers on the willow branches.

You'll get some kind of disease back there, she said. He checked his stomach and the bottom of his feet looking for spots or signs of the disease.

When Mikey went looking for his shoe, he found Wilson sitting in a rotting recliner chair poking at the remains of a bonfire.

Wilson said, G'day Mikey, happy as ever. Mikey blinked and vaguely recalled a drunken fraternity with Wilson by the fire the night before, an arm around the shoulders of the man thirty years his senior, pretending he knew plenty of things about Yamahas and tractor-pulls.

I'm looking for a shoe? said Mikey.

What's it look like?

Like this one.

Ah.

I'm gonna peek around, said Mikey, hopping on the one foot.

I'm not gonna lie to you buddy, Wilson pulled the lever to recline and closed his eyes. I'm thinking it probably went on the fire. He was worse off and he didn't complain. He sat on the old chair and the willow wept over him.

The scrapyard or dump was a ten-minute drive from Fearnoch off the old highway. Mikey worked with the steel in the back, in a rusty swamp of I-beams and channel-iron. His job was to blowtorch the steel into pieces smaller than four feet by two feet, heave these pieces into the backhoe's bucket and drive them to their corresponding piles. It was a crackhead's job. His colleagues had the outlines of their hats and helmets permanently sunburnt into their heads, many with bare or sparse gum-lines, here and there an incisor hanging on. They all enjoyed a good cough around the scale-house with the calendar of naked women at the beach fading and curling inside. Most could not read well. The concrete slab where they kept the oxygen and acetylene tanks for the torches was organized into two sections: FUL and MT spray-painted on the ground. Mikey's favourite co-worker was Moo-Moo, a man who came from the Congo.

Is Moo-Moo your real name Moo-Moo? Mikey asked him when he figured he knew the man well enough.

No, said Moo-Moo. He flung an old barbeque high up onto the cast-iron pile.

What is it?

Moo-Moo's mouth opened into a massive smile. Mukengeshayi, he said.

Oh. What?

Moo-Moo is fine, Moo-Moo said, and did the big smile again. Mikey thought the man's smile cradled all the good things left in the world. Big white teeth and pink tongue. He said cheer up, cheer up, a lot and patted Mikey on the back with his work-glove. The other men said Moo-Moo smuggled himself from the Congo to Burundi and then to Canada and had to hide in a shipping container for two weeks and even ate rats while he was in there. Mikey wasn't sure if it was true but he checked the internet about those two countries to discover that the Congo was the poorest in the world and Burundi was third poorest. So, supposedly, Moo-Moo risked his life and ate rats to escape to the third poorest country in the world, and here he was smiling, laughing, telling everyone to cheer up, cheer up, at the dump.

Everyday there was something new to cut that the crane had added to the swamp: 100 beat-up dishwashers, a nest of two-inch thick rebar, an old escalator, once an entire Harvey's restaurant.

One time, a frightening old man, with grey whiskers growing off in every direction like a cat's, brought a truckload of rotors, struts and compressors back to the slab and got out of his truck smelling unmistakably of urine. The other labourers referred to the man as Mr. Darling, same last name as Mikey. The urea mist coming off him made Mikey's eyes water. He found out later through his father this man was his estranged great uncle Alvin.

Where do I come from? thought Mikey.

The finest day Mikey ever had at the dump was when he unloaded an 18-wheeler of obsolete computers.

D...uh...Do I have to be gentle with them? he asked the foreman.

Oh no, said the man.

Mikey smashed monitor after monitor, glass to dust, keyboards, esc and alt keys all in the mud. He was the sole perpetrator of a mass grave of old computers. He laughed, was a boy again for a day, and an ancient joy rode out inside him.

And on one interesting morning Mikey walked to the back, same as usual, dragging hoses with his torch over one shoulder, but today there was a tapping sound. Mikey stopped and looked towards the big excavator claw that was piling a mountain of refrigerators. Walter, the man who worked the claw, was waving and beating on the glass in front of his little cockpit area. Mikey squinted at him. Walter was certainly very animated and frantic. Then the tapping made sense when Mikey felt his face seize up and the tubes in his throat and chest strangulate each other. He bent to the gravel and retched without sound or air. It seemed as though his lungs were congealing, that he was drowning on land. Mikey tried to describe it to John later: like someone poured engine coolant down into your lungs. Walter got out of the claw covering his face and helped Mikey hobble to some oxygen. Walter had punctured an old refrigerator with his claw and Mikey walked into the invisible leak of freon and ammonia. Every breath he had of this mess was about the same as smoking ten packs of darts, Walter said at lunch. One thing Mikey did enjoy about working at a dump was how you could litter wherever you pleased.

But there was a new person at the dump. This was surprising. It was morning and the sun was huge and uncompromising on the horizon. Mikey was cutting some sandy steel

plates. You had to manipulate the dials on the torch to get the correct ratio of oxygen and acetylene, spark it up, concentrate it on the steel until you get a little white-hot bead and slowly coax this bead along with the torch to achieve a cut. The sand from the plates would alight and fly up in little hurricanes to funnel down under his work gloves. He paused to straighten his back and howl, and then saw a beautiful girl with braids and a clipboard walking towards him with the sun behind her. Her outline burned into Mikey's brain. Sweet Jesus who is that and what is going on around here, Mikey thought.

Because it was so hot she was wearing her coveralls wide open with a sports-bra underneath.

This is a mirage, he concluded. I haven't drank enough water. Or this is an acid flashback. I am having a mirage-acid-flashback at the dump, thought Mikey.

Hi! the girl said. I'm Stella. Moo-Moo said you're Mikey. She stuck out her hand.

Yes, said Mikey. His safety goggles were fogged and leaking sweat condensation. She had bangs and braids and freckles and one dimple was a little bit bigger than the other when she looked at Mikey.

Oh God, thought Mikey.

He said something abrupt like: What are you doing here? Or: What can I do for you?

I'm doing a Masters at the university. I'm taking soil samples, Stella said, and held up an expensive looking stick-device instrument. The university, she said again, when Mikey was quiet, staring at her then the stick.

The university, he said slowly. He took his hardhat off.

This is an interesting place, thought Stella.

Mikey said: Well it's nice to talk with you Stella, my blowtorch is frigged.

But it wasn't. He went over into the empty water tank with a rectangular door hole blowtorched out of it that served as their equipment shed. He sat up on the workbench and let his work-boots swing under it. Sweat fell off his nose and landed in dots on his pants. Rust hung in stalactites and grew around him like soft orange fungus.

Phew, said Mikey. Phew.

Anna liked to ride the metro alone at night. She imagined she was in a great movie. She felt this was what it meant to be in the city, the light and noise of the city coming in shafts, the neon loneliness, the music or cadence of the city grumbling up into her genitals. Anna wore a big toque and sat there reading *Anna Karenina* trying to feel smart.

This is how people think she thought as she read. This is exactly how people think, I think. Then she was thinking too much and dug her bookmark back in the crease after only two paragraphs. She squeezed the fat book in both hands and slapped it against her knees. I don't know if I can do this, she thought. The unopened manuscript on her table almost certainly contained the latest rejection of her novel. She had written a mystery novel but the twist was you never find out who did it. We don't deserve the truth! Anna was adamant about this plot feature.

How many books can we say absolutely need to exist? she thought to herself on the metro, watching a passing train. Scream out of the cave. The Bible, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, maybe this one here, maybe one more, she counted them off on her hand. Oh, *Huckleberry Finn*. But not many.

She didn't think she was a writer. She didn't read enough, she didn't keep a journal, she didn't drink much tea, dipping the bag pensive and blowing away on tea all day. But writing was her last attempt to prove that despite the last eight or ten years, she was not an idiot. She worried everyone would find out she was an idiot and ironically, writing made her feel like the number one idiot around. All she really had was a good memory, and anyway she stole all her stories from other people who were too busy and vested in their interesting lives to document them. Who ran around on Xans and fucked everybody and got internships in Barcelona.

But then Anna thought, no I really should read more. Levin was trying to read a book about heat and electricity but his mind was sliding away to his cows and dreaming about the future:

Splendid! And I and my wife will go out with our guests to see the herd come in...

Yes, doesn't it go just like that, Anna agreed, then promptly thought about a bear and rolled her shoulders inward. The bear memory was summoned out and it hit her right between the eyes in an empty metro train car with an empty water bottle slowly rolling towards her feet at 11:30 p.m.

This bear was a young black bear, fairly little for a bear. He had a playful energy and he trotted up out of the blueberries onto the road like a dog greets a car coming down the laneway.

Anna was eighteen and tree-planting near Fort Nelson, BC. The sun came up at 1 a.m. there. There were wolves, bear, moose, someone saw a cougar. Anna saw a large snake

whipping its tail around with a frog sticking out of its mouth, and she jumped. A few hours later she saw the same snake again, with more of the frog its mouth, the frog ribbiting blood and still not ready to die.

This is their place, not mine, she thought.

She found out what it was to be tired, vomit across the hood of a F-350 tired, sleep with an inch of ice-mud in her tent tired. The bottom of her foot was hard enough she could put cigarettes out on it. She lost nine out of ten toenails that summer which made a tiny pedicurist start crying when this sweet young girl put her feet from hell in the pedicurist's lap. However, Anna found a certain freedom was afforded by not checking your email and shitting in the woods.

When hot days found their merciful ends Anna would sit in the dirt by the road, a thin vein cut through a continent of sphagnum moss that curled over a corner of the globe. She found the perfect seat once, the sandy ditch fit her lower back and hamstrings exactly. And in the five minutes before the truck came to pick her up she thought: before she might be bored to wait for five minutes by herself with nothing to do, but now, just how lovely it was to have five minutes to do nothing, how perfect to be bored, half-asleep in the dirt.

On the drive home back down and across Canada the bear trotted out like a happy dog and Anna loved him and put her hand up to the window and then he was absolutely creamed by the truck behind them. He cartwheeled like a teddy-bear along the middle of the road and came to a stop on his back with his tummy zippered open perfectly from neck to bowels as if a surgeon had sliced him. There were berries all over the road from

his stomach that didn't exist anymore and his intestines, now outside him, moved, writhed like a pile of snakes. Planters ran out of the trucks and everyone thought he must be dead, but then he raised his head up and put his paws up, covered his face like a human might. The young man who drove the truck that hit him held the bear's head in his hands and cried, the ears sticking out between his thumbs and pointer-fingers. The bear swallowed and died bravely. After a while, a foreman said we probably shouldn't be on the highway too long and the young man and his friend dragged the bear to the ditch and crossed themselves, t-shirts smeared in bears' blood.

The metro door slid open and Anna walked out and up, the empty metro station a mausoleum, the life rolling away from the bear's eye.

Kirby forgot something as he left the house, so he swung around on the heel of his boot, went back into the house and picked up what he'd forgotten, then he walked back out to the laneway and remembered he'd forgotten something else, so he swung around again and went back in the house again. He considered punching a hole through the house. Across the field he could see John bringing in the hay. Then Kirby's phone went off, again, rumbling and chirping. On this government-issued phone there were now nineteen work emails since he woke up. The emails all described talk of reaching out, further to the above noted matter, I refer you to the action plan, etc., and ended with cheers or regards or best.

He watched John out in his tractor for a minute. John got off his tractor and began launching bales up onto the wagon. Fat green bales, carrying two at a time and sending

them up through the air with frightening ferocity for this early an hour. It was alarming how strong he was, and hard to watch him work without being reminded that you sit all day. Kirby looked back at his phone when it starting making more noises and rumbles. He pushed and clicked away at it to make it stop. How these messages and meetings did anything to address systemic issues of oppression, he'd like if someone broke it down for him soon.

Kirby wanted to help people. This was his covenant, his blood-oath. His world was bullies and bullied.

In grade seven, when the French teacher asked what will you be when you grow up, Kirby did not say NHL player, or fireman, or veterinarian, he said— help people. Aide les personnes. Instantly he said it and lowered his eyes.

He was a small, pleasant boy, who wore glasses since he was two, and had the same hemisphere of mushroom cut on his head then as all the other boys, except for those whose hair was too curly, like Mikey.

The French teacher said, Ah, comme un...peut être un diplomate Kirby?

Oui, Madame. He would be a diplomat then. If that meant someone who welcomed dying, crippled, faceless skeletal forms clad in rags, fed them boiled potatoes with a wooden spoon, held them in his arms as he was not afraid of their sores and disfigurements. He would hide them away from Nazis, polluters and his father. He would change a few things about the way things were.

And then John, out there in his tractor, wanted everything to stop changing. He was, and he was supposed to be, a farmer. Not a coder, not a social media marketing coordinator. His progeny should farm on into forever, farming the dead farm with the fences needing to be tightened and the barn collapsing with the next snow and no milk quota. He was bygone— John was a remnant, bringing in the last of the measly second cut. A hundred years ago there'd be tall-tales written about him. He could raise a barn and then get shit-drunk off moonshined forest-whisky at some fiddling jamboree a few towns over. Dance across the logs each spring in the drive and tell the government to fuck off, if he ever saw it around. Maybe he'd come across a postman or a country reeve on his horse once or twice in his life and that'd be all he knew of any government interference. He'd be on his own. He could be a farm-king, a lumber-king even, a strongman, a wrecker of dance-hall benches.

But, of course, those days were dead. And John's farm was grown up in bush and he stood in it useless. Like someone had reached in, through and around his crops and cattle, and ripped his dick off. Take a good long look— he would certainly be the very last of anyone like him.

Peace had told Kirby to tell John to stop using fertilizer.

Well, no, John said.

It's cross-contaminating into her garden, Kirby pointed at the raised beds by the fence. She can't say they're organic at the market.

No one can say their shit is organic around here, said John.

Kirby looked at him.

I can stop using fertilizer but the fertilizer from the McKenzies, John pointed across the road, is gonna blow over onto my crops anyway. So they're not organic. Same with hormones and shit with the cows. The cows looked over at Kirby and John like they knew they were being talked about.

Like your fertilizer blows into her garden, said Kirby.

Yes, said John. And if there was no fertilizer at all, my crops would be dogshit and I'd be even more fucked than I am now. Which is fucked, he added.

She just doesn't want it in her garden. That's all I know.

John looked exhausted. There were old salt lines from sweat on his hat and bits of alfalfa stuck to his shirt.

Does she want to sell organic gourds at the Sunday Farmers' Market?

She does, said Kirby.

I got work to do buddy, said John, and he launched another humongous bale up onto the wagon.

Kirby stopped at the Fearnoch Convenience for a big dirty styrofoam cup of coffee because Peace had forbid all coffee. He plunged on the big thermos and it just coughed and pissed a tiny stream, then stopped.

They're a little slow on the bit here today, said the old-timer behind him, Mr. Mulrooney, with his great stained beard and rubber boots clumped up in cow-shit. Kirby agreed.

At work there was a meeting, and then another meeting and his boss Mrs. Tremblay came down from the floor above to tell Kirby and Kirby's team their project was being put on ice. They'd move to a different file for the time being. Several co-workers threw their pens in the air and sighed, but Kirby was secretly relieved.

We're going to have to switch gears with the election, Mrs. Tremblay said. We'll circle back to this file. Tall and imposing with giant shoulder pads in her mauve blazer, she went on a smoke break.

Kirby got the job in large part through the clout of his sympathetic uncle, who was a high-ranking public servant. During the interview process he was asked questions such as—describe a scenario in the area of communication in which you excelled. Describe a scenario in the area of communication in which you faced challenges. In a year he was bridged in, off probation and he'd pretty well have to murder someone to get fired. He thought his salary was ridiculous for what he did. If he wanted, he could sit and look at his fantasy hockey team and complain with the others then leave at three o'clock, as some people did. Which is not to say everyone there was lazy; the hardworking were the most miserable, stuck in the mud, another project dissolved, another million thrown at some horse-shit.

He didn't want the job because that was selling out. But, Peace argued with a finger in the air, you can change the system. She swung her leg over him and sat in his lap.

Like a Trojan Horse, Kirby, she said and put her nose against his. And furthermore, she reasoned, the best place to start the change would be right in that little shit hick town of yours. Kirby had inherited some McHugo land.

Kirby thought about his dad, bared his teeth and then said yes. They couldn't scare him out of Fearnoch— fuck them. Now he and Peace could buy a house and leave their anarchist punk commune in the worst part of Vanier downtown with the electricity getting shut off and the hot water sputtering and rusty and the homeless shitting and OD-ing behind the dumpsters across the treeless boulevard.

I'll plant carrots! said Peace. I'll have hens. But so far Kirby had not found a way to effect any change at the government. He tried to find a way to find out more about the file he was working on without betraying the fact he didn't know more about his file.

Shoot an email to the new RO4, said Mrs. Tremblay. And an email to the RO3. Is this about the PCC on Friday? I'll shoot an email to HR.

Kirby had no idea what she was saying.

I feel like I'm not being very helpful, he said. Ma'am.

Mrs. Tremblay was clacking violently on her keyboard.

Don't worry McHugo. We can put you on the bench for a bit, while you get caught up on the new file. Take some mental health days if you need— you look like shit.

John liked to take his boy for tractor rides, sometimes on his grandpa's International 434 and thought his boy liked it too. He put Johnny on his knees and let him steer along the lane.

I think I am a good dad, John thought. Is this what good dads do? Jesus I am fucking tired. A country song played on the portable radio in the tractor and it was a very bad country song. It was all about beer, chicken, good dogs and old jeans you really like. John

put his chin on the top of Johnny's soft head for a minute. He was embarrassed that the song perfectly described all the stuff he cared about. He was just singing one long shitty sentimentalist country ballad. Just shoot the 30 odd 6 and make maple syrup.

I'm desperately passionate about all that, thought John. Beer by my mailbox and fenceposts.

And he took his son around his kingdom. They circumnavigated the Younghusband rectangle of the earth that had grown now six Johns.

John's father was out in the Northeast field with the cows. He was always frigging around with something and had no idea how to sit inside and fade by the wood stove. They had thirty-three head, which wasn't very much. Most of the yearlings were sold off, they kept a few heifers and steers and separated the calves from their mothers to get them off the milk. The calves and their mothers watched each other through the fence, making long mournful moaning consternations back and forth that continued to drive Kirby and Peace insane. And now an untended fence had rotted right through and a bull from the next farm got in with the calves. Johnny pointed towards his grandpa with a pink popsicle.

The farm was laid out in long thin fields. Thin ribbons of land was the Younghusband way. It wasn't great land for farming, it wasn't deep and loamy. What could be furrowed was, and the cows sat and ate where it was too rocky for the plow. One area in the middle of the property, which the cows had trampled and grazed to the roots, right down to the

folds of Devonian limestone, and everything canopied by these whorled-over hardy bastard sickly trees, always reminded John of something from the Bible. Like a place in the Holy Land for lambs and sermons. There was an untidy and unplanned community of buildings: the house where John and Polly lived with the one healthy elm tree left blooming over the house magnificent, the modified three-season cottage where his dad lived, several outbuildings, a silo, barns and sheds, a pighouse, chickenhouse, icehouse, all of them old, many bowing back penitent into the ground. On the foundations of the first John's cabin, or what they claimed were the foundations of the cabin, there was now a cattle-feeder wheel next to a hay-wagon with a broken axle. The old brick farmhouse the third John built, that John eyed suspiciously for ghosts when he was little, was at the back near the train-tracks and far from the road it predated by many decades.

John and Mikey and Kirby had investigated every acre of the farm when they roamed around as boys trying to have adventures. They built a fort that coyotes later took as their den. They threw snowballs at chickens, pigs, porcupines and then felt terrible. They had fistfights and once Kirby fell and cut his shin open and John decided they should camp there for the night as their friend could not go on and began trying to construct a bivouac until Mikey convinced him they should just go tell his dad, who, really, was just over there by the barn. John enlightened them on what he knew of French-kissing and they debated trying it on each other before trying it on girls.

I'm gonna frigging French-kiss you Mikey right now and get it over with! John caught him by the ear.

No! Mikey howled and swung his arms.

These activities always involved climbing over a series of fences, something that was never Mikey's strength. He'd get stuck on the fence, John on one side, Kirby the other, both of them laughing, another pair of Mikey's pants ruined on the barbed wire.

Now here John's dad was trying to separate a cream-coloured calf from the bull. The calf was headstrong, insistent on going under and trying to nurse from the bull and seemed confused as to why that was a problem. The formidable bull looked around, indignant and in need of an explanation.

John's dad fell over and the calf evaded him. The old man sat with his head hanging between his knees on the stubbled field and kept his head there when he waved to the boys on the tractor. His shirt was ripped up. John swung down off the tractor and stuck his hand out for his dad to take. He thought about brushing his back off, but reconsidered, maybe that was condescending. John's dad had a small laugh when he got up and gestured at the calf.

He thought he found the best udder around.

Together they led the bull back to his personal pasture and wired the fence shut. John slapped the unruly calf on the back, and it jumped and trotted in a circle. Its enormous beguiling brown eyes were new and innocent to the world, and eye-lashed like a prom queen's.

You frigger, he said, little frigger. What a gorgeous calf it was. He remembered when he was a boy he saw a calf such as this, creamy and perfect, but lying dead and abandoned against a shed with flies landing on its eyes. The other cows grazed past and

around it unaffected, no time to mourn. John told his Dad in a panic and then started crying.

Don't look, his dad said, don't look at it. John put his face into his dad's dusty plaid coat.

At night after Johnny had settled, John and Polly would have long serious talks up into the darkness. She'd sniff and the pillow would be wet and he knew she was crying.

I will sell once Dad dies—I will. I can't do it while he's alive, John said. He rubbed Polly's shoulder blade over the comforter. And I'll look into the school-bus driving job.

You'll be sad forever, said Polly.

Also Anna and Matthias were having serious talks. Or trying to have serious talks but perhaps letting it die without a serious talk. Anna had only ever been dumped; she had never dumped anyone. I wonder what that's like, dumping someone, she thought. Maybe it's harder. Sometimes. Maybe I'll try it one day; I should try it. She thought of old relationships, where she was gun-shy, wading in slowly and trying not to slip on a rock. Darren or Darrell or Jean-Luc would say, come on Anna, it's fine! It's great.

And she'd breathe and say, OK here we go, and he'd take her hand lovingly and help her up over a wall, and then, up over the wall, she'd fall down and plummet towards a bunch of poisoned sticks.

When she met Matthias he made her feel like she might be OK in the city. He knew how to offer his arm and navigate the glowing beast. He kissed her at Christmas party under a balcony where they were smoking because it was snowing wet and horizontal. It

was surprising and exciting and they both had their hoods up. The snow slid through the cracks in the boards on the balcony and wound over their mouths and cigarettes. He was small, sweet and just balding a little bit. Anna could put her face against his soft shirts and feel calm for a minute. But that was all two years ago. He did not enjoy any talk of the future. He was thirty-four and never said dating, only hanging out. And he was the worst snow-shoveller she'd ever seen.

But that wasn't fair. Matthias was usually very nice and they did nice things—sleeping in, gallery openings, brunch and bubble tea and shit. He contended that capitalism and climate change had fucked everything anyway so why bother. He said New York would be under the sea in ten years. It was cruel to have kids at this point. Anna wanted kids but she kept her mouth shut and considered her chequing account and the effects of Adderall on babies. Well, said Anna, maybe they can build dykes, I want to go to New York.

She immediately submitted to an electric fuchsia fantasy squeezing a wet dishrag in the kitchen about kissing someone in the rain in Manhattan and then felt bad because the tall shadowy stranger she was kissing definitely wasn't Matthias.

He offered advice on her novel, but he was skeptical about a mystery that is never solved. Anna frustrated easily on this matter.

It's because everyone says they're looking for the truth but they're not, they want what they think is the truth to be the truth, they don't wanna budge, you know?! she said.

OK, said Matthias, somewhat rattled. But I think people read mysteries to find out who did it.

They don't deserve it. We don't deserve it. We want it easy so...we can't have it.

Anna looked at her Word document and wanted to cry. She stood up, stuck her arms out, rotated them in violent counter-clockwise circles and said grrrrrrrr at her computer.

I am so tired of words, she thought. Most of them don't mean anything anymore. And I'm finished examining anything under any type of lens.

The writing was slow, just sitting and sitting until something shit out, reluctant. Although, now and then, usually late at night, she'd have a blessed moment where it felt right, and she knew it was right, and she felt drunk even, and she'd go outside into the night listening to rap on her headphones like she was heading to a party.

Later she said sorry to Matthias, sorry if I was mean.

Why don't you ever take me to Fearnoch, he said.

You don't really wanna go. I don't want to go.

I wanna do something honky-tonky!

Anna sat on the floor, spread her legs and tried to see if she could still touch her forehead to the rug. She would have liked a cat to sit on her back.

Nothing has ever happened there, she said. I guess there's inbred people if you're into that. Then she remembered poor old cow-eyed Wilson and felt even more mean.

Matthias reminded her about the poetry recital he was organizing. Anna thought about six undergrads on antidepressants speaking about themselves at a cafe, and wondered when did she ever get so mean.

Anna also worked at a diner but her French wasn't too strong, and she got embarrassed a lot. It was called Café Plus. There were a lot of eggs and beans, everything very wet and sliding around on the plates, and small tables with napkin dispensers and condensation-rings from an endless anthology of *Bleue Drys*. Pie, entire or a great creamy wedge, was popular among the patrons. The cook yelled and the manager yelled and she'd just stand in her apron covered in sauce and take it. Once she dropped one of those old bulbous coffee pots and wasn't prepared for it to detonate like a bomb on the tiles. Glass shrapnel propelled in a generous radius, and the diners adjusted their hearing-aids and looked at each other terrified.

One of the waitresses had been in the industry almost 50 years. A half century of buckling orthopaedic shoes covered in ketchup, the broom and dustpan, stoking the coffee makers with Maxwell House brown dust like a coal-worker in the bowels of the *Titanic*, sitting on the bucket by the dumpster and smoking at 2 a.m.

She was Yvette: never to be fucked with. Tales of a former life were tattooed in birds, names and greening roses that wound up both arms, up and lost into the sleeves of her black polyester v-necked waitress' blouse. She had a small silver flower studded into her nose, and spread makeup thick on her face that had been tanned and trenched with cigarettes. Yvette carried herself straight-forward and proud through the universe, her pencil behind her ear, glasses on a chain, licking her thumb and stabbing the receipts on the spike. She had the same portion of emphysemic kindness waiting to be ladled out for everyone, a blind ninety-year-old pensioning regular who'd be leaving them soon or an oxycontin-addicted laid-off drywall installation worker. Anna didn't know much about her

past but imagined drugs and motorcycles. She did know that Yvette wished her daughter would reconnect.

There was a new girl at the cafe Anna was supposed to help train in. Her name was Maria-Jose. She was very small and gorgeous, she had a ponytail coming out one side and just bounced around the cafe with perfect skin, her hands behind her back and a warm interest in everything. She is pulchritudinous, thought Anna, finding the word. Oh I think that word's still good, she thought, a word I can chew. Maybe this is a new friend? How about that!

But Maria-Jose missed a shift, then another, and the manager licked his lips and relished in firing her. He loved a good firing.

Then there was a newer girl, Océane, who from the first day was cruel to Anna. At least, that was what Anna had concluded. Something about tips, or maybe Anna had said something, or maybe it was just something to do. I'm a pretty easy target, she thought. Océane was tall, also beautiful, but with a severe and officious ponytail, not a playful one like Maria-Jose's. Nothing about Océane was out of place, not one hair, and she was comfortable to return Anna's questions with silence. She'd stuff her notepad into the pocket of her apron, irked and precise. Maybe this was just how she was to everyone, thought Anna, beautiful and icy.

But Yvette noticed Océane wouldn't tell Anna what on earth was happening with Table Three and said, Suis moi, Océane, and took her to the closet behind the bar with all the coffee filters and fake Christmas tree segments. Whatever Yvette said in there, a dif-

ferent Océane came out of the closet, eyes like she'd seen a horror movie, and Yvette followed blasting four cataclysmic coughs into her fist. Océane was different to Anna then, and maybe there'd be a new friend after all.

Yvette said: Anna you drink Lowenbrau?

Non Yvette. It's beer?

I had one. Tiens...put a Labatt's Blue on your workbench there for three day, she stuck up three thick pale fingers, then drink it. This is Lowenbrau.

You see, there is poetry everywhere, Anna thought to herself.

Yvette said she'd like to meet Anna's mother. Which made Anna think about her mother. I would say to her you are this...Yvette paused and looked at her phone, then read out: conscientious. She grinned up at Anna, like to say: that wasn't so bad getting that ridiculous English word out.

Anna didn't know if anyone cared about Yvette. She didn't think the world noticed Yvette. The old woman was invisible, people looked past her, through her, on their way to someone or something else. She is the backbone, her and people like her, and nobody knows it, thought Anna. She wanted to put her hands on Yvette's tired shoulders, on the old polyester, and say that she mattered very much.

Sometimes John would get hit by the premonition that Mikey'd just killed himself. He'd take the dog up to get the mail, or look around for some twine, or eat a jam-jam, and

he'd intuit it through an eerie shift in the breeze. That's it, I'll bet Mikey just killed himself just then.

Mikey had to go to the Royal Ottawa Hospital, when they were little, to talk about his feelings. He'd be missing from school for weeks. Whatever problems he had, he poured booze all over them by the time they got to high-school. John thought Mikey wanted everyone to like him, that was his problem, but everyone did like him. Yet he hid in his hermitage in the loft with his books and no-more-than-four-pints policy, and his dead cat and dead plant.

John would call or drive to his house to make sure Mikey wasn't hanging somewhere spinning slowly. I didn't kill myself John! Mikey shouted once from behind the wood-pile.

John remembered old Mikey stories when he was out making turns in his tractor. He laughed to himself, grinning and shaking with his plaid shirt tucked into his jeans.

Once they stuffed him into the back of a lady's car. She was not excited about it. Mikey had imbibed a hospitalization-worthy level of rum in the quarry. He lay like he'd been shot, supine in his underwear by the fire. Somebody's mum came to pick up her daughter from this demonic pit of shadows, and nobody could have been too excited to have their sons and daughters down there. Somebody thought it was Mikey's mum beating the horn and headlights into the quarry and also Mikey looked like he could use some attention. So, four drunk boys carried the drunkest boy up to the car and stuffed him in the backseat where he lay half-naked, wet and unresponsive. They folded his legs in, slammed the door and went back down into the pit, ignoring or not hearing this lady.

I don't know this person, I don't know this person, what is this?!

John shook in his tractor. Maybe he shouldn't laugh, but Jesus Mikey.

As Mikey saw it then, you were supposed to drink a lot and party a lot, that was the way in Fearnoch, and he worked very hard at it. Also being fucked from drugs and beer really filled a hole for him. He always had a headache, there was always too much noise, always too much information firing in and around from the moment you woke up until bedtime and everyone talking and talking, but not if he could just cast off pleasantly into beer and substances.

He aspired to be a dreamy dark complex boozier. He applied himself; soon he could drink a whole 2-4, which was a rare distinction. He could open a can of beer by smashing it against his head. After high-school he continued to drink a lot even if there wasn't a party. He went over to John's to watch a Sens game with a bottle, drank the entire 26er bottle before the third period was over and there was absolutely no change in his demeanor from before he'd started drinking the bottle, which, to John, was alarming.

Mikey gobbled, snorted, smoked anything: cocaine, crack, MDMA, ketamine, dihydrocodeine. Once he took a potent combination of these things and took a voyage, an explorer pioneering into a different dimension. He lay on the floor in the basement at someone's house and screamed and everyone was yelling at him to shut up and he thought yes someone is really making quite the racket and yelled at them to shut up too as he didn't know he was the one screaming.

John remembered a party at someone's hunting camp and two older boys who readied a mountain of drugs on the card-table by the stove.

We're gonna feed young Darling drugs until he goes insane, one of them said.

Mikey bumbled over, put his hands behind his back and pigged out on whatever was on the table then went missing in the woods for several hours. The next morning he returned and asked John what happened.

I've never seen anything like it, said John, who was laying a fire. You definitely weren't Mikey, you were someone different. You said the reason I'm drunk all the time is because I hate you all and you bore me.

Oh boy, said Mikey.

You talked about Susie a lot. You also ate a ton of raw pork.

Mikey held his stomach. Was Susie here?

Mikey talked about Susie a lot, the one girl from high-school he thought he was in love with, or as close to love as he knew how to feel, and then he'd promise John to stop talking about her, and John said, Oh sure Mikey.

Susie, tiny and outspoken, with her hair up in a knot and her jeans with the knees ripped out, in the smoking section at the school, telling the teacher to go fist herself. Whose dad put everything, his whole family, down the coin-slot at the VLTs. Who'd take Mikey's arm and take no shit from anything. Before too long she'd informed him she'd take none of his shit either. She said he was spineless and marched away and this word spineless followed him, orbited him like a lesser moon. Don't worry about Mikey, she said looking over her shoulder, he's spineless. He missed trying to make her laugh on the phone.

When Susie had finally said, OK Mikey I'll go out with you, he was shocked she would take off all her clothes, get in his bed and lie naked next to him, just like that. He nobly allowed that he'd give up drinking and drugs, his tortured ways. She probably just wanted to bang before moving to Toronto or someplace but there was Mikey, crouching and kissing her eyelids like a Romantics poet.

I'm spineless, Mikey said to John, babbling and drunk. I'm like a vampire. I don't think about anyone else's needs. I'm a vampire. My love is vampiric.

Frig off Mikey, John said. He looked at the moon, enormous and close and yellow.

There are child-slaves on earth, said Mikey also noticing the moon, which looked to be coming closer, and I cry because someone wants to fuck someone else.

C'mon now Mikey we're Fearnoch boys! We've got that Fearnoch charm about us, said John.

Maybe you ah dddo...I'm just some quif with a broken brain—and Mikey, not without a sense of timing, threw up in front of the Petro-Can.

The day he went to the dentist drunk was the day Mikey began to draft his no-more-than-four-pints legislation. He slept at John's house, he didn't remember anything about the night before except telling John's dad he had to go to the dentist at 9 o'clock the next day and eating his coke off a CD in the rain because it got wet. John's dad woke him up, said: Wake up Mikey, rubbing his shoulder, remember the dentist? And Mikey fell over trying to get his shoes on. He could smell his own mouth. He felt terribly sorry the dentist had to go anywhere near his mouth when he opened it.

However, a caveat to his new rule, was one day a year in late September he could get drunk with John. John had taken to calling the blessed day St. Mikey's Day, as in I'm getting fucked this St. Mikey's Day don't anyone even try to stop me. And mercifully, St. Mikey's Day was coming right up.

Now Mikey sat in his car in the Fearnoch Convenience and gas station parking lot. He had a gas station sub on the passenger seat. He hoped no one he knew would see him eating a gas station sub in his 2007 pre-owned Hyundai Accent with the door that didn't work because of the snow plow. A round hay baler knocked out its bales in the field behind the store. Mikey helped with the haying on this farm when he was a teenager, but it was the smaller square bales then, the ones for horses, which you had to sling by hand. He remembered blowing hay out of his nose in the bathtub and scratching it out of his hair. He looked back down at the sub. The plastic wrapping on it was puffed up hard. Puffed up like a fake tit, Mikey thought. A violent gas whined out when he tore the plastic.

This is grim, said Mikey. The sub said: spicy country-style chicken-n-rib sub. It contained chicken product and also chicken-flavouring agent.

The farmer from this farm where Mikey'd helped came out of the store. Joe Cheeseman: he was a great beast of man who'd always spooked Mikey. He held the door open for an old lady and the stuffing from his plaid coat hung from under the arm like an old mall Santa beard. Joe loved to put young lads to work, bark at them from the tractor,

and prove no one could slug the hay like they did when he was a young lad. Mikey got good and rattled when Joe bellowed at him for putting the hay in the straw's spot or the straw in the hay's spot. And for picking up a bale wrong so it busted from its twine, and for throwing up in the loft. The loft was a dark hot piece of hell and Mikey had never seen anyone so angry with a face so red. And the bales just kept coming up the conveyor. Joe would begin each day with Labatts 0.5 beer but, inevitable as moon and tide, at a certain point he'd say fuck, and rip into the box of his forbidden secret real beer.

Though when the haying was done and Mikey was laid out, shaking in the shade under the hay-wagon, Joe came over in a great mood, put his hand on his shoulder and said good lad, Mikey.

Joe's son, who everyone called Mush, followed his father out of the store also wearing a ripped up plaid coat also with Santa beard stuffing escaping it. He too was a giant.

Mush Cheeseman and his exploits were a big topic for people in Fearnoch. They talked about him like this: Oh. Mush. Fuck. Maybe with a beer halfway to their mouth.

Mikey didn't know why he was called Mush. He was older but failed a lot of classes so he was in Mikey's class sometimes. Mikey figured he was in about grade fifteen. Mush sat in the back, eyes hemorrhaged, his great face bloated up like he'd been stung with a blowfish. Stoichometry or Othello didn't bother him too much and besides soon he'd be making lots of money working in septic, and snow removal. He was full of confidence and advice.

Once John and Mikey both got dumped over the same weekend.

I'm done, said John. I'm done!

Mikey only stared into the hills.

They paddled to Champlain Island and unfolded their camping chairs out on the sand bar. In the rippled sand and zebra mussels, they revelled in their sadness, poured it all over, argued about who was sadder, let their beer cans float away to the sun. Then they were silent awhile, defeated and out of applicable words. And then one of Mikey's chair legs buckled and snapped and he was pitched onto his side in the river. He lay just as he'd fallen, motionless and resigned in an inch of water.

Just leave me here, he said.

John made no indication he'd even noticed the change in how Mikey was seated. He watched the horizon with his beer on his lap then got up, walked two steps away and arced a mighty and long piss towards the ripped-up sky and sun that died and bled in the river.

At this time Mush floated around the point, directly in front of and very close to John and his humongous piss.

Great, said Mush. He was winding in his fishing rod and it appeared he was sitting on a very small or even invisible boat, or that his pants were in fact, a boat.

What is that, said Mikey. He sat up in the water and put his hand over his eyes. Are your pants a boat?

Mush kicked himself out of a camo floating chair with hip waders built into the bottom of it. It was a chair-pants-boat for anglers. He moored up his pants-fish-chair-boat,

came ashore and took some of their beer. He drank many of them, and then shared his advice:

This is what you have to do. Meet a girl you really like...

Yes, said John.

...you spend time together and it's great and nice...

OK, said Mikey.

...and you both really like each other eh and it's going real well, then...

Ya, said John.

...then you just fucking dump her.

John and Mikey were quiet.

Outta nowhere, fucking dump her bud, said Mush in his indefensibly bad sunglasses emitting urgent greedy suckling sounds on the beer can.

What! said Mikey.

But that's all that I want! said John.

I'm sorry—you gotta dump her. Nothing is better for your confidence. That, to Mush, was the way forward.

Mikey made a splash lying back in the water. He thought he'd leave his head there in the mud and weeds for a while.

Pontoon-pantaloons, John said smiling at the pants-boat.

It got dark and still they were on the island.

Now Mush and his father spotted Mikey and came over to say, G'day Mikey.

Hello Joe, hello Mush, said Mikey, working on his sub. He thought about the new girl Stella at the dump and tried to hide all evidence of the sub. Probably she had a boyfriend who had a condo, good shirts and he's better than me at hockey.

And then an older woman, small and trembling, appeared on the other side of Mikey's car. The parking lot was frigging abuzz today and no one could sit and enjoy a secret shit rib sub.

Could you...uh could you...excuse me, she said. She moved a balled kleenex into her pocket. Mikey noticed she'd been crying. Her nose was red and she blinked a lot behind her glasses. Maybe something terrible had happened. She had the same ladies' haircut you saw bobbing around everywhere in Fearnoch. Bunched, fluffed like the underneath of a chicken and layered dyed parts and a frond of bangs insistent on her forehead. The wind was coming through the corn and messing this haircut around. She then held up a gas cap.

It broke off? Mikey got out of the car.

No, it won't go on. I thought you could do it maybe. It's always falling off, she said and sniffed.

Let me see. Mikey inspected the gas cap. It said on it: twist until clicks three times and had a little clockwise arrow.

The mechanics they sold me the bad one, the cheap one, she said. They know I don't know anything about cars. But I can bake pies, cake...she hovered over his shoulder as he looked at the cap then the hole on the tank.

That's also important, Mikey said. I think you just... He lined up the little nodes on the cap and tank, pushed on it and reefed on it clockwise and it clicked three times smartly.

There, he said. The cheap little gas cap sat snug on the tank.

Oh! she said and slapped him on the shoulder. Oh!

On the Friday night Kirby and Peace invited John and Mikey over for supper and a movie. They were trying to be friends. Polly didn't want to go and stayed home with the young lad. I don't wanna watch you and Kirby pretend to be friends, she said. It's sad.

Polly was tough. She was from the sticks; further up the line than this. She was small but tough, proud with big defiant dark eyes and she didn't like to sit still. John said she wasn't one for leisure. She'd been a champion barrel-racer on her pony when she was younger. She grew up on a farm too but didn't share John's romantic view of them; she was even-headed and saw the writing on the wall—both with the farm and with John and Kirby. Mikey always liked her. He remembered seeing her driving past his place well-pregnant with a calf in the back of her Toyota Tercel and wave at him embarrassed and once too pulling Johnny in a toboggan along the road during a blizzard.

Kirby's my friend, said John.

OK.

We've been friends since we were four. You've been...we've all been friends since we were four.

Can you take Johnny to bug-camp tomorrow cause I'm looking after him tonight? Or is it sports-ball...she looked at the calendar, no— bug-camp.

Yes.

No one seemed too excited about this evening, except maybe Peace who'd chosen the movie.

Imagine owning a house, thought Mikey in front of the door, owning a house. He decided he didn't want to say very much tonight. I will ask people about themselves, that's how we're supposed to talk to people.

John left his rubber boots out on the porch and it looked like hay was growing out of all the shit stuck to the bottom of them. I'll be nice tonight, he said to himself. Remember.

Kirby opened the door a little unsure why he'd arranged all this. Let's just have a nice time OK, he said. We're going to have make-your-own pizzas.

John handed Kirby a box of beer. OK fuckin-eh make-your-own pizzas. Do we have to talk about class struggle? he asked.

Yes, called Peace, who'd heard from the kitchen.

Mikey thought: so, we have a conservative farmer, and these activism hosts, and whatever I am, catatonic wastrel, together for supper and a movie. But they sat at the same table, children from the same god, busied with pizza construction, getting flour everywhere. Peace and Kirby had put out bowls of exciting things like pea-shoots, prosciutto and pears.

I am really going for it over here, said John. He had flour up in his eyelashes. I mean I am really givin' 'er on this one. Eh Mikey. His pizza, obese with meat, sagged when he moved it onto a tray.

Me too, said Mikey, creator of pizza worlds, looking down at his firmament, threatening another mittful of cheese. Thank you for this, he looked up at his hosts and Peace spun towards him with her arms wrapped around a large book. It had a padded dark green cover and Palmistry written in gold on it. Before Mikey could say how are you now Peace, as he was planning, she said: Mikey. Can I read your palm?

Uh, he said. It's got a lot of cheese on it.

She held his hand gently on her knee and consulted the book. Mikey's hand was cheesy, and also singed and bubbled by blowtorch sparks. He closed his hand without thinking and she cracked it back open.

What's your astrological sign? she asked.

The one with the bull.

Do you have any Chinese heritage?

What?

She blew flour off the pages. With one finger she traced along Mikey's palm and the other she traced along the words. This says you should be Chinese. She thumbed through the pages and wrinkled her forehead, mouthing the words, then flipping back annoyed.

I'm just a white guy, Mikey said.

But what's your ethnic heritage?

I don't know. Ireland, Wales...places like that. I guess maybe someone was Chinese at some point. Mikey was puzzled, having long assumed while the Chinese were inventing writing and gunpowder, his ancestors were shitting behind rocks covered in mould and moss in a part of the world with mists the sun never punctured.

There's a new girl at my work, he said. He had not meant at all to say this. He just sat back and felt the words fall out and thought oh boy here I am saying something.

A girl! said John.

Is she pretty, asked Peace without lifting her head.

She's so pretty it's offensive. This is offensive to me.

Are you going to talk to her? Kirby said.

I don't know. No.

A girl, said John again.

Peace continued her inquiry of the hand, squeezing it against her billowy pants that had elephants embroidered on them. There's goddamn puss and blisters all through your line of heart, she said. I can't read this right now. She gave him his hand back. Then Mikey, who was starting to feel OK about talking tonight, for now, had an idea.

Kirby, he said, you still work with those kids at the community centre?

No, said Kirby, looking out the window through the bush towards the community centre and remembering for a minute a time when he felt he was helping people. But it paid thirteen dollars an hour.

Do they need volunteers? said Mikey.

I could ask, said Kirby. You know I think Polly volunteers there with the Women's Institute. He looked at John.

She does, she does everything, John said, nodding along in a rocking-chair.

You want to volunteer Mikey? Kirby asked. With disadvantaged kids?

Well, he said, I helped someone the other day you know.

Who?

I helped a lady at the gas station with her gas cap. I put it on. It was great.

OK. Um, that's good... Buddy some of these kids are profoundly damaged.

Sure. Mikey got quieter. All I do is cut steel and sleep above the garage. And Mrs. MacPherson is dead.

Talk to Polly. Sure they need help. You need a criminal record check and I think there's a drug test.

Mikey stared at the ceiling with sauce all over his chin and recalled an altercation with an elk when he was a dishwasher snowboarder coke-head one winter in Banff. And then all the cold nights in the drunk-tank using his shirt as a pillow.

I don't do drugs anymore, he said. I have a Labatt 50 after hockey.

We are shit at hockey, said John.

How are you though Kirby? Mikey said suddenly, remembering to ask how people were.

I'm good, said Kirby. He wanted to say his fucking sperm had finally done its job, but it was too early yet.

Peace had chosen the film because it featured one Kenneth Wasserman, from whom she'd taken an acting workshop when she lived in Toronto. It was set in a smoky future world of planetary apocalypse and geopolitical strife. They sat full of pizza in the dark focusing on all the explosions, subterfuge and sex.

What the hell is going on, said John after another car-bomb went off. I thought he was already dead. Are we in the past? Where's Wasserman?

Shhh, said Peace. That group is murdering all the rich people. I think. She tucked her toes under her blanket.

Where are the North Koreans? whispered Kirby. The ones at the beginning.

Do you know, said John, Kim Jong-Un or whoever's assassins murdered his rival by smearing poison all over his face at the airport?

Poison smearing, Mikey said slowly.

Shh! said Peace.

On the face! said John. Imagine that— you're jet-lagged and hungover like in Newark and you take a big smear of poison on the face.

I swear...said Peace. But then yet another explosion lit the room orange and she said: Oh they got another one.

This is a hateful movie, John said. In fairness he may not have hated it if they were car-bombing communist dictators or terrorists instead.

You can't say they don't deserve it, said Peace.

Rich people?

Redistribute the wealth! She raised one fist out from under the blankets on the sofa.

You are the rich people, said John, forgetting he was going to be nice.

What? said Kirby.

If you want to car-bomb the rich people, and you look at the whole world and history, we should all car-bomb ourselves.

I mean the fabulously wealthy, said Peace. The oligarchy. She loved to say this word with contempt; to snarl it out. It felt good to be angry.

Ya, that's you and me, said John, also feeling it was good to be angry.

Kirby pressed pause and said: First of all this is going to be a nice evening. And second we are not the fucking rich people. Kirby pressed play and felt very good and angry.

John wanted to say that Kirby got paid 80K a year of tax-payers' money to check his email, but he held back and considered how much of his pizza he'd just eaten. Instead he said: So we car-bomb the ten evil billionaire oligarchs who are ruining everything and take their money and then everything's perfect forever for everyone.

OK, said Peace, giving John a sinister grin.

Mikey thought he should try to change the conversation so he said to Kirby, almost in a whisper: My plant is dying.

Not Robert Plant, said Kirby.

It's so simple and superb, said John, still hot in the ears, take all the money and you decide how to redistribute it. A perfect idea.

Kirby pushed pause again.

You can't say it's fair, he said. We gotta do something, we have to— together we have to rise up and take—

How about you collectivize my farm and send me and Mikey to the gulags? said John. Mikey remembered when he was told it was rude to talk about politics, which seemed very long ago now, and also wondered why he had to go to the gulag too. John gave in to the teasing he told himself he wasn't going to do.

You and Peace can start a war and turn Fearnoch into your paradise.

Fuck Fearnoch and fuck you, John, Peace said. She was exceptional at confrontation and never backed down from her aggressors. She took the remote from Kirby and pressed play and then threw it across the room so the batteries busted out the back of it.

John looked at Mikey and Mikey was silent. You people just wanna rise up because it feels good, John thought. But then he reflected on all the things he did because they felt good. He left it: he was supposed to be nice. One battery rolled slowly into the kitchen.

And then Wasserman finally made his appearance. He was a policeman in a police car on an overnight stakeout eating a bag of chips. The house he was watching exploded and Wasserman said fuck and set down the chips.

That's Kenneth! said Peace.

Wasserman! cheered John. Sets down the chips!

Wasserman screamed in the radio and fishtailed out of his only scene in the movie.

After the movie, Peace was in a rotten mood and went into the kitchen to make tea for herself.

So North Korea takes over the world? John asked, staring at the blank screen, wondering exactly what happened.

Fuckin-eh, said Kirby.

Then a mug smashed and Peace yelped. She had poured her tea quickly and angrily and scalded her hand. She sat down on the kitchen floor and cried, holding her hand. Perhaps it was more from frustration than pain that she cried. Kirby got the broom out. John crouched to look at her hand.

Here, he said. Put it under cold water. He touched her hand, but she pulled it away. A purple discolouration in the shape of a peanut spread at the base of her thumb.

I'm fine John. She sniffed. I'm fine OK.

Thank you for the pizza, said Mikey, breaking his silence.

When John and Mikey left, Peace said with her hand under the tap: Do you hate John? I think I might hate John. Really. And Mikey's fucked, you can tell. Later she said, that film was pretty shitty though.

John didn't want to go home to Polly and Johnny yet and asked Mikey if they could drive around for a while and just smoke. Let's go to that forest at the end of Fourth Line there, he said. Do you have any fucking Cinquante in here? he said rooting around in the back of Mikey's 2007 pre-owned Hyundai Accent.

Now by the dark forest and freed from Kirby and Peace, John could fume a bit and he spat out his words on the bush. Does the whole world just love bullshit now? Is that movie the kind of shit people like? Am I going crazy? Jesus we are fucked eh. Sorry I'm grumpy, Mikey, why don't you ever say anything!? He booted a small log into the distance and drank his Labatt 50.

Mikey considered an old rap song and after a while said: I ain't a shot-caller just another motherfucker in the crew.

John sat on the edge of the forest, then lay on his back in the wet clover with his beer up on his knee. He put his hands under his head and surveyed his township between his knees. The fields were silver by the moon and rolled down into the river. They were alive with moon and whispers, crickets and frogs. Cattle lowed and John could have cried.

Our ancestors worked in these fields with no teeth and their fucking spines bent in half, John said. There would be no fields and no Kirby...just a tiny bit of gratitude...he pinched off and held up a single stalk of hay.

My Grandpa Darling's job at the mill was to push a button at nine, drink rye, push the same button again at 5, then go home, said Mikey.

Gratitude, John repeated. He tasted the delicate forgotten word. Do you know what I mean Mikey, he twisted to look at his friend.

Gratitude, said Mikey.

Yes. The whole past, all of it is only something to rise up against. Rise up— what do they know. Kirby and his pension... Rise up Mikey! And he tried to hand him the hay stalk. Mikey didn't say anything.

You used to talk a lot more, said John.

I was drunk all the time, said Mikey.

John took a huge performative drink out of his beer.

I'll talk with you John, sure. But know that I don't know anything, like most people, and I'd like to make a case for silence, Mikey said.

I'm lonely, John said. I was friends with Kirby. Now I'm a pig racist land-rapist.

Everyone is only trying to do the best they can, with what they have, said Mikey. He was thoughtful and looking up into the ribboned indigo blinking worlds and galaxies and oort clouds over the forest and field. We all just need a little more grace I think, he said and held his 50 solemnly with two hands.

Thank you Mikey that's inspirational, said John.

It's true. You read the *National Post*, Mikey stretched one arm out as far as he could, they read the *Guardian*, he stretched the other arm as far as he could the other way. You'll never agree on anything until something big happens. Like a war, or a big fucked tsunami.

You sure about that?

Oh yes I'm sure.

Do you think Peace will put a hex on me from her witch-book?

Probably.

Mikey wandered and found a plaque on the path in the forest and studied it in the moonlight. This plaque commemorates the swamp-fire of 2012, he read. What fucking swamp-fire? I don't remember that.

John looked at the plaque. Four acres of wetland burned in the fire started by lightning on August...He stopped reading. Did they think there's never going to be lightning and fires? The odd fire is healthy. No, this forest just has to stay perfect forever. He ran in a circle with his arms flapping. Welcome to our perfect forever forest. He tried to click his heels and sent some shit from his boots flying.

Mikey then found another plaque.

Is that one to commemorate the three voles that perished in the great swamp-fire of 2012? John asked.

Yes, said Mikey. I think there's a statue of those brave voles around here somewhere.

Voles in the swamp-fire, said John. Is anything worth a real plaque happening around here?

You are way too mad, said Mikey. He wanted to say more but felt he hadn't said anything interesting, smart or appropriate in at least a year. He thought about putting his hand on John's shoulder. He was beyond tired of John and Kirby bickering. They were peevish, each more and more right. All we did was watch a shitty movie and eat too much pizza, he said.

Sorry, you're right. John had a vision of his barn finally slumping over, returned to the earth and a middle-aged Johnny, fat, staring into space with pleated khakis and a goatee and an ID badge on his belt, surrounded by humming glowing photocopiers.

Nothing's perfect, he said. My wife thinks I'm a xenophobe and I wear too much Browning Rifles gear.

Are you a xenophobe?

I don't think so. I hope not.

Your wife is wonderful, said Mikey. He was jealous. He thought about how great it must be to sit in the living room listening to a record with your wife.

I know, said John and he rubbed his face. I should tell her that. Maybe we should all just be quiet for a bit.

That's what I'm saying, said Mikey. Everyone just work down in the mine and shut the Christ up.

But maybe you gotta stand up sometimes and tell someone to fuck off though eh? said John.

When John got home he remembered he had to go check on the calf, the cream-coloured one, who was now sickly. He walked down the path to the barn with a flashlight and thought about Peace's burnt thumb. The calf was at the back of the barn, alone in the dark, eyes big and green in the flashlight. The other animals ignored it. John readied a pail of pablum supplement, stuck his finger out for the calf to suck, then transitioned the calf from finger to pail. He scratched its chin as it drank. The calf drank desperately, pulling and stamping, and pablum mix ran off its chin in streaks onto John's hand.

Polly was half asleep and mumbling gibberish to John in the bedroom. Mmm North Korea, Kirby... yes, she said. Yes the tomatoes...Johnny's sick.

You're wonderful, said John.

And immediately Johnny announced himself at the door, naked and crying with barf stuck to his chest.

He's been like this all night, said Polly, now fully awake.

OK come on Johnny, said John. He took his hand and brought him in the bathroom. He wet a towel and cleaned the boy's chest. Johnny stood naked on the closed toilet lid and coughed 'til he peed. Dad you sleep in my bed, he said.

John got into Johnny's tiny bed because Polly had done it the night before. He dragged the tin Ottawa Senators garbage can over in front of Johnny and let his feet hang cold off the end of the mattress. Johnny held his dad's hand between his own filthy warm wet little hands and continued to cough.

Mikey's Ireland book was finished and he had moved on to an even fatter one about World War Two. He couldn't read more than a few sentences without his head slipping away to wives and record players and then he'd forgotten what he'd just read.

Jesus, he thought, I'm fucking trying to be a good reader and get the transference going here but I don't need to know about each and every cocksucking tank formation in Sicily. He had a book about the fall of Rome that he picked up when he got tired of all the World War Two slaughters, but there were plenty of slaughters in the Rome book too. He clicked off the light and was proud he didn't look at any pornos.

There was shit Anna had to clean off the toilet during her brunch shift at Cafe Plus, and then there was shit waiting for her to clean off the toilet when she got to her evening shift at the Centre Bourassa.

Tabarnak! said Yvette when she saw the state of the stall where Anna was on her knees scrubbing away.

Anna stood up to stretch her back and made a big frown. How do they get it up around behind the toilet tank?

I think we serve the shit food here, said Yvette hobbling away with her large tired ass heaving and pitching under the knot of her apron. She went to find the manager to say stop making Anglo Anna clean all the shit always. Océane smelt the stink from across the restaurant and kept well away. Non non non, she said.

The shit at Centre Bourassa was all over the seat and down on the floor. Anna almost laughed. What a world, she thought. She figured it was a form of protest because the workers had found and destroyed the boys' drug stash. When you have nothing else you can still shit all over the place. She was so used to picking up shit she didn't gag at all and almost forgot to put on gloves before picking it up and dropping it in the toilet.

Ebenezer had gotten in a fight.

Why...why? Anna was cross. She crossed her arms and barked. They're gonna send you back to Rivière-des-Prairies you know that. They're dying to send you back to Rivière.

Ebenezer said nothing. He tried to smile like it wasn't a big deal, he was tough.

Miss Natalie said you kicked the shit out of him. Why? Anna asked again.

He's SA anyway, said Ebenezer. SA was sexual assault.

Why Ebenezer.

Ebenezer looked up and said directly: he said I was a faggot and he was going to fuck my sister. She's thirteen.

Oh, said Anna, and paused. Then she slumped down next to him on the floor against the wall. The size of him—Anna was always amazed how small he was. He was only a

boy after all with his whole ass out of his pants and his ears stuck out under his hat. His tiny narrow shoulders, skinny arms, a child with awful tattoos home-poked on his arms and hands. And all that he carried. He was like Marley's ghost, he was, thought Anna, thinking about that for a minute. Chains double-ironed, wrought in steel, long and wound out like a tail, dragging murder, drugs, gangs, assault, torture, drunk mum, younger sister, no dad, no breakfast and trying to find a toonie for a Jamaican patty and a pop for school-lunch. She herself fussed about her boyfriend not manning up and changing the tire instead of calling someone to do it, and not eating her out, and getting rejection letters.

Shit, she said. Well was it worth going back to gen-pop?

I'm going to die soon anyway, he said looking at his hands.

Fuck off, said Anna.

It's true. He said it factually, not trying to be hard, or sad. He brought his knees to his chest.

Earlier he'd been in a counselling session in the counselling room with all the Kleenex boxes and soothing posters of palm trees and sand dunes. The clinical psychologist said, I think you are finally showing some remorse. This is progress, Ebenezer.

Miss Natalie touched his knee and said, you are sorry Ebenezer.

Yes, he said.

For what you did...

Yes! he said.

Talk more about how you're sorry, said the clinical psychologist, leaning back in his chair. Talk about...um, he looked at his notes, Mr. Bachmann, he said. He reaffirmed his gaze down at Ebenezer.

I'm sorry...I'm sorry.

Mm-hmm, hmm.

I'd talk to him, said Ebenezer.

I don't think we can do that. I'm sure he doesn't want to.

Ebenezer thought about Mr. Bachmann; he was always thinking about Mr. Bachmann.

When he left the room, the older boy, who was SA, even though they weren't supposed to know that, but everyone did, said: you're crying? Then he called him a faggot and said he knew his sister and was sweet on her and she wanted to fuck him.

Ebenezer was much smaller but knew some important things about fights: most people will talk a lot then start shoving then fight. Very few expect you to fight right away. Then expect and plan for an immediate right haymaker. Try to kick his knee back because he's going to be looking at your hands and head. And punch for the jaw not the head where you're going to hurt your hand more than you hurt him. And don't stop because you don't want him getting up. This was what he knew about how to fight.

So the older boy was still talking about his sister when Ebenezer dropped his notebook and cracked him in jaw in the hallway. Then he kicked at his kneecap, trying to snap it back. The boy staggered and crumpled and Ebenezer kicked him in the ribs, then the head. He hurt his toe and switched feet. He steadied his hands against the wall and

kicked the boy's ear when he covered his face. He didn't stop until two staff put him in a restraint, one on each arm.

Are you crying? he said to the boy as they dragged him away down the hall.

Anna's mother fed the birds, every morning, if it was 40 below, if there was an ice storm. She was out there pouring the seeds from an old coffee-tin. Entire migration routes recalculated to visit her feeder which was a sheet of plywood on a post. Several smaller bird-feeders were strung up in a circle around the plywood. She friggled her back putting sacks of seed in her trunk at Fearnoch Farm Supply. Five, ten and twenty pound sacks, a fifty pound sack even, of black sunflower seeds, striped sunflower seeds, niger seeds, all-purpose birdseed with corn and millet. She was a retired hairdresser in old dirty jeans who didn't fuss much about makeup, or new recipes or wine, and she drove around loads of birdseed for all the chickadees, nuthatches, and hopefully, one day, a bluebird. Maybe she would wear makeup if she got invited to a wedding, but other than that it really wasn't her business.

She broke her day into chapters and bird-care was a lengthy one. Sometimes she cut people's hair at the kitchen table— old ladies talking about the Almanac while she tried, fruitlessly, not to make them look like a lamb again, or young fellows gripping action figurines and not sitting still. She watched the birds from the kitchen window with a notepad. She looked at job websites for Anna. She ran a bird-watching newsletter and pondered the ethics of letting the cat out.

The chickadees were always there. Fearless, they'd land on her hat, with their perfect little faces, tiny inquisitors who had to inspect everything. A dozen mourning doves, a little more tentative, landing in a clump with their noisy wings after she went back inside. The red-winged blackbirds with the handsome epaulets came back every St. Patrick's Day on the day. And those bluejay bullies, and grackles, American goldfinches, evening grosbeaks, sometimes an enormous pileated woodpecker. At Christmas, the fat cardinal lording with his missus. Crows and ravens who lived over in the barn. She knew them all. She wanted more orioles and barred owls and whisky-jacks, not so many wild turkeys coming in like a dinosaur herd, not so many squirrels. She talked to Anna on the phone with her notepad ready for any new bird activity.

How's Matthias? She tapped her pencil. She had met him and liked him, harmless polite Matthias.

He's OK Mum, said Anna.

Is there any news about his job?

No, he says he's still waiting for some professors to die.

Oh. How's your book then?

It's not a book yet...I like it one day and hate it the next.

I guess that's how that goes eh. Can you tell me who did it? I won't tell.

No, that's the point. Nobody gets to know. I don't know.

I think it was the heiress who did it.

It's a pretty narcissistic thing to do write a book.

Anna you have to—

Everyone stop and listen to me—I know what I’m saying— me and my narratives...

Anna you’ve always been good at writing. Every teacher you ever had said.

Thanks Mum.

You need to use your contacts and get it published.

Yes I know, said Anna. If she wasn’t happy her mother could always divine it off the telephone line. If she spoke she knew, if she was quiet she knew. Anna only tried to call when she was upbeat. She didn’t want to make her worry, but not calling made her worry even more. The unsaid bubbled away always: please be happy so I can be happy. And come home and have a baby.

Are you gonna come home for Swamp-fest? The Bird-Watching Committee has a pavilion this year.

Oh...maybe. Tell me about the birds Mum. She laid on her back on the carpet with her calves resting up on the bed and her mother regaled her with chickadees, hairy woodpeckers, downy woodpeckers, starlings and flickers.

Anna’s father left before Anna’s mother even knew she was pregnant. Anna’s mother had spent a lifetime wondering why he left, and on her better days she thought: I won’t ever understand and that’s fine and fuck him all the same. On her bad days she thought maybe it was because she was poor, needy, ugly, boring, dirty. Maybe he wanted more more more — more women, more life and things to do. If he stuck with one woman who didn’t wear makeup in an Ottawa Valley backwater with sunflower seeds and old ladies’ hair stuck to his socks, he’d rule out all the others.

Maybe he got to fuck and leave all different types of sad women all over Canada—Edmonton, Newfoundland, Wawa—in living rooms, hotels, backseats. Fucking them with no condoms, holding them after with his carpenter hands sliding over their hips down along their legs, laughing and kissing their ears, eating their grapes, then soon enough gone away down the highway.

Maybe he had a spectacular life exploding along in lustrous bursts, green and blue fireworks up into the dark. Laughs, sex, money, maybe tango-dancing, bisexual four-somes, doing cocaine and creating art. Anna's mother imagined him tearing with his teeth at all the things she could not offer a partner.

Maybe he got all that, but he never got to see what his daughter looked like sitting on the vent in the kitchen eating her porridge. Anna sat on the hot air vent on the cold kitchen linoleum on cold mornings and her mother brushed her thick blond hair. Her little bottom on the grate, tiny back straight and sure, she'd lean back slightly as her mum tugged away at the knots, but she didn't spill her breakfast. He never saw the frost coming through the windows and the static pops of Anna's hair as she peered into her bowl. She was a quiet and careful child. Then she'd pull down her balaclava making sure not to mess up her brushed hair and wrap her scarf and brave the cold up to the school-bus. Little determined steps in her snow-boots.

He never got to sit on a small desk at Fearnoch Elementary School while the teachers year after year, some of them close to tears, would say: the brightest student I've had in forever, just a pleasure, a joy you know, and after so many rotten kids between you and me Miss Berube...

He never got to see Anna fourteen and blundering into the world of makeup, phone-calls and worrying about your tits.

No mum, this is how you're supposed to do it, she said. Stubborn and poking herself in the eye with the mascara brush. A big dusting of rouge or concealer or something, eyeliner, opening her mouth wide and painting it with purple lipstick. She tried to look sexy in the mirror. Maybe the girls at school would leave her alone now that she was trying to look like them. What she looked like was a heartbroken prostitute about to be shipped to New France.

Oh Anna, I don't think it's supposed to look like that...But what did she know?
Anna's purpled bottom lip quivered and she turned and went into her room.

And Anna's father never got to see Anna come down the laneway with the makeup washed off and the school-bus pulling away through the trees. Anna's mum was raking leaves and dropped the rake and Anna hugged her and cried into her neck for a long time with wind and leaves in her hair. Only Anna's mum got to see that.

Now, the turkeys come every day after breakfast, eat everything, even the compost pile, you know. Anna...Anna?

Mmmpf, said Anna. Sorry Mum I fell asleep.

That's OK.

It was a nice thing to fall asleep to, said Anna falling asleep again.

There was a meeting in the Centre Bourassa office concerning Ebenezer's latest incident. The only reason, the only fucking reason, said the program director looking around the room, that he's not going back to La Rivière is because he's fucking getting out in two weeks. Then we're done with him. Three fat binders containing Ebenezer's extensive file sat on the desk. The program director packed up his briefcase and scowled at the binders as he left.

He's...he's a child, Anna sputtered to Miss Natalie after the meeting.

He's not, said Miss Natalie.

You know how many people— they're saying they're going to kill him.

I know Anna. But what can we do? She strained to lift Ebenezer's file back onto the shelf.

Anna went to tell Ebenezer. She knocked softly on the door to Room #7 and found him hiding under his cot and asleep.

Mikey stopped taking his depression pills because he worried about his serotonin secreters depending on them and also fretted about his dick falling off. As he stepped back into life without the pills, he wondered if this was what going crazy was. I'm crazy, he thought. I'm villainous. I'm the villain in the story that everyone's leery of. Everyone's looking at me. He visualized his mind piloting a thin highway of sanity, spooled from cerebral fibres, and crashing offline into a dark corner of his skull.

In the office at the scrapyard, which was an old shipping container, there was still one of those old punch-in clocks. Mikey found his card and punched it just as the clock struck

eight. He turned his work-boots upside down to let the dirt pour out, put them on, opened the door and ran face first into Stella. She had braids and bangs and freckles and her brown eyes were deep and severe. He'd been avoiding her.

Have you been avoiding me, she said.

He thought this was a very direct thing to ask someone she'd only just met.

No I'm not, he said.

I wanted to ask you...I forgot my lunch.

Well, you can have some of mine? Mikey had a tin of soup and a can-opener in a Loblaws' bag.

No. Take me somewhere. Where do you people go to eat around here? She crossed her arms and held her shoulders.

Mikey thought. We could go to the fries-wagon by the river there and have fries.

Yes let's do that, she said.

And so at noon Mikey drove them to the fries-wagon and they sat down at a picnic table in front of enormous fries platters. The river was languid, mute, in no hurry at all and the clouds piled up fat and lazy. Stella was quiet, wiping the grease on her pants and surveying the river.

Mikey tried to think of something to say. Are you finding any good soil samples?

Oh yeah, she said. Oh yes, the scrapyard's fucked. Her eyes went large and she speared at her fries with a toothpick.

Ya, said Mikey. What is it for? The soil samples.

It's my Masters, my field work. I have to test for pH, nitrate index, magnesium, manganese,—she noticed Mikey's eyes cloud up—at waste management facilities...anyway it's boring.

The dump is the highest point in Fearnoch Township, he said. His pop sprayed out in a fan across the table when he opened it.

Sorry, he said.

Stella looked at him and didn't say anything for a while. She kept looking at him and didn't break eye contact to look at the river or her fries. Mikey then became conscious of the issue of what to do with your eyes during a conversation. I'm staring. Should I be staring? Once an ex-girlfriend and Mikey were downtown and she yelled at him for staring at everything and everyone and Mikey said I'm from a small town, I frigging stare at people and unusual things— of which there were many examples of both around.

But this was like going on a nice bike-ride and then remembering oh but of course I don't know how to ride a bicycle and instantly flipping over the handlebars and eating shit all over the pavement and bloodying your knees. Did we learn as Australopithecuses where and where not to look while talking? Maybe it was involuntary and natural until we talked to someone whose bangs and nose and chewing were all just too much. Mikey looked into her eyes for as long as he dared, remembered about blinking, broke away to look at the river, squinted and looked at Quebec, looked at his pop, then tried her eyes again and still she was looking at him. He looked at her ear when she tucked a strand of brown or possibly auburn hair behind it, and ultimately let eyeballs sear down at his feet. He was worn out. He hoped lunch would end soon before he made a mistake.

Do you have any pets? she said from out of nowhere.

I had a cat, Mikey said, looking up and rubbing his eyes. Mrs. MacPherson. But I had to put her down.

Who's Mrs. MacPherson?

My cat, my dead cat.

You named your cat Mrs. MacPherson?

Yes, because she had long orange fur and reminded me of the secretary in elementary school Mrs. MacPherson who helped me when I barfed on the bus in grade one... and grade two, then she got transferred to the city.

Oh.

She made zucchini bread at Christmas and no one ate it so I felt bad and told her it was great. So then she gave me a ton of shit zucchini bread and gave my mum the recipe and it was just a lot of shit zucchini lying around.

Oh. That's nice.

Stella bent to tie her shoe and her hair hung very close to Mikey and the smell of hair, the conditioner, the forgotten scent of girl was so overpowering he thought he might have to say: You gotta back up I— I'm gonna black out here.

What are some things that you like? she asked. She certainly had a very direct way of speaking.

Uh, said Mikey. He couldn't think of anything. He had no hobbies. Regarding his interests, he was not overly noteworthy.

Reading? he said after contemplation. I try to read and not look at the internet.

What about movies?

Sure I like movies.

I like horror movies, bloody gory dirty fucking greasy horror movies, said Stella, trying to make a horrifying face with fries in her mouth.

I like hockey, said Mikey, remembering he actually did like some things.

I love hockey!

You, said Mikey, like hockey? It was dawning on him that she was perfect and it was terrifying.

Ya I'm from Thunder Bay for Jesus' sake. I play, I have my gear here, do you play—can I play?

Um, said Mikey. Well, I could ask John.

Stella put down her toothpick. You don't have to...if there's room, you know. She looked down at her hands in her lap. A tractor drove past them with a jostling hay-wagon which left cow-shit and straw all over the road.

Mikey tried out the questioning. What are some things you...ah...d-d-d...don't—he took a running start at the word and his face seized up and he almost screamed it when he finally got it out—like?

Having no friends in a strange small town, said Stella immediately. What don't you like?

Well I think people get too excited about baked potatoes. It's just like a ball of ground. And when people clap when they laugh. And snappy abbreviations. And I'm

tired of Tibetan prayer flags. Mikey had been wanting to tell someone these things he didn't like for a while.

Stella considered the deluge of negativity with her nose wrinkled.

I like Tibetan prayer flags, she said.

Mikey drove them back to work, up the dusty river road and up the hill, and now they saw the sky had a black rectangular hole ripped out of it. A black rectangle, exact as math, on the horizon. Oh great, thought Mikey. Maybe it's the birth of a black hole. I've been waiting for this. Both Mikey and Stella were aware of the hole and looked at each other to confirm they were seeing the same hole, then looked back at the hole. Mikey drove them closer, closer to the vector fields from the beyond, or the end of all things, or whatever it was he was driving them into. Mikey let his mouth hinge open, with grease from the fries at its corners.

Stella was first to address the new feature on their world.

What, she said pointing her finger, the hell, is that? It was getting bigger.

Mikey didn't know how to respond. What was there to say except: now our world has a hole in the sky? Science must present some answers. He watched the hole, watched Stella watch the hole, still pointing and her mouth hanging open too, and still it got bigger.

Instead of being swallowed, they got close enough to see what the hole was. A massive banner hanging from a hot air balloon.

Oh, said Stella, exhaling. Oh I thought it'd be more interesting than that.

The banner was an advertisement. Future site of *Edenia*, it said, Pastoral Peaceful Affordable Detached Family Homes. And under that— *Edenia Outlets: Over 75 Stores. Living Green.*

Well frig, said Mikey. I wanted a black hole.

Ya, fuck outta here *Edenia*! Stella cupped her mouth and shouted out the window.

Mikey looked at what would become detached family homes and over 75 stores. A creek cut a lazy looping gully through overgrown fields and briars and a derelict wind-pump squeaked in the distance. It's so nice as it is, he said.

Yes, said Stella. It is.

I guess people gotta live somewhere, but Jesus, said Mikey.

What's your phone number? She pointed at him with her phone and Mikey told her.

When they got back to the scrapyard, Stella said: can you not ignore me anymore? I don't know anyone in this place and I'm here all semester. She unfastened her seatbelt and gestured with her hands at the mountains of old appliances and cars. All I know here is this dump.

I'm not ignoring you, Mikey said.

Sure, said Stella.

Stella got out of the car and walked off into the dump to gather her scientific gear. She was gorgeous and direct and loved hockey. Mikey sat in the car holding his work-gloves and tipped into a true unmedicated hole of sadness.

Wow, this is feeling, he thought. An acute absence of happiness molecules.

I don't want to ignore you, he thought. But I don't know what to say. I don't think I've had a real experience in years. Do you want fake confidence or no confidence? Do you have any idea how old and poor I am? Are you interested in my horsehair mattress, the nightmares, or maybe my one nostril that doesn't work very well because of the drugs?

He wanted to get into the hole in the sky with her and slow-dance and have more fries and discuss hockey statistics. He wanted her to come back once he'd done something magnificent and they could talk about that. But mostly he wanted her not to figure him out, to see him through the dump-fumes. To feel along with her fingers and discover he didn't have a spine. And he knew she would soon enough.

The floorboards in Johnny's room were warped, water-damaged and curling up into the baseboards. It was pouring outside, piking fat raindrops, and the framing company, where John was getting some days under the table, called and said don't come in. The second cut of hay was in the barn, and the combine-man was coming for the soy and corn later in the week, so he took the morning to see what he could do about this squalour his son slept over. Johnny had his feet full of splinters from ripping around the house. John and Polly took turns going at the boy's feet with tweezers and a bowl of warm water. Polly was a nurse and much more persuasive with the tweezers than John and his big clumsy hands that were so worn he pretty well didn't need mitts in winter.

John pried up the most rotted floorboard and discovered underneath was lousy with rat-nests and rat-shit. He sat on Johnny's bed and put the crowbar down.

My son sleeps in here, he said to himself, breathes this shit. He tried another floor-board.

What'll be under this one I wonder—perhaps some tuberculosis.

The rain swelled and spat against the window and John looked out as his dad staggered in the dooryard, just like a zombie with a bloody mouth. He was dragging a chainsaw. John ran outside into the rain and yelled: Dad!

His dad turned around slowly and revealed he had blood going from his mouth all down the front of his shirt onto his pants. The rain whipped into his side, made the blood run and his dad stood there with the chainsaw dangling, looking like he had a touch of the amnesia.

What are you doing chainsawing out here? John hollered through the rain. Dad!

His dad stared with his mouth open.

What are you doing? John repeated, running towards him. Come on, come inside! He took his elbow.

When his father finally spoke his voice rattled out slowly, like it was coming in from far away: it was a little alder...it just bucked up at me.

In the kitchen John looked at his dad's mouth. It was strange and awful to pull your dad's lip open like he was a child. John saw two teeth were missing and a dark black gash on the lip continued to bleed, full of dirt and bark.

I wish Polly was here, said John. We gotta go to the hospital Dad—why were you chainsawing alders in the rain?

I'll be alright, his dad said with his eyes sagged and his mouth open. Someone's been stealing my wood. There's a wood-thief about.

John drove the truck into town with wet leaves all over the windshield. His dad was wide-eyed and mute with a bloody mass of paper towel stuck out of his mouth like a soother.

Dr. Ayoub, the Younghusband's family doctor, was at the clinic and had a moment to put five stitches into John's dad's mouth.

Jesus, John, he said. Jesus. He squirted more saline in and John's dad spat some pink sawdust out. Dr. Ayoub closed the door.

You should see a dentist about the teeth, he said.

I don't know, John's dad said. He came from a long line of doctor-avoiders.

Dr. Ayoub leaned in close to the old man and put his clipboard down beside him. He had a pleasant olive face with gold glasses, but his look was chastising and strict, like an old schoolteacher's. John's dad felt ridiculous in a paper gown seated on the stainless-steel examining table with his rubber boots hanging off the edge. He was soaked through, blood still all over his face. Dr. Ayoub considered John's dad a friend, and he didn't want to have to be stern.

I am worried, said Dr. Ayoub. You shouldn't be working. You're showing all the signs of a breakdown. Like we talked about. Now you're chainsawing in a rainstorm. He gripped the cold edge of the table. He grew up in Lebanon during the war, with more and more rockets arcing orange and red every night, snipers in the hotel—pop pop—and people keeling over in the street when they were just out getting some groceries, his brother's

foot blown off mid-shin, his brother holding the foot with the sock and shoe still on it, his own dad gone missing, his five-year-old sister, her short braids stuck straight out from all the dust, hiding in the cupboard and looking not unlike John's dad, bloodied and dissociative, and he'd seen every type of bullshit you could throw at someone. Dr. Ayoub knew the look of a defeated man who couldn't concede. He knew it very well. John's dad shrugged which brought a loud crinkle from the paper gown. He wanted to be up on his feet and back to the farm.

John— please get some fucking rest, said Dr. Ayoub.

Matthias was at his goddamn poetry recital. Or perhaps this was trivia night. Anyway he wasn't home and Anna sat at the kitchen table feeling like the only person in the world. She thought some more about the life Ebenezer had found himself in and then took out her laptop and went at her story hard, beating down on the keys, thinking she could at least fantasize about better lives. I'll write all night, she thought. I'll murder all my characters if they keep bugging me. I can do whatever I want in here. She snarled with malice.

Ebenezer would free up and then go right back into the shit; she knew it. And she would do the same if she were him. She slapped the laptop shut. She'd choose drugs, money, status, girls over working at the Dollar-Plus or eating cake with teary empath social workers who only got into this business because they were broken themselves.

I'd choose the shit outta drugs and girls, thought Anna. She threw a book of poetry she'd been looking at for inspiration over towards the package from the publishing house,

still unopened. It was tiring to rifle through everything that happened, trying to be clever and find links. Oh I'll put that in the story; can I take that for the story? She forgot how to diversify sentences, or if she should diversify sentences, and these days every one was beginning with he looked or she thought or it was.

Maybe writing was just transcribing all the cool things you thought and said. She reopened her laptop again and exhaled with renewed vigour. Recently she'd murdered a character, the poor old abbott, Father Dominic, a man who wasn't quite what he said he was, and she wondered if she'd shown enough compassion or enough personal detail during his sudden gory departure. Anna did another rake-through of her own now depleted life-details and came up with slow-dancing with John Younghusband in Grade 8, in the gym at the Junior High attached to the high-school. She put her head down on his shoulder and they moved slow and clockwise in a dark tiny gym, and he breathed hot all over her ear with his John Deere hat pushed back. His hands shook on her waist and he tried not to breathe on her too much. He loved her and the song was *Crazy* by Aerosmith, of course it was, only that song would work for this memory that hung so far back in her head she could only paw at it. Anna stood up and slowly shuffled clockwise, trying to remember. She didn't know what to do with this, but she did wonder how John was for a minute.

Then she thought about fish-sticks. Fish-sticks? She remembered when she was maybe ten and her mother put three fish-sticks on Anna's plate with a spatula, and then fixed a barrette in Anna's hair while Anna shook the ketchup bottle. The fish-sticks were

pressed into identical singed rhomboids. So perhaps—Father Dominic ate fish-sticks...and thought about his mother. Ah fuck.

John in Grade 8, fish-sticks, her mother, Father Dominic's mother, she travelled along this peculiar sequence while staring out the basement window at feet and then got to Ebenezer's mother. Anna met her once when Ebenezer's mother was invited to Centre Bourassa to sit in on one of his more ill-fated counselling sessions. She was very small, had her hair cut short, a cranial coating of soft black fuzz, and said hardly anything. Ebenezer's file said his mother had a history of drinking, and awful boyfriends that abused her, Ebenezer, and Ebenezer's sister. Anna got up and made a drink for her damn self.

Anna remembered that meeting as the one where Ebenezer punched a hole in the wall. His mother told him that his best friend Bernard, the one Ebenezer kept his mouth shut about when he got arrested, had told everyone in the neighbourhood that Ebenezer was a rat. Which was the worst thing you could be in that neighbourhood. And which was an awful thing for a free man to say about someone who was irrefutably, spectacularly not a rat, a non-rat of the highest order, the proof being your freedom. Ebenezer's mother said everyone was yelling rat at her in the housing complex. His sister, who was a selective-mute when she was little, hadn't said a word in three days. Now she ran home with her backpack bouncing, crying, slamming the door and doubling over to catch her breath behind it, but saying nothing when her mother asked what's wrong.

Ebenezer closed his eyes and put his hands together. Anna thought he was handling it pretty well. Then he got up and punched a hole right through a poster of a calming palm

tree at sunset and left. Later, Ebenezer's mother touched Anna's arm and said, he has such a big head, my Ebenezer. She may have been drunk. When I gave birth—oof, she said.

Anna looked back at her story, unsure how to work these personal details into and around Father Dominic's demise. She wondered where Matthias was and then thought maybe she should do something nice for him. She took a generous sip from her drink, wiped her mouth with her sleeve, and thought, I'll put on something very sexy and just lie here seductively. No certainly not, I'll go get some ice cream.

For now, she thought, Father Dominic is going to have to be garrotted, a piano wire slicing into his neck-fat and a shower of arterial blood, without a whole lot of context, and we can all just deal with it.

At the gelato store Anna forgot what Matthias' favourite flavour was. She tapped along the sneeze-guard with her house key trying to decide. Surely it wasn't plum-pistachio-whisky. The gelato man looked ill-humoured and she pitied him for having to wear such a silly hat. She got blood orange, mainly because she wanted it. Matthias still wasn't home, and she didn't write all night. She fell asleep on top of the quilt with her clothes still on, and the blood orange gelato melting a blood orange puddle on the table.

Kirby and Peace were part of a movement called Climate Death. Fabian, the leader and founder of Climate Death, called a meeting at his house, one of the new mansions by the river. Fabian was downright dashing and Peace didn't hide her crush on him.

I don't understand, said Kirby. He's just a 40-year-old white guy who isn't bald and isn't fat. With money. I could look like that if I don't get bald or fat, and have money. He shifted gears in the SUV annoyed, and motoring them down Fearnoch Road towards town. Or is it a cheekbone thing? What is it with girls and cheekbones?

Peace traced a finger along the window at some sheep with their backs painted red.

It's his conviction, she said. That Fabian.

Fabian had a tree inside his house. In the foyer. The house looked like an alien mothership touched down in a cornfield. There really was something about him, Kirby admitted to himself. He was very cordial with his guests and he walked around not fat and not bald using two hands to shake everyone's hand. He made his millions in the High-Tech industrial parks of West-End Ottawa, developing and selling cyber-security software to larger firms, but that is, perhaps, too boring to even talk about. Now he mainly worked from behind a megaphone, at rallies to do with the climate, the Middle East, free tuition, the arts, free-speech, anti-free-speech, everything. He could yell and march and be part of something and feel superb. Peace giggled when he whispered something to her. Kirby ate a lot of the various dips laid about and accepted a beer in a tall skinny glass tube.

I read there's good news about polar bears, he said to a lady who was eating a baby carrot. They say there's more of them than they thought.

That is not true and it is not good news, said the lady with the baby carrot.

Oh, OK, said Kirby.

Fabian then sat up on the back of the sofa and thanked everyone for coming. Then he got serious.

It is time, my friends, to act. He said the last word very loudly. The group members got excited and cheered. Kirby clapped his one free hand against his chest. As you know, Fabian continued, there is a protest planned at Parliament Hill. There's a convoy going right through Fearnoch! And we will counter-protest it! He punched a fist down into his other hand. We will make a stand...

Peace raised her hand and said, What is the protest?

A great question Peace, said Fabian. And the truth is I don't really know. I think it started as a farmers' protest about milk quotas and that but now there's the usual conservative politicians from around here, and he grimaced, you know, anti-immigration people, anti-carbon-tax people, I don't really know. It's the other side is what it is.

Boo! said the lady with the baby carrot.

That's right, that's right, said Fabian, and I didn't start Climate Death so we could just sit around! The group was getting very excited. Fabian spoke at some length, eloquently, here and there running a hand through his stellar haircut. He appealed to emotion rather than logic. They loved him. Fabian continued and, to paraphrase, he said: And on that subject, I have this to say, which, as we know, is correct.

So check Facebook for updates, Fabian concluded when everyone got out of their seats. The event is on the Facebook group—is it on the Facebook group, Marlene? he asked looking at the lady with the baby carrot.

Marlene nodded.

So check Facebook...he made his hands into guns and did performative shooting motions back and forth at the two people closest and on either side of him. And we'll see you Sunday!

Maybe this was the revolution, Kirby thought. At least it was doing something. At work they discussed if standing-desks were in the budget and whether they should go home at two o'clock or three o'clock on Fridays. He was giddy.

Peace bent her head sombre on the drive home. I guess I can't go 'cause of the baby, she said. I haven't been to a protest in forever.

How long before we can tell people? Kirby said.

Oh Jesus a month...month at the very earliest. I don't wanna jinx this shit Kirby! Last go around Kirby told everyone far too early.

I will protest my heart out for all three of us then, said Kirby. He adjusted his glasses, gripped the steering-wheel and put the pedal to the floor. The fightin' pride of the proletariat surged in his guts. Peace reached out and touched his ear.

Do you ever think though, said Kirby later at home, that Fabian might be bullshit?

Peace was back at her beadwork.

Hey now, she said.

Mush rumbled down John's laneway in a new 4-wheeler to tell him about the same protest. He'd been out mudding and mud drops fell out of his beard like chocolate milk. He wore large mirrored-lens goggles which contorted his face into a dazed, imbecilic expression.

So...what is it? A rally? said John.

I don't know but everyone's going. They're coming right through Storytown then here on the way down to Parliament. I think it's to tell those fucking nerds in the government to fuck off. Goddamn fucking nerds. You like the new bike? He leaned on the 4-wheeler.

Well that sounds all right, said John, a finger on his chin thoughtfully. Do you want a pint?

Quick beer, quick beer here, said Mush, taking it from John. I'm bringing a cow, he said. You can bring some pigs or a cow. Drive your tractor down, that's what the lads are doing, take your combine...

I haven't got a combine, said John.

What kind of a farmer are you?

A poor as shit one buddy, you know that. He stared a long way off down a row of corn.

It's a good farm, a good farm, said Mush, looking around. A curled-over dead elm tree reflected off his goggles and mud continued to rain out of his beard. One of the barns was at such an angle it seemed an optical illusion or some type of backwoods hocus-pocus was keeping it upright. You got some Herefords here? He looked at John's herd. Shorthorns?

Yeah. Look at that one, said John, pointing at his prize calf. Got a bit Holstein in him I think.

Gorgeous. Gorgeous, said Mush. I like a Hereford. No need for these fancy new Europeans you see. I don't even know what's going on any more with cattle to be honest.

I'm done, Mush, said John.

Mush drank beer the same way that Mr. Cheeseman Sr. did, John had noticed. He'd talk and talk, gesturing around with the full beer, then at some juncture of the conversation he'd recall, oh shit that's right I've got a pint here, and consume the entire thing instantly.

Mush handed John back the empty bottle. Then c'mon downtown and we'll tell 'em to fuck off together, he said. This is Fearnoch! He twisted the handlebar and ripped away up the laneway.

Mikey had two appointments on one day. He felt one would have been more than enough. The first was at the Community Centre to see Polly and the disadvantaged kids. He was nervous but he said to himself, raising one finger at his reflection in the rearview mirror: a man needs responsibility. The outdoor rink had goldenrods and burdocks stuck up through the pavement near the boards, and past that, past the creek and cattails, a small procession of highland cattle walked, noble and quiet, like ancient lords. Probably kids in Fearnoch weren't too fucked up—just loopy little hicks, Mikey figured.

Polly met him with a wailing infant on her hip she was bouncing up and down.

OK so thanks for coming Mikey, good lad, Polly said, I want you to keep an eye out for Jefferson. He's a sweet boy but he's got a temper, she said looking around the sea of children, presumably for Jefferson.

Jefferson, said Mikey.

Yeah, Jefferson, said Polly doing a shushing sound to the infant.

What's that his last name?

No it's his first name. He's tearing around here somewhere.

Mikey held his hands behind his back wondering which of these little hellions Jefferson could be.

Polly got closer to Mikey and Mikey felt some drool from the infant stick on his arm. Jefferson struggles with FASD, she whispered, looking around to make sure no one heard. Just know that... you're not gonna understand some of the things he does, I guess.

What's FASD? Mikey asked, not in a whisper, and Polly's big eyes lit up.

Shh! It's called— Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

Oh.

His dad's back in Peru and his mum—Polly looked around some more—you remember Shawna McKenzie? Maybe I shouldn't tell you that.

Oh sweet Jesus, said Mikey. Didn't they lock her up?

Yeah, well. I shouldn't have told you that, she grabbed his wrist. Forget that, she said.

I have already forgotten, said Mikey.

Anyway Jefferson's very sweet and I know he'll just love you...where the frig is he? said Polly, turning around. Where's Jefferson? she asked an old lady who sat in the armchair by the bookshelf full of donated unappreciated children's books.

He's here, said the lady, closing her eyes and leaning her head back in the chair. He's been making lots of bad decisions.

Then Mikey heard a savage roaring noise and a boy with long messy dark hair ran into the community centre carrying a large stick that had a lot of long dead wet grass stuck to it.

There's Jefferson, said the old lady without opening her eyes. About to make another bad decision.

Jefferson, said Polly. This is the man I told you about. She slowly eased the big dirty wet stick from him. This is Mikey. She rubbed Jefferson's back and nudged him towards Mikey.

Jefferson stared up at Mikey, his brown eyes large and guarded, a window cut into his ragged hair. He looked like a tiny hockey player with four front teeth gone and scars on his forehead and cheek.

Hi Jefferson, said Mikey. He put his hands on his knees and crouched. Um well, how old are you?

Jefferson recoiled. He turned his head and put it into Polly's thigh.

How old are you? asked Polly, and when he remained mute she said, Seven, he's seven.

Jefferson spun his head around to Mikey and said, Yeah seven.

Oh, said Mikey. Great.

Why don't you show Mikey your colouring? said Polly. And Jefferson walked over to the table, with Mikey following, and sat on an exercise ball in front of an open colouring book with the page heavy with black and yellow scribbles. Mikey sat on a small beanbag at the knee-high table and felt humongous.

What're you drawing? he said.

A bee, said Jefferson. Bumblebee. He pressed very hard and broke his yellow crayon.

He looked up through his hair at Mikey for a moment, then re-addressed his bee.

It's beautiful, said Mikey. Have you ever been stung by a bee?

No, have you? said Jefferson.

Oh I've been stung at least 50 times. They love me. At the dump.

Actually I have been stung once.

Oh you have?

Yes. It got in my juice. So I don't drink juice outside in the summertime now.

Oh, said Mikey, with his index finger on his lips. That's actually quite smart.

Do you want some juice?

Yes.

Jefferson got up walked to the kitchen. He was wearing a faded John Cena 'Can't See Me' WWE shirt that was too small and jeans that were too big. He came back presently with two juice boxes with the straws already stuck in them plus a book about Angry Birds.

Look at this, he said handing Mikey the book. He watched Mikey's reaction to the book and fit the straw into his mouth.

This looks great, said Mikey. Jefferson nodded and sucked on his juice box, the clear straw filling yellow.

Can you read it for me? Mikey asked.

Jefferson took the book. He cleared his throat and said, Angwy Buhds. Fuck, he said. I hate Rs.

I don't like Ds, said Mikey.

Jefferson looked at him and started back on his juice box.

Here, I can read it for us. Jefferson brought his exercise ball around and sat next to Mikey. Mikey thought he liked Jefferson very much.

Then he had to go into town for his next appointment, which was at the clinic to see his therapist Dr. Dolan. It was his bi-monthly counselling session. He loathed these sessions, hated every Kleenex, every concerned mm-hmm, every piece of therapy language.

The day sucked out of the hills into dark and his mood drew with it. He lived now on a planet with more gravity, walking underwater, marooned in a methane lake, with Earth a dot in the night. Once I was jolly, he thought. I haven't danced in a very long time.

Mikey thought about just not going. Opening the door and rolling out or driving right past the clinic. Driving all the gas out of the pre-owned Hyundai Accent, driving 'er right into the Ottawa River. But that meant his beleaguered parents would kick him out of the loft and he'd have to look for a job that paid more than 15\$ an hour and he didn't even have his high school and he'd have to buy new clothes and get a resume and probably have to go to town more and talk to even more people. Maybe he should take a bunch of pills that fucked his liver or pancreas but realigned his brain chemistry and made him normal so he could talk to all kinds of people. Confidently, with lots of enjoyable laughs, and he'd enjoy it and they'd enjoy it.

Maybe he could go to an art gallery opening or something in town. Hello, I'm Mikey, he would say. I work at the dump and my social skills have taken a big hit and if I have any more than these three beers here there is a chance I could go insane and get pee on myself.

Dr. Dolan took her glasses off. Mikey, she said. Michael. You have to start talking soon. I can't do my job if you don't talk. She came out from her desk and sat in the leather armchair next to him.

Can't you be like Freud and just tell me everything that's wrong with me? Mikey asked. I'll just lie here. I don't want to talk about myself.

I don't work like that. Only you can help yourself. I only try to keep you on the road, she said, making a driving motion with her hands.

I d—don't want to talk about myself, Mikey said.

Dr. Dolan glared at him. She looked at her watch then glared some more.

Mikey was a little rattled so he said: Everyone talks about themselves too much and we're none of us as special as we think we are. We're just little bits of something bigger. Mikey thought he was being quite eloquent actually, and it was something he'd been working over in his head among the rust-heaps at the dump.

OK so what do you want to talk about?

Mikey thought. The fall of Rome, he said.

Oh?

Yes, it's exactly what's happening now. You see, I've been reading, he was getting excited and gesticulated by driving an index finger down into his knee. We all get lazy

and comfortable and fat because we've had it really really good and easy for a long time, he said. Same as Rome.

Mm-hmm.

And we take everything for granted and forget all the hard work and blood that went into it.

Mm-hmm.

And we crumble and crumble until one day we're so useless King Alaric can walk in through the gates like a fruity weirdo with a dead bird on his helmet—I dunno that's how I imagined it, I don't really know what I'm talking about—and he just sacks the whole place. Just sacks 'er. Mikey punched his knee. Because we're fat and soft and haven't had a real fight in forever. It'll happen very soon, just you watch. He folded his arms.

Don't go throwing too many stones there Mikey.

Well I'm not trying to say I'm not lazy and useless. I'm definitely not trying to say that.

Well, I don't know about that— but you see, you're smarter than you think you are.

No I'm stupid, said Mikey. But I know I'm stupid and I keep quiet. That's the difference. I know I'm a retard.

Dr. Dolan was old friends with Mikey's mum. To her Mikey was the boy ripping through the cornfield with ridiculous poofy hair, covered in mud, with a t-shirt from a museum with pictures of insects on it. Curious but too sensitive for the world and crying about how his pixie-dust wasn't working.

OK, she said, what if I said I'm gonna tell your mum I'm getting tired of doing these pro-bono sessions. Until you talk about yourself.

Mikey sighed and hung his head between his knees.

Uggghhh, he said. You should do pro-bono for rape victims and war heroes. Not me.

C'mon Mikey. Don't be so rough on yourself.

OK. I'll talk about myself, he said. He looked at the purpling dusk out the window. I have shown an extreme lack of personal development, he began. I just can't do it anymore. I forget what people say to people. I want to run away when people start talking to me. I think I gotta get up and leave right now. I'm all fuckered, Dr. Dolan. I'm embarrassed to be myself, I'm a coward and I'm spineless, he said, and stopped, out of breath.

Dr. Dolan didn't say mm-hmm, she just looked at him.

See, people talk about themselves too much, I don't wanna talk about myself. Life's not fair, Mikey said. I work with a man who ate rats.

Are you taking your pills? Dr. Dolan said.

Yes.

I think this is one of your better sessions, Dr. Dolan said, making some notes. See what happens when you talk to real people Mikey?

Like his mother said, Ebenezer had a large head, stuck down onto his slender neck and shoulders, which drew nicknames like Pumpkin and Alien when he was a boy. His sister thought he moved around like a bird, bobbed around like an alien-bird. He grew up, his body caught up with his head, and a quiet fury laced him together. He spent a lot of

time worrying about his sister. He'd made her toast, and soup, reaching on his tiptoes for the plates.

Toast. His sister said, toast again?

Soup then, he said. He only knew how to make toast and soup.

Do the alien-bird-dance, said his sister. Ebenezer put down the can opener and flapped his arms and juttied his head back, cluck-clucking and bobbing, like an egret.

His sister cackled and swung her feet off the edge of the chair. Then she coughed and sent a spray of crumbs across the table.

Like many young men, Ebenezer wanted to be tough. If he grew up in Fearnoch, that might mean getting a lot of penalties in hockey. Or drinking lots of pints and getting in brawls at the Storytown Fair or in the Country Mouse parking lot. He could have drank and drove them Fearnoch roads with the Johns and Mikeys of the world and traded punches with some Quebecers and then got a job at the mill and a nice beergut. But in Ebenezer's world, tough meant gangs.

His job in the gang was to pretty much do whatever Fatty said. Fatty was the gang leader of sorts—he was what Ebenezer might become in ten years, if he stayed angry and alive, and gained 200 pounds.

Fatty gave Ebenezer and his best friend Bernard an old handgun that looked like it would fall apart if fired, and no bullets.

It's for fucking robbing people, he said. He winced and swallowed, full of peptic acid and cocaine. Don't ask me again. Anyone selling where they shouldn't be. Any cock-sucker wearing red. Fatty had a lot on his mind. His daughter was sick. The police were on him. A big Blood head was out of jail and on him.

Ebenezer and Bernard took turns sticking the gun into the backs of other boys. They barged into homes in rival housing projects and took drugs, money, phones, Playstations, necklaces, whatever they thought of, sometimes even chips. They got in trouble if they didn't steal enough. Sometimes Fatty accompanied them to make sure everything went right.

There's no way this thing would work, said Roland. He pointed the gun at Ebenezer's head and smiled, showing big dark gums. They were sitting on their bicycles behind the Couche-Tard waiting for Fatty.

Don't point it, said Ebenezer and smacked his hand.

Bernard looked at the gun some more and then tucked it into the top of his pants. Doesn't even look cool, he said. It was a short rusty revolver, like an old white person would have in a dresser, not a big Nine from rap videos.

Ebenezer was looking at his phone. A girl from class had been sending him nude photographs all day, from the moment he woke up. More rattled in, lighting up his phone—she was in her room pushing her lips together in a pout and putting two fingers to her mouth, clicking and sending away to Ebenezer. Crisser, said Ebenezer, looking at the onslaught of soft electric nudity. I wonder if she's trying to send these to someone else. He texted: are these for me?

Let me see, said Bernard lunging for the phone. The texted response was a whole bunch of hearts. Ebenezer was quite pleased about the hearts. Bernard lunged again and tripped over his bike, sending it clattering to the pavement, which made Ebenezer trip over his bike. They lay in front of the dumpsters in a tangle of legs, wheels and handle-bars.

No! Ebenezer shouted, stretching the phone away from Bernard.

Fatty watched them, sweating profusely. He came closer and his gigantic shadow draped over the boys while they wrestled on top of the bikes. He pushed his braids off his forehead and wiped his face with the sleeve of his T-shirt. There were two older boys standing beside him and he put one arm around each of them.

This is Ronald, he said tapping one on the shoulder, and Shitty, he said, tapping the other. They're coming to make sure you don't fuck up like the other time, he said. Ronald had his eyes hidden by a baseball hat and one gold tooth. Shitty was missing a front tooth. Ebenezer and Bernard had been robbing the wrong places, busting in windows and finding little more than some rolling papers or a single onion.

They were supposed to burgle a home belonging to the parents of a Blood drug dealer with whom Fatty had a tremendous bloody beef. He wanted to send a message and Ronald and Shitty were there to take care of things if the parents showed up. Fatty was taking too much drugs to make any sort of methodical calculation. Take everything and beat everyone up, he said to the boys. I don't know. If you see Marc-Antoine, cock-sucker, just...saw his head off. He turned away and muttered to no one in particular, fucking try to clap me up, not gonna clap me up. He was walking in circles, losing it,

sweating through his shirt, shaking more coke rocks out. Of all the daughters born in the world everyday, why he wondered, was it his with childhood epilepsy. Barely been born and shaking violently for fifteen minutes straight two or three times a night. The funny thing was he didn't even want to acknowledge the child and certainly never wanted to see her mother again, but the little creature looked up at him and shook all over the place and his fat evil heart broke.

Ronald and Shitty waited outside while Ebenezer and Bernard tiptoed around and filled up Bernard's backpack.

We're in the wrong house again, said Bernard. He gave Ebenezer an I-tablet and a fancy heavy watch, then spun around so he could zip them up in the backpack. Ebenezer explored the house, silent and fascinated. This is how some people live, he thought. There was a lot of wood, the shelves, desks, all golden, dark and rich. There were books with gold writing in an alphabet he didn't know. He looked at a large painting of a herd of horses running through a river.

Maybe it's like professor gangsters, said Bernard.

Look at this, said Ebenezer. He put on an immense furry hat the size and shape of a large birthday cake and pointed at it.

This, he said, is a hat.

Bernard nodded, impressed, and then the front door opened.

Bernard and Ebenezer froze and looked at each other with the whites of their eyes shining out. A small and round old white man entered with a jingle of keys, his top half obstructed by two large cases of water bottles. Ebenezer could see the top of his shiny

bald head over top the cases of water bottles and his corduroys and old man shoes beneath. The man set the water bottles down by the door.

Phew, he said, phew, and stretched his back before turning and noticing in his kitchen there appeared to be two Haitian boys, one wearing a shtreimel. The little man looked from Bernard to Ebenezer and slowly opened his mouth. Ebenezer would remember back to this delicate little moment when he couldn't sleep at Centre Bourassa. The man's mouth open and wet, one hand up against the back of his head while he put together what was going on. The cool marble reflection of the countertop. The weight of the silence, the man's olive corduroys, and the hot fur of the hat.

Before the man could say anything, Ronald and Shitty were behind him. They shoved him, sent him flying through the door and shut it. Shitty held a gun that looked like it would work just fine. The man yelped and sprawled out on the floor.

Stay down, said Shitty. Stay there, he said. Ebenezer, are you Ebenezer?— Écoute Ebenezer le fuck! Get some rope. Go— I said stay down, he said with an explosion of spit and kicked the man who yelped again and covered his face down by the water bottles.

We're in the wrong house, Ronald said. He scratched himself on the chest.

Yes, said Ebenezer. Bernard stayed behind the countertop staring at the old man whose hands shook over his face.

Take my money, the man said, and rolled to reach his wallet. Ronald kicked him right in the corduroyed butt.

Let's just go, said Ebenezer.

I said get some rope! Or duct tape, said Shitty.

Ebenezer walked away and looked for rope or duct tape. He shook, his hearing went in and out and he forgot what he was looking for. So he just looked around. He saw more old books and black and white photographs on the wall. There was a photograph propped up on a table of a beautiful young woman standing in front of an old car with her hair blowing and her mouth open wide like she was laughing. Ebenezer remembered he was still wearing the hat. He took it off and lay it down in front of the photograph. He hoped they could leave soon.

Ebenezer! Shitty yelled, and Ebenezer went back into the kitchen. Bernard had one of those big packing tape dispensers and was cocooning the old man, mummifying him. Bernard wound it, fed it through the man's jaws and around the back of his head. The man wheezed on the tape and looked at Ebenezer.

Let's just go, Ebenezer said. It's not the right house.

Ronald dwarfed Ebenezer. He's seen us. He's seen your face.

Shitty squeezed Ebenezer's collarbone from behind. Allons, he said. He twisted Ebenezer around and shoved him towards the old man on the floor. Take the tape off his mouth, Shitty said.

Ebenezer got on his knees by the old man. He found the end of the tape sticking out beside one ear and twisted the mess of tape off. It was slick with blood and saliva.

Don't scream, he said. The man breathed heavily, drooling onto the floor.

I'm making a sandwich, said Shitty. Ask him if he knows Marc-Antoine's parents.

Do you know Marc-Antoine's parents? Ebenezer relayed. The man said nothing, just breathed and stared. He doesn't know, said Ebenezer from his knees. I think he's hurt.

Ronald and Shitty whispered between themselves in the kitchen. Ronald looked unnerved. About a week after this whole what-have-you he was shot four times in the chest and stomach outside a strip club in Laval and pronounced dead at the hospital. Shitty looked like shit.

Ask him again, said Ronald after a moment.

Why would this old white man know anything about Marc-Antoine? said Ebenezer.

Stop asking fucking questions! Ronald said. Let me think. Shitty was more decisive; he didn't need to think, he ran over with the gun out, shoved Ebenezer aside and held it right in front of the man's nose. Ebenezer cracked his own head off a small table by the door, the man screamed cross-eyed looking at the gun, Ronald paced back and forth waving his hands beside his ears and Bernard started to cry.

Where's Marc-Antoine?

The man shook his head.

Where's Marc-Antoine? Shitty said louder. Are you going to stay quiet? he added. Ebenezer steadied himself and rubbed the sore spot at the back of his head. There was a trickle of hot blood and he was angry.

Ebenezer—it is Ebenezer right?—give him a kick, said Shitty.

Ebenezer shook his head.

Give him a kick.

No, said Ebenezer. Violence was his first language. He had no problem with fights and blood and people crying. Everyone gets the shit knocked out of them sometimes. But he looked at the very old man twisted on the floor in his olive corduroys and old man shoes. He looked at his eyes and said no firmly.

Câlîce le fuck! said Shitty and booted the man.

The man, whose name was Mr. Bachmann around this point figured he was going to die anyway and he'd had enough. His wife was dead, and he missed her and felt halfway dead. And his parents didn't survive the Holocaust and come to Canada only speaking Yiddish and sew buttons and cobble shoes to put him through law school so that the Bachmanns went from penniless to rich in one generation so that these young bastards could rob him, kick him and wear his shtreimel.

He shook in his cocoon and yelled every awful thing he could think of about these boys, Marc- Antoine, whoever that was, and youth and criminality in general. He shouted some awful things about Haiti, where he assumed they came from.

Do it! Do it what's the holdup, he screamed, thrashing and worming about. Bachmann closed his eyes and mumbled and sang softly what, to Ebenezer, sounded like an ancient spell.

Shitty's eyes went wide behind his gun. I'm gonna tape him back up, said Ebenezer, thinking it was the only thing to do.

I could shoot him right in the brain, said Shitty. Bachmann didn't open his eyes and continued his chants.

Shhh, shhh! Ebenezer said, shaking with his head smarting and trying to find the end of the tape on the tape dispenser. Still Bernard cried and Ronald paced and Ebenezer expected the gun to go off any minute. He stretched out the tape and stuck it to Bachmann's ear. Bachmann opened his eyes viciously and bit Ebenezer's hand.

Ebenezer cried out and struck Bachmann on the head with the tape dispenser. He cracked and kicked and punched at the old man, and heard himself scream, felt the blood boiling in his skull and felt very good for a few seconds, then very bad. He backed away as Bachmann continued his chanting and then there were sirens and the room glowed red then blue, red then blue, and the boys fled.

Anna froze, folding dishcloths and washcloths, shocked that Ebenezer was recounting this to her. She wondered if she should go get a more experienced staff.

You've been carrying this around the whole time? she said. You didn't tell anyone? No one?

Ebenezer poked his head out from his folded arms.

I kicked him, he said. I hit him. I didn't have to.

Anna sat beside him with the dishcloths folded in squares on her lap. Well, maybe you can talk to this Bachmann. Maybe I can talk to him. She knew nothing of these matters.

Ebenezer remembered Bachmann's devastating stare from court.

You've almost served your time—you're almost there Ebenezer, said Anna, wishing she had some answer, or anything worth saying at all.

When the police came, Ebenezer stayed quiet and didn't struggle when they put the cuffs on. He'd been arrested before, sure, but this was big—robbery, assault, unlawful confinement. He stayed quiet, said nothing to the police, because of all the things people tried to say he was, or possibly was—criminal, victim, survivor, gangster, good brother, bad son, bilingual, Haitian, Canadian, Haitian-Canadian, receiver of nude texts, abused child, murderer, honest, liar, alien-bird-pumpkin—whatever the case, he was not a rat. He wanted Anna to take him away, to where she came from, where he dreamed there were quiet, dark, empty fields, and horses running through the rivers.

Anna wasn't sure what to do about Matthias. He was either a puppy, batting at her hair and trying to kiss, or aloof and unreachable, cold to the touch. He could be two different people. Even his eyes would change shape and colour. Maybe she should dump him. What was all this anyhow—wasn't a relationship supposed to be you like each other, you date, you laugh, you're nice to each other, treat each other well, you have sex, and it's nice and good, most of the time? Maybe she was a Valley hick idiot.

He lost it when she questioned, or merely posited, really just brushed up against the idea that some of his loud positions regarding capitalism and climate change were no longer scientific or rational and had slipped into the realm of political, even religious. Well, that was not the right thing to brush against. He yelled, and stomped around the apartment, and said later that he overreacted because he was hungry. Anna herself didn't treat people poorly if she hadn't had lunch yet.

She buttoned on a plaid shirt with her tongue sticking out the side of her mouth in the mirror. It was a strange tartan of yellow, purple and green, the fabric covered in those tiny little balls cheap and old shirts get. The shirt was too short, why are shirts all too short and too wide, and she ripped it off and sighed at herself. She wouldn't dump him. He wasn't so bad, but the real thing she didn't want to address was going back to being alone right now. A tiny cold planet spinning around Montreal afraid of everyone.

It's hopeless, he said. This is lunacy. Why do we do this? He had his pencil in his teeth and was talking about his poetry. His sonnet about how his love was a ship out at sea was not doing very well. Every publication was sending it back, even the new online ones Anna'd never heard of and certainly didn't care about. Why are you writing a novel? he asked, letting his hand fall off her shoulder down her back.

Anna's eyes fogged up and she drew a deep breath. Because I used to be smart, then I fucked up in University, fucking absolute seat of sanctimony and I will live to see that building crumble, mark me,—she wagged a finger—but it's my fault for not having the courage to drop out and join the army, so I have no idea what to do about jobs, except to clean shit up off the floor at different places, and this is the only way I know how to say I'm still here. She came out of her trance and made a fist and knocked on her head.

Well maybe one day, with enough work, and edits, and years, there is an outside chance an agent might consider the possibility of taking a look at the first three paragraphs, he said. Anna turned and shrugged.

Sorry, he added.

All my fucking characters are saying things no one has ever said in real life, said Anna, staring at her computer screen with her teeth bared. Disquieted. I am disquieted. That's an odd word eh?

At Café Plus, Anna walked in whistling away with her shirt too short, and Yvette caught Océane's eye and nodded towards Anna, then folded her arms, all the old tattoos creased over the starched apron.

Anna, Océane said, Yvette says you are writing. Yvette smiled her large crooked, chip-toothed smile.

Yes, well, um, said Anna. A mystery novel.

I'm also writing, said Océane, pointing at her chest. I'm a poet.

Poetry, said Anna.

Can I read what you've got? Will you read it for me?

OK.

C'mon you can come to my writing group tonight. Are you in a writing group?

No, sometimes I share with my boyfriend or my mum.

Océane reached back and fixed her already perfect hair. Non, non, Anna câlce you need a writing group. C'est comme, ah, infection, illness, writing—you need help.

OK I'll go! Anna loved this new Océane. Thank you, really. I don't know if it's any good.

Océane laced her fingers through Anna's hand and raised her hand up with hers. She shook both their hands in the air with an energetic, devilish grin and then went and smoked darts with Yvette.

And so that night, Anna put her laptop in her backpack, took the metro to Parc-Ex and met Océane and two of her poet-buddies to share and comment on writing, with wine and snacks. It was a lovely evening and all the windows in the apartment were opened high as they'd go with the curtains fluttering and dancing in.

When it was Anna's turn she got very nervous. She was aware of her face full of wine, felt her face move and heard her voice as she started to read very slowly. The scene she'd chosen for the group was yet another murder scene. This time it was the unheralded downfall of a retired Giant Tiger manager with sleep apnea bludgeoned with an old auger by an unseen antagonist at an agrarian venue based on her recollection of Fearnoch Live-stock Sales. She had tried to pack in as many strange ideas and words into the death scene as she could, to make it particular. Words she was trying to find a home for: guileless, gormless, bon-vivant, suchlike, doodad, quasar. The poets listened with their wine and their mouths open. Then the former Giant Tiger manager died in ineffable pain, the sun shining on his opened brain, and Anna said, OK I'll stop there, thank you for listening.

It was quiet, except for the curtains. The poets stared at her, frozen, mute, and Océane had a tear in a big streak down her cheek. She sniffed and whispered, *tu me niaises crisse*. She wiped her face, shook her head, then began to laugh. Anna! she said, and smacked her on the back.

Anna fell over to one side and hid her head in a pillow. She didn't know if she would laugh, cry, or fall asleep.

This whole time you had that, and you didn't tell me, Océane said. This whole time!

So, it's good? Anna had half her face out of the pillow.

It is...magnificent, said Océane. Fucking...

La poésie, said one of the poets quietly.

Anna rolled her face back into the pillow and said, Oh my God I thought it was shit! And laughed and laughed and started hiccuping. Thank you, thank you, she said.

They all went and sat on the balcony with their legs swinging off, lit some candles, the warm breeze blowing every fabric and every strand of hair around lovingly and everything about the world was better. The smells, winds, sounds, energies, atomic transactions, everything glowed and breathed, better.

Several of Kirby's colleagues noticed that he shrunk a tiny bit each day. Stooped, hunched, back fused up and rounded, looking more and more at the ground. He charged in on the first day, early and valiant, fresh pleated pants, ready to put his fucking back into it. He'd dive into all open files, work through the night if needed, alone, a single light in all the dark brick and glass. He would give folks back their human rights and woe to any oppressor.

And each day he was told no, not yet, no, just wait, there isn't a project at this time, just wait. He shrank and shrank. The one file he had he didn't understand, and he'd missed the acceptable window in which to say he didn't understand. He sweat and looked

and looked at it, trying to will it into some kind of sense. But, he was getting the feeling it didn't matter anyway.

Just tell your boss this is fucking stupid, said Peace. She probably would actually do it if it was her.

That's not really how this works, said Kirby. He was exhausted, even though he got a good sleep and didn't do anything all day.

Peace was already thinking about something else. She had no time for anything boring. Her mother had raised her on a beach, naked among the cedars, with no rules, no expectations except love and peace, no shut the fuck up and listen, Peace, child. She wandered away to go and try to organize a potluck.

Kirby finally drew himself together and spoke with Mrs. Tremblay the next day.

Are there any new files? he asked. Any new big complaints?

I just need you to sit tight, Kirby, she said. How about the POCC? Did you email the TR3?

Kirby had a headache just trying to listen and play along. His head hurt, his chest tightened, even his bag ached. They were going to run out of acronyms. Or start speaking exclusively in them. I don't understand what I'm doing, he said.

OK.

I have never understood what I'm doing here.

Ah. OK—nothing?

Nothing.

You should take some leave, I think, Kirby. You look awful. Mrs. Tremblay let out her breath slowly, concerned, a small scarf knotted at one side of her neck.

I don't want time off! I want to help!

No, I'm going to insist. The leave is there for a reason.

So, I'm on stress leave because I'm stressed about how there's nothing for me to do at work.

Mrs. Tremblay stood up to begin the procedure of Kirby leaving her office so she could get back to work.

You're taking some personal time to recharge, she said. Kirby, you're just one piece of a massive operation. You'll have days where you don't think you're making a difference, believe me. Talk to HR, I'll see you in a few weeks, fresh as ever. She patted his arm.

There's a lot of people not making any difference around here, Kirby said, getting reckless. Seems to me there's almost too much government.

Ah, said Mrs. Tremblay, holding the door open. But I thought you were a socialist.

Kirby went home and made chicken because he wanted chicken and forgot for a moment that Peace, while pregnant, threw up at even the mention of chicken. She was out having brunch with the Community Association. Kirby sat with his chicken on the sofa. What would his revolutionary heroes do, he thought, probably not sit around with chicken, and then he heard Peace cough outside and open the door and remembered about the chicken.

Peace entered like a cyclone.

Kirby dear, you're home! she kissed him on the top of his head. Look at this, she turned and posed, holding her stomach. Getting a gut almost! She put down her bag and continued, I had some good news, I was talking to Dorothy at the Association and there's a job opening in town—inclusion officer with the vice-equity provost! Doesn't that sound like me? And, you know what my shaman says, and oh my God is that chicken, and she instantly turned and ripped a gargantuan barf across the hardwood. Then she yelled at Kirby for a long time, barfing more, and fair enough, he thought. Pregnancy was barf and yelling.

Peace ate mainly turnips at the moment. My child is going to be almost exclusively constituted from turnips, thought Kirby. He packed up his hockey bag and didn't tell Peace he was on stress leave.

John was excitable on the drive to hockey. Lévesque keep your head up tonight lad! he yelled, shaking his knees. Mikey wanted to resume never saying anything about anything, and he drove the Hyundai, distracted by the sunset. He did wonder why they had to play these French wizards so often. It would be nice for once to run up his stats against one of the shit teams.

A masterpiece of mammoth sky held over Fearnoch. The last summer days detonated and burned silently, deep orange heaven and purple cirrus like vertebrae. Mikey felt the weight of heaven on the Hyundai, he was humbled and docile beneath glowing guts of clouds bigger than his entire township. Maybe, he considered, I'll become a priest.

Watch the frigging road there Mike, said John.

Nothing really meant a whole lot under the breadth of the painted atmosphere: the fugacious crust of Fearnoch, the Younghusband log-barns with sheet-metal roofs, Polly and Johnny snoozing before her night shift, the cows licking at roots and each other, the hawks riding up the gyres. Everything was only a ribbon, a shimmer, but they fit everything they had in there. They loved each other and hated each other, played hockey and they drank 50. The breeze turned and the trees shifted. Mikey had a little benign foreboding: maybe something was coming for them all, something bad, but not yet, not tonight, tonight was for birds floating up into muted celestial cinders and the sermons of the hockey-barn.

John was also cowed and mildly spiritual. He wanted to go for a walk down below by the tracks with Polly and Johnny and just stand under all the orange and purple. The world could go and do what it wanted, as long as he and his family had the rectangle of acres under the sky from the road to the tracks, and he'd put in work, make babies, then die. That was all he needed from his time on the planet.

When the Lord made Fearnoch, he said, He took his time to make sure he got everything just right. He was being pretty cheesy but also wasn't entirely kidding. He squeezed Mikey's shoulder.

Big game, big game Mikey lad, oh we have a new player tonight, I forgot to say.

Well hopefully he knows how to score eight fucking goals, said Mikey.

She.

Oh.

She responded to my ad in *The Weekender*.

You put an ad in *The Weekender*?

She said she played University-level.

At the rink there were about eleven people in the stands. A few old-timers in Fearnoch Syrup Kings sweatshirts talking their twangs at each other, with pepperettes and beer in Horton's cups. One Québécois girlfriend sat frozen and annoyed with a blanket on her lap and the tip of her nose red.

Yes got a crowd tonight! said John. I'm going no-bucket for warm-up.

Kirby filled up the water bottles in the dressing-room bathroom, John put the box of beer on the zamboni snow, and Mikey went through his superstitions as he dressed. Right shin-pad before left, always, tap the goalie's pads four times, and so on. And then Stella came in.

Oh Jesus, said Mikey.

Ya thanks for the invite there Mikey, said Stella in a growl. She put her much shorter sticks with the others against the wall and found a spot among all the Codys and Coreys.

Boys this is our new player, um... said John, pausing.

Stella, said Stella.

Stella, said John, so let's all make her welcome. What position do you play? he said and handed her a Fearnoch sweater.

I usually go middle.

OK. Let's try you centring...he looked around, a little confused that Mikey was glaring at him. Mikey's line? Shake it up here.

John sat back down next to Mikey, and Mikey whispered, that's the dump-babe!

What?

I thought you said she was beautiful, Kirby whispered.

Look at her! Mikey hissed, pointing at Stella with an elbow pad.

Stella got up, took one of her sticks and started to roll it back and forth in her hands. She stared at the ground, shaking her head and talking quietly to herself.

She looks frigging nuts buddy, said John.

Why'd you put her on the team? said Mikey. This is the one night a week I get to be myself and not worry about shit.

What do you want me to do? John said. We need skaters— she's from Thunder Bay for Jesus' sake! Stella pulled her shoulder-pads over her head, blew some loose hair out of her face and nodded at John.

Ready to fucking go coach, said Stella.

And Stella could play. From puck-drop, it was obvious to all the stunned onlookers that the smallest player was going to exert her will on the game. She dangled and toe-dragged all over the place with her braids whipping around, dummying the Pontiac defence, howling for the puck in the corner. The old-timers stopped discussing refrigeration units and how many cows they were milking and stared speechless. The zamboni driver by the gate stared too and burnt his fingers with his cigarette. The French girlfriend, who

was tired of being called a puck-bunny, put away her phone and cheered for Stella. She went down and banged on the glass. John was ecstatic.

Not bad Mikey, John said, and he hopped the boards. Got any more players at the dump?

The Quebec team got out to any early 2-0 lead, but it would not be a blowout tonight. Mikey dug the puck out for Stella before Lévesque, the French captain, pitchforked him down to the ice.

Yes Mikey! Not afraid to take a hit to make a play! Kirby shouted from the bench, beating his stick on the boards.

Stella paused with the puck and drew two defenders towards her before backhanding a pass to John, all alone, and he stepped into it, got everything on it and crushed it top-shelf glove-side. 2-1.

The Québec team, angry they wouldn't get to cakewalk through Fearnoch again, began to push back. Lévesque was hitting everything that moved, and their top scorer, the hotdogger in white skates, hogged the puck more and more, trying to score highlight-reel goals without using his teammates.

At second intermission it remained 2-1. The Fearnoch team huddled by the home bench. They wheezed and leaned on their sticks, exhausted, but proud they were making a game of it in their barn.

One more period, said John. He paused as one of the Codys spat a huge plug of tobacco out. Stella, he said, you just keep fucking givin' 'er like that. Mikey— get open, give her something to pass to. One more period. Twenty minutes for one goal boys. And

I'll tell you right fucking now, they're not going to get shit past us on defence. He patted Kirby on the chest.

The Quebecers collapsed around their goalie, content to defend and not push for more goals. They sacrificed their bodies, dropping to the ice and launching themselves in front of every shot. With three minutes on the clock it was still 2-1. The Fearnoch team were peppering the French goal, but every shot was hitting a stick, a shin-pad, a skate, an arm, deflecting into the corner or up into the stands. Stella found some room with the puck, spun and wired it on net, but a Pontiac defenceman got in front of it and took it right off his helmet. He lay on the ice, dazed and rattled, and the referee whistled the play dead.

If you can't take it, don't block my fucking shots, said Stella, annoyed and skating to the bench.

The only Quebec player trying to do anything on offence was the fellow at centre in the white skates. With all the Fearnoch forwards driving the net, no one was paying him a whole lot of attention. One of Mikey's shots ricocheted right onto the centreman's stick and he wheeled around and dosey-doe-ed beautifully around a Cody. It looked like he might have a clear lane, a breakaway in on the Fearnoch goalie, who was terrified of the man's skills.

But as he crossed the blueline, John and Kirby, ferocious on defence, would hold the Fearnoch line. They timed their backwards crossovers perfectly and converged together to close the lane and clothesline this superstar. He landed on the back of his neck, stick, helmet and gloves off in every direction, and slid away with his white skates stuck up in the air.

Kirby lifted the puck out of harm's way, and Stella got it at centre with seconds left on the clock. She carved deep into the ice and found another gear. She chipped the puck around a French player, and gathered it on the other side as the old-timers stood up out of their seats. Mikey knew he had to find some open ice, but he had two defenders on him, slashing him, grabbing his sweater. He felt their sticks on his spine, hammering across with ribs. Stella waited. The old-timers looked at the clock, then back to Stella as she stickhandled back in a circle, unfazed by the seconds clicking away.

Mikey felt an arm draped around him and finally had enough of the abuse. He swung back with a violent elbow, which the ref didn't see, and then he was free at the side of the net. Stella noticed, she noticed everything on the ice and knew exactly how the play would unfold. She waited stubbornly, relentlessly, until finally the defender in front of her dropped to block the pass, then she went down on one knee and sauced a gorgeous aerial pass to Mikey.

Look at that fucking sauce, whispered Corey on the bench.

Mikey watched the perfect little delicious black UFO spinning towards him, not wobbling, over all the clown-shit between him and Stella, sticks, legs, ice, refrigerated air, language barriers, screams, old-timers, puck-bunnies, hockey haircuts, Scottish-Irish-French-Iroquois-Algonquin skirmishes and collaborations, and he knew he'd never been so attracted to anyone in his life. Nothing but the puck mattered for one second, in all Fearnoch, not people who talked too much or people who didn't talk at all, not people who knew a lot or knew nothing at all, not farms or pigs or Climate Death, not the weather, not the city marching closer and closer, not miscarriages or trying to keep teeth

in your kid's head and hoping he loved you, nothing for a second but the puck and its immaculate journey up, over and down onto Mikey's stick. It dropped right between his feet and merely needed a nudge over the goal-line as the horn went. 2-2.

The eleven or so fans of hockey night in Fearnoch ruptured into jubilation. Popcorn and beer flung from the Horton's cups decorated the stands. Because it wasn't the playoffs there would be no overtime and Fearnoch and Quebec would have to accept a tie. They shook hands at centre ice.

'Oly fuck who's the new player? said Lévesque to John.

In the dressing room Mikey handed the pints around and John gave Stella the MVP hat to wear, which was an old beaten-up Fearnoch Farm Supply baseball hat. She looked very happy with the smelly hat dwarfing her head and her cheeks burning pink. Mikey gave her two beers.

Nice finish Mikey, she said, loosening her skates.

When Mikey got home he was too wound-up to sleep. He puttered around, thirsty and restless. He looked at Robert Plant, who seemed determined to continue dying, and thought about Stella's pass and his finish. Oh boy I'm getting some dangerous feelings going here, Robert, he said.

He looked at Stella's number in his phone, and tried to conceive of an appropriate message. But how to say— sorry I didn't invite you, what a game, you're the best, I'm afraid of you, do you want to go swimming in the river? Mikey didn't know how to write that message tonight, and threw the phone away. He squirmed in the dark, scuttled around looking at the stars with his legs twitching, for tomorrow was St. Mikey's Day.

Matthias made supper for Anna as a surprise.

I've got all the things I think you like, he said. There was roasted squash, a salad full of seeds and onions and shit and Kraft Dinner with wieners. Anna put her hands on her face and stared at the table.

I love all these things! What is going on—this is beautiful! And she pinched his chin and gave him a long kiss and wanted to kiss more. Is this—why the surprise?

I wanted to do something nice, he said. I think we've been fighting a lot.

I think so too. Anna put her hand on his knee. You forget about Kraft Dinner eh? Then you're sad and wanna be eight again and just believe in something, there it is. She closed her eyes with her fork sticking out the top of her fist.

Same shit box as ever, she said.

She was warm and full and put her head on Matthias' shoulder. She didn't mind his views against having children or for slam-poetry at the moment and they were just two more lovers under the moon full of Kraft Dinner.

Let's go for a walk, said Matthias. Summer's almost done.

Oh I'd love that, Anna straightened up. I really would Matthias, but I got a nightshift, remember.

It was Ebenezer's last night, for this stretch at least, as an incarcerated youth. He was asleep in his room when Anna got to her shift at midnight, which was odd. Anna wanted to see him and tell him a surprise.

The night-staff weren't allowed to sleep, but they all did. Anna always had trouble, lying on the chesterfield in the common room waiting for a rat to run across her or imagining a boy hanging himself with his sheets.

Every hour Anna checked on all the boys and marked down that she did so in a binder. She hated the intrusions, worried she'd knock on the door and open it to find them masturbating furiously, absent with a tunnel in the wall, or dead with their wrists and eyes open.

In Room #7, Ebenezer was just a small mound under his blanket, at midnight, 1 a.m., at 2 a.m., same small mound. Anna watched until she saw the mound rise and fall incrementally, and was sure he was breathing. She winced when the door creaked as she closed it slowly.

At 4 a.m., Anna rubbed her eyes and knocked on Room #7, opening it to find Ebenezer sitting up and wide awake.

Hi! said Anna.

I free up tomorrow. Ebenezer's eyes shone big and bright.

I know. Congratulations. Can I sit here? Anna sat on the end of the bed.

Ebenezer tented his knees up to make room on the cot, hugged his knees and shook. Anna wondered if he was thinking about drugs, sex and freedom more than not getting shot.

Ebenezer, she said, can you please be careful out there?

Yeah, I will.

I wish you didn't have to go back there.

It's my home.

Anna considered that and felt stupid. Listen, you know, Mr. Bachmann, she whispered.

He turned to the wall. He was recalling in heavy pieces the man's hair, house, hat, his ribs cracking, his life they busted in on.

I got his email, said Anna.

Ebenezer frowned.

I thought, said Anna, I'd email him, and we could see if he'd meet you. She exhaled, feeling stupid now her idea was put into words.

Ebenezer didn't say anything.

Would you like that? Anna asked.

Yes...

I'll email him then and maybe...

I don't think it's legal though.

Well, there's no court order against it, I don't think. I'll set it up. Here's my number.

That's definitely not legal I know that.

To talk to each other once you're out?

Yes.

Well I'm about done listening to the rules on this one, said Anna, fiddling with her hands on her lap. They pay me seventeen dollars an hour to handle suicide, rats, and shit, and violence. You get what you pay for.

Ebenezer laughed.

Bless, he said.

I'll email Mr. Bachmann then. And you—just don't get killed, don't go around acting hard. We all know you're hard OK. Can I hug you please, said Anna.

Yes, he said and leaned forward.

Anna was planning on saying something like this: there are people you respect because you should respect all people. Then there are people you respect more because they're special to you. And then beyond that there's a few people you respect the most because of what they have to deal with and how they deal with it. And you're one of those few people.

But she didn't say it, she only hugged the boy for a long time, sitting on his prison bed at four in the morning.

At nine in the morning Anna went home to sleep and Ebenezer completed his outgoing interview then met his new parole officer. He packed up his blue clothes, posters of cars and babes, and his sleepy time tea box, and collected \$45, half a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a silver chain from the office. Into a bloody pink clouded Montreal morning, he stepped forward, a free man.

Mikey worked the hot steel tasting the Labatt 50 to come. It was very hot; summer going with a burning finish. Stella ignored him, or had too much dump-data to compute. Sweat stung into Mikey's eyes and he tried to dab at them with the back of his work gloves, but that got oil and engine-grease into his eyes too. He thought how wonderful to drink in excess of four pints, but also felt that scary old thirst awaken down in there. I'll

drink lots of water, he reasoned. And no drugs. Oh Lord. He looked around for Stella as he drove the forklift back to the plate-and-structural steel pile, sweating like a fevered pig.

The beavers were flooding John's back field by the tracks, and the coyotes, who had annexed an old shed as their den, were singing louder and louder at night and John fretted about his calves. John had repaired the fence near the beaver dam each of the last three summers. He thought about dynamiting everything, filling the sky with animal parts, maybe he'd even get some on Kirby's lawn. But he silently admired the beavers and coyotes' will to live and work.

At supper, Johnny whispered something to Polly and turned to his father, with his eyes arched up, his entire face ablaze with the glee only a child knew.

Why don't you tell Daddy what the dog did, said Polly, eating her carrots with a spoon and looking like she might fall asleep into her carrots.

Johnny's face ruptured into a wide crinkled grin. The honour of passing this vital information to his father was not lost on him.

Puked! Johnny said with a squeak and then covered his mouth with both hands.

Oh Tip, said John. Tippy eyed him mournfully from the floor.

He ate some garbage from across the road, said Polly. Then he came in here and ate some of my birth control. The phone rang and Tippy got himself up and howled at it.

A rusted maroon Dodge Neon came down the laneway then. MacKay's Taxi: 'Serving Fearnoch and the Valley' was painted on the door. Well I hope it's a happy St. Mikey's Day for all, said Polly. John kissed her, then Johnny.

And please make sure Mikey doesn't die, Polly called from the door.

I promise, said John.

One of the frigging fifteen or so brothers of the MacKay clan drove John to pick up Mikey. John was pretty sure this one was Wayne. He spoke of horses and pigs.

Have you been working with horses long? asked John.

Oh all my life, all my life.

And pigs?

All my life, all my life. Wayne looked over the wheel into the sky. I don't know what the sky is getting on with these days Johnny, he said.

There's Mikey right there, John said pointing at the house behind the store.

Where are we off to tonight? asked Wayne.

Over to the Quebec side, Hull, said John.

Oh a good piece, said Wayne, looking at the metre.

Beers, John said slowly and loudly.

It's good your generation doesn't drink and drive as much. When I was young, there was one cop between here and Renfrew, he said. Just keep 'er between the ditches. No goddamn public transit for us Fearnoch lads eh? Wayne was clearly sentimental and excited, dipping away into his youth. Horses, pigs and driving drunk.

Mikey was lousy at stopping or slowing down drinking when he'd obviously had enough. It was a skill he'd never grasped. This frightened John sometimes, how he'd drink faster and faster, even though his eyes were pointed in different directions. Mikey was thoroughly enjoying his cold, cold Labatt 50s, and they toasted another St. Mikey's Day, this year at a darkened bar attached to an old hotel in Vieux-Hull. There were light wooden chairs arranged in fours around small tables and painting of cowboys and steers roamed the walls. The regulars mainly played dart tournaments and had alcoholism.

I love places like this, said John raising his 50.

They were amalgamating quite the heap of empties on the table. Mikey drank deeply from his fifth beer, savouring the custom of his holiday. He admired at length the shape and temperature of this beer bottle, the beadlets of condensation running on deep amber.

It's too bad it's not Wednesday, said Mikey. We could have wings. Wing-nite Wednesday is the heartbeat of the people. I say if you want to understand the real Canada—go to Wing-nite Wednesday.

What—I don't know what you've got in your head sometimes, said John.

Sometimes it gets out. To the detriment of my normalcy.

Yeah, your beleaguered normalcy.

I haven't come down from that game yet, Mikey said, deciding hockey was appropriate to talk about. Some game it was.

Stella might be the best to ever wear Fearnoch black and yellow, said John. What the hell is wrong with you getting mad at me for putting her on the team?

Don't make me feel bad, said Mikey. Not on my holiday.

Why don't you talk to her? Why don't you talk to me about these things?

What do you mean talk— just fill the air with a bunch of little shit things? No one's really talking, they're just yelling to feel good.

I won't tell anyone if you talk to me when you feel bad. Look at your eyes for Christ's sake, you look like a...like a shitty poem.

I like having a little crush on Stella, said Mikey. But I don't want to test it. You know? I'm scared—I'm being honest. I just want to leave it where it is for a minute — a crush. Probably she has a wonderful boyfriend. I'm being honest here Johnny.

You, said John, are fucked.

And I don't want to show her how bad a loser I am. Mikey drank more.

You're not a loser, John said. Fuck off I don't wanna hear that.

You asked me to talk then you tell me not to. I am a fucking loser—I work at the dump, I—I barely remember how sex works. I am also a coward.

A coward.

Yes, I've thought about this. I have milk in my veins.

Well you're pretty courageous at drinking beer.

Remember Susie?

Yeah but remember you're not allowed to talk about her anymore. We've gone over every conceivable scenario with Susie.

Once this huge drunk hick at the Fair said: you're a Darling? I know some Darlings. All of them queers, Mikey said. Then he said: let me touch your poofy hair.

That sounds like something that would happen at the Fair, said John. He studied a cowboy and reflected on how smelly, diseased and hungover they must have been on long nights in the saddle.

Touch your hair, he says, Mikey continued. And Susie said: don't do it Mikey, don't let this huge fucker touch your hair. So she's tugging on my arm, but I just lean forward and let this goon piece of shit grab my hair.

John crinkled his nose and made his hand into a fist around his beer.

I let him. And Susie said: you're spineless. You are spineless, he repeated. And she was right, all along.

That doesn't make you a coward. Just don't do that again.

I am a coward. Mikey was adamant.

Well, then I'm also a coward. And a loser.

You have a beautiful wife, a child and a hundred acres.

You wanna switch? You take dog-barf and the dead farm and I get to watch Youtubes in the garage. 'Cause that's gonna be good for me.

They were quiet for a while and unfestive.

Just please don't kill yourself, John said. That's all I want.

I don't feel drunk but I've had so much Cinquante I feel like my teeth are falling out, said Mikey feeling around with his tongue.

Do you want me to start pulling teeth out of my head and putting them on the table? Because I can, said John.

Mikey laughed.

Let's celebrate Mikey, said John. No more of this. You talk to Stella, don't let anyone touch your hair, Fearnoch farms make a comeback and we win the championship and it all just fucking works out. More Cinquante!

Mikey pulled a fragment of melted steel out of his scalp and set it on the table, with blood and one hair coming off it.

That's what that was, he said, flicking at it.

Jesus, said John.

When it all works out I'm just gonna go stand on the hill and scream until my temples explode and blood comes out my eye-holes, said Mikey.

And I, I will be right there with you. John put his hand on Mikey's arm.

Kirby hasn't been to a St. Mikey Day in forever.

It probably wouldn't be good for his carbon footprint.

Kirby's evening was much different from John and Mikey's. He bought a black balaclava for the protest and tried it on in the mirror. He ate more turnips with Peace and they read their books on the deck and dipped and glowed with the sunset.

Fearnoch isn't so bad, said Peace, bookmarking her book and watching the swallows.

They discussed baby names.

Just not a name like Kirby, Kirby said.

My mum let me choose my own name, said Peace. Before that I was Baby.

I don't want to talk baby-talk to the baby. It's condescending and stupid. I'm going to speak to the baby like a person.

You say that, said Peace. But I bet you'll be so in love you'll say all the stupid baby things to baby.

Do you think it's half evil bringing a child into this world? We already have too many humans. He watched three obese men try to push a truck out of some mud, then took his glasses off.

Maybe whoever's in my gut right now is gonna solve all those problems, said Peace. She put her head in Kirby's lap. Maybe I'll become a scarecrow artist, she said as she dozed off.

In Hull, Mikey's aggressive consumption of Labatt 50 had attracted the bartender's ire.

Ton ami est fuckse, she said to John.

Quoi? said John.

Ton ami. She pointed at Mikey.

Mikey staggered around the tiny dance-floor with two older women. Red, blue and yellow lights shone down on him, country ballads came out of the speakers and he kicked his boots up into an ambitious dosey-doe. He almost fell off the little stage but gathered himself, hooked his thumbs together and flapped his fingers to somehow manipulate his hands into the illusion of a rather formidable eagle, and he flapped this eagle up and up to effectively resurrect himself up off the floor. The older women cheered. John was impressed. Then Mikey knocked over a speaker and broke his beer bottle.

Out! Out! Out! said the bartender.

John took Mikey by the arm and they went out into the street. They laughed and tripped on broken pavement and found the only bar that would serve them— a strip-club in an old brick schoolhouse with a pink halogen sign that read: Cabaret du Scandal.

I wish we had drugs, said Mikey.

I would do drugs, said John.

Look at this, said Mikey. He showed John his phone, on which he'd texted to Stella: do you want to go swimming in the river. What do you think? Not bad eh? He put his phone back in his pocket.

A dancer stood up on their table and slowly took her clothes off. Feathery nylon fluorescent purple garments poured and slid off of her down onto Mikey and John. They stared up with their mouths open. John drank his beer and Mikey looked at his phone some more.

No phones, said an intimidating bald man in a Cabaret du Scandal golf-shirt. His arm muscles tensed, bronzed, veined and tattooed. He wore a big leather bracelet that didn't have a watch on it.

Sorry, said Mikey. He wandered away to the bathrooms and left John with the dancer slowly gyrating on the table, eyes locked on John. Ah frig, thought John.

Mikey came back ten minutes later and gave John a grey capsule.

Take one, he said, have one John—I had one.

What is this? Is it Carfentanil? John peered at the small pill in his enormous hand.

Go on and have it — fuck it! said Mikey. He slapped John on the back and chattered his teeth.

Where'd you get it?

Mikey waved at two dancers who sat with their stilettoed boots up like they were done for the night. Their legs were lashed up in crisscrossing yellow and pink netting. They both raised their Limon Tornado coolers up at Mikey.

I got it from them, he said. It's MDMA. I think it is.

John licked the pill off his hand. Alright Mikey lad I trust you, he said.

How I see it, is that it's only once a year and it has the added bonus of keeping me up long enough so I don't piss myself, Mikey said thoughtfully. Which is a boon.

The dancer on their table sighed, gathered up her clothes and left annoyed. Mikey and John drank the place out of Cinquante and a new dancer climbed up onto their table. She began her dance and clothes, boas and underwear, once again flowed and slithered down.

Oh boy here we go, Mikey said. The pitch, cadence, the tone of everything in the place shifted and he felt his face inquisitively. He tipped into the sparkly fuzzy hold of the pills.

I am absolutely fucked off drugs and beer. How do you feel? Mikey opened his mouth as wide as he could and looked at John.

Phew, said John. Phew!

Les gars, growled the intimidating bald man. Will you take a dance with the girl? Twenty dollar.

I work at the dump, said Mikey.

I'm a farmer, said John.

The dancer, completely naked, swayed over them.

Mikey took out his phone. He texted the same thing over again. Do you want to go swimming in the river? The dancer saw this and stamped her boot down on the table beside Mikey's hand.

Eyes here, she said and pointed to herself.

Sorry again, said Mikey. I'm expecting a message. He looked at John and John looked at him, their faces ghoulish from ecstasy tablets and then they looked at the dancer, and everyone really just looked at each other fucked up and annoyed.

I wish the Mouse didn't burn down, John said. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead. Johnny better not do drugs. Oh no. Just say no Johnny. He felt like he might cry.

Mikey jumped when he felt a vibration in his pocket. He pulled out his phone again.

Is it Stella? John shouted as though he was on a rollercoaster and all the patrons and dancers turned their heads.

Mikey held up the phone and slid his finger down the screen to show it was a text from Stella and it was at least twice as long as the longest text he'd ever beheld. It simply didn't end. Mikey tried to read it but forgot how to read and felt his face had ignited and was on fire.

Uh, said Mikey. He was having difficulty computing through the information coming at him. The short story of a text message, the nudity, the glowing blue cold butt shaking and twisting above him, John's sweaty forehead, and Jesus where was the beer?

No phones! The intimidating bald man shouted. He slammed his hand with the leather bracelet on it down on the bar.

By then this dancer had simply had enough of these sweaty broke hicks on ecstasy with their phones out and their John Deere hats. With a well-timed and violent kick, she booted Mikey's phone clean out of his hand and across the bar.

Take us to Fearnoch, Wayne, John said tearfully to Wayne MacKay. Wayne met the two of them at a corner on Boulevard des Allumentières in Hull at three in the morning after receiving John's nearly incomprehensible voicemail.

You know, it's \$80, said Wayne out the window. Mikey considered touching the man's moustache.

Yeah, yes, fucking rural...rurality, said John.

C'mon I'll do it for 60, said Wayne.

What an evening, Wayne, said Mikey. Wayne sped over the vacant bridge into Ontario.

Do you have any Labatt 50 Wayne, said John.

Look at my face, said Mikey. It's aflame.

I'd like to put jam all over my face, said John, folding the sun visor to look at the mirror.

My parents gave me an ugly face, said Mikey. He rubbed his arms and checked himself over. I look like a half-drunk bag of homo milk, he said quietly.

Can you play some rock and roll? asked John. We should sleep sitting up back to back tonight, Mikey. To be safe. Like buddies at war.

That's good thinking because there's going to be a war soon, said Mikey.

John wiped a tear.

Jesus Christ what kind of evening did you lads have? said Wayne, taking his eyes off the dark road to look from one to the other. He looked awfully imposing and authoritative with his sunglasses and grey moustache.

An hour more of that and Wayne gladly dropped Mikey off in front of his parents' house.

Mikey gave Wayne \$20 and said, that should do it. Happy St. Mikey's Day to all.

He walked along the gravel road leaning heavily to one side and rubbed his hands together. Instead of going in to bed he wandered in the dark. He looped around the store, under a tree, past the pig-sty, to the barn behind his parents' house where the farmhand hung himself during the depression. The drugs and beer were wearing off good and he felt that hole opening up. We're all just trying, trying to fill that hole, he concluded. All us grist down here.

Mikey thought about trying to read Stella's novella-length text, but his phone was dead. He paused in front of the barn, then lifted the latch on the door. It yawned opened slowly and silently, invited him in to the cobwebs, the ancient straw, the must of a century, the old horse-stalls, and rusted saws and scythes on the walls. He sat in the corner until the cracked window began to glow with a vicious bleeding sunrise.

This is where the farmhand did it, right here, he thought. He felt along the rafters, looking for a mark, an old piece of rope. It must have been so easy. Get up there, tie the rope, step off the edge of the stall and it's just a little bit of kicking and spinning. Just like that.

Mikey wasn't sure what to do. Maybe he was supposed to die ten years ago but because of some cosmic error, an offline gamma-ray, he was still alive and blundering through limbo, through shit-limbo. He looked out the window again, to the punctual hateful sun. This time saw a ghost and wasn't overly shocked. The farmhand's apparition floated and fluttered past the window. He looked again and saw it was his mum in her nightie going up to get the paper. Mikey ducked his head and hid in the barn, then slid away undetected up to the loft.

At Café Plus, Anna found Yvette crying in the dish-pit. She tried to hide it, turned and sniffed with one hand on the lip of the sink. Anna rubbed her shoulder.

Je suis correct, said Yvette. Je suis correct. She sniffed again and smoothed down her apron.

Later she took Anna's hand and said, Promise me you will always talk to your mother, OK?

Matthias was making an effort to be closer to Anna and said he'd finally come have supper at Café Plus.

You don't have to, said Anna. The food is unbelievably bad.

But he wouldn't hear it. He said he'd eat anything she put in front of him. Yvette and Océane were excited to meet this Matthias.

He came in at six o'clock looking very sweet with a new shirt and haircut. Anna wiped her forehead and waved at him. Yvette crossed her arms and sized him up over the

top of her glasses. But Océane stared at him from behind the bar with her mouth open and Matthias saw her and froze in the middle of the restaurant.

He stood there a moment, looked from Anna to Yvette to Océane.

Ah, he said, um. And then he shrugged, spun around and left.

Océane put her hand to her mouth. Anna was incredulous at what was happening.

What the fuck was that? she said, running to the door to watch Matthias scurry away down the street.

Anna, Anna, Océane came to her in the doorway and crumpled on the floor, her apron a tent around her legs. I am sorry, she said. I didn't know.

Océane had been sleeping with Matthias for months. They met at a poetry reading.

He called himself Matt, she explained. He said he was in an open relationship.

I didn't know we were in one of those, Anna said. Her hearing went in and out and she sat in the closest chair. A few patrons paused with their pies.

I'm sorry, said Océane, blinking tears. She took out her phone. I will say to him—fuck you. Right now.

OK, Anna said. She thought Matthias must have been with Océane the night she let the blood orange gelato melt everywhere. She felt sick, not exactly angry or sad, but thoroughly humiliated. It's not your fault Océane, she said after a time. Don't be sorry.

Yvette came and sat with the two girls. She looked out the door, her face murderous. Anna visualized her putting an axe in Matthias' brain, which wasn't far off what Yvette was thinking.

After her shift, Anna rode the metro back to St. Henri. The empty car squealed around the corners and she dozed with her head snapping and rolling around. Maybe she should cheat. Maybe everyone did it, it was OK and acceptable because this was all one big game of deception. We kid ourselves with fairytales that say different. She closed her eyes and felt the insomniac city on her eyelids.

When she came up out of the tunnel and her phone got service, Anna saw four missed calls from Matthias. And a text saying he was coming over. In her apartment, he was sitting at the kitchen table with his hands folded together and his eyes wet.

Anna, Anna, I'm sorry, he said. OK, I didn't think you'd be into an open relationship, and I've been having trouble—I mean—you can be kinda hard to...

Anna stamped one foot, closed her eyes and put one hand in the air.

No, she said. No, you don't get to talk right now. You're gonna listen.

Matthias was quiet.

First of all, Anna began, throwing her purse on a chair, if you're gonna cheat on me, own it. Dump me. We could date, or you can fuck all the other sad poet girls and pretend like you're twenty until you're sixty, but you can't have everything. Where's your spine lad? she said, channeling her mother.

Anna, Matthias started, the fact is...

Facts! Don't you dare use that word— you don't get to use that word!

Anna—

Anna stamped her foot again. I said goodbye to an immensely troubled ganged-up seventeen-year-old today, she said, and he's twice the man you are. See—this is why no

one gets to know the end of my book. This is why! If everything is deception and, and not being truthful, well then you don't deserve shit—you don't get to know! Be sincere—I'm not asking a lot! Fucking gimme a minute here.

Anna got a glass down from the cupboard, filled it at the sink, drank it all, turned and continued: And you don't get to talk like you know everything anymore. She wiped her mouth with her sleeve. The game is up! You don't know anything, you don't know who Mussolini was, you've never read Alice Munro. And your poetry is self-important. And stop blaming everything but yourself—it's not capitalism's fault you don't shovel the fucking steps! And fuck you and your, and your...cortados, Anna concluded, running out of breath.

Matthias was quiet.

Now please, leave me alone, said Anna. She went into the bathroom, locked the door and sat on the edge of the tub breathing in hurried lungfuls.

John finished his morning chores, then worked to see if he could make the back field of any use again. He dug up rocks with pick and spade, great dirty slabs of limestone and rolled them into the tractor-bucket. The wind sighed through the old farmhouse by the tracks and John had the sensation of being watched, by ghosts. He turned back to his task and thought about getting an excavator in there or just abandoning the old field to rot forever. In the bush by the fence, the old threshing mill rusted in the weeds. Old thumb-severing giant, eater of arms, looking like a retired apocalyptic death machine. John went in to see his dad, who was drinking the flat last third of a can of tonic water used to make a

gin and tonic the night before. Jesus us Younghusbands are really out to pasture here, thought John.

Why are you drinking that? John asked. Why don't you pour it out?

John's dad looked at the tin and back to his son. I don't know, he said. 'Cause I'm Scottish?

John handed his father a card. It read: Valley Barn-Wood Restoration.

It was two young lads, said John. They take lumber from old barns you don't want, for a song, and then turn them into artisan, you know, artisan city things. They've made a fortune.

Outstanding, said John's dad.

What?

That shows a capacity for innovation and commerce.

I don't want them taking our barns.

Well everything changes, said John's dad, even though he'd had about as much change as he could weather. Across the road, the construction crews were shoving up a house a week, putting another identical crescent around another boring forgettable park with a bench and a play structure.

I told them to frig off, said John.

John's dad went and sat by the window with his book and his pants even higher than normal. Outside the field was getting down; chewed up and begging for rain. John's dad had been trying to stow himself out of the way. He sat by the window or out with his cu-

cucumbers and squash trying not to get in anyone's way. Maybe this was his mental collapse Dr. Ayoub foretold. Sitting out of the way with your pants way up, with little more to fuss with than a book and some cucumbers. Utility gone, self-reliance going, everyone forgets everything and forgets you and gives you pitying looks at the convenience store. The middle of everything you know falls out, sucking everything down a funnel, so you just tuck in your shirt and try to keep it all on the tracks. He didn't recognize much about Fearnoch anymore. He wanted to say something to his son, say there's something wrong, maybe there's not much time left. All he could come up with from his time on earth, seven decades in the fields, was: we have to be humble. That was what he had, to put in a box and give to John and say carry this forward son and good luck.

John watched his father sitting by the window. This is what he looked like most of the time now, lost with his mouth falling open. John thought about all the other dads, Mikey's dad, Polly's dad, Kirby's dad. He thought about when his father held Kirby's dad by the front of his shirt in the parking lot of the arena. John's dad didn't think anyone had seen him, but John watched holding his stick and hockey bag in the snow falling and twisting under the light over the entrance. Kirby's dad used to come into the dressing room after a loss and scream at Kirby in front of the other boys, and then drive home without him, leaving him to find a way home. John's dad held Kirby's dad against the wall in the parking lot and it didn't happen anymore. John thought he was lucky his dad was his.

He got back to work, fixing another rotted fence and remembered the pigs again, the ones that escaped when he was a boy. The pig-farmer later gave him handfuls of loonies on Fridays to slop his pigs and clean out their pen. They were happy and friendly animals, and filthy. John swore they had big human smiles and they'd laugh and run over to see if there was food. One day when they got big, the men came for their teeth. They came and ripped their largest teeth, the canines, and the pigs cried and John cried. And then another day, the men came back for their testicles. John gave the pigs apples while the men got behind them, held the animals down, seized the testicles and either cut them out, or squeezed them, clamped them until they burst. The pigs' eyes lit up wide and they screamed like people as they processed almost indescribable and truly inhuman pain. Young John sat later in the grass beside the hyperventilating castrated pigs feeling the pain in his own bag.

Mikey navigated a hangover he figured had to be a type of concussion. He called in sick and moved through a crust of the world with no magic or grace left in it. There was an evil kinetic energy to the reactions and transfers in the atoms around him. He hadn't the courage to look at Stella's text yet and talked out loud to himself.

At the community centre, Jefferson ran towards him.

The boy pulled his hair off his face, tucked it behind his ears and spoke through his hole of missing front teeth.

I have a new wrestling move, he said. The stunn-uh.

Stunner? said Mikey. I remember that.

Jefferson laughed, tried to tackle Mikey, and then gripped around his leg and slapped the ground three times.

Ding ding ding! he said.

Mikey laughed nervously and said something like, oh TKO! He looked around for Polly and felt sweat readying, overflowing the glands under his skin.

Then another boy, Roy, who was mute and autistic, wandered over to wrestle too. He jumped on Jefferson and pinned him and looked up at Mikey, face bare and affectless.

Ding ding ding, said Mikey. He tried to get a read on what was happening.

But Jefferson snapped just like Polly had warned he would. His frustration management was poor, at best, because when he was a fetus his mother had cooked his cells in gin. He lifted Roy up and slammed him into some toy wooden ducks on wheels. He kicked, punched, clawed, and cried all the while.

Fuck, Jefferson screamed. Fuck!

Roy cried silently, affectless and wet.

Mikey put his hands under Jefferson's armpits and lifted him a foot off the floor. Jefferson swung, kicked, wriggled in the air. Mikey twisted around and set him down, putting himself between the two boys and sweating pure Labatt 50.

He couldn't say: I know you have FASD, Jefferson, and it's not fair, but you can't do that, he's autistic, so he put one hand on each boy's shoulder and said, OK, OK.

Later, the elderly lady who led story-time told Mikey under no circumstances was he ever to put a hand on a child during an incident such as that.

But he was beating the absolute shit out of that boy, Mikey turned and said to Polly.

It's the rules, Polly said. We are liable.

By now Jefferson and Roy were playing with the wooden ducks like they were old friends, their eyes still puffy from crying.

It's really fucking hot today, said Mikey. He shook his wet t-shirt. Why's it so hot?

Dr. Dolan asked Mikey about romance in his next therapy session.

Oh no, said Mikey. Oh no.

C'mon now Mikey.

If I like someone I see them not as a person with their own shit but only how they'll make me happy and safe. Come and just assume a place as a perfect little piece of my life please.

Jesus, Dr. Dolan said to herself. She put her feet on her desk. What are you reading now then? she asked.

I'm almost done my massive World War Two book. I'm at the Battle of the Bulge.

What do you think?

I mean... they killed everyone. Everyone was killing everyone. Millions and millions. It's unimaginable. And you know it happened so easily. Normal people—farmers and students, milkmaids, kids off to school. Just in piles. In Belarus or China or all over. He put his palms up against his ears.

John took the old International tractor rattling and shaking down the side of Fearnoch Road to meet with Mush and the farmers' convoy. Kirby met with Fabian and Climate

Death and everyone wore black and Fabian had a large Soviet flag tied to a pole. Anna met with Mr. Bachmann in the coffee shop inside the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. And Ebenezer walked free, free and roaming through the gravel parking lots and derelict brambled parks of his Montréal-Nord in his clean blue shirt, pants, hat, and shoes trying to look good for all the girls. He wasn't sure where his mum was, and he decided to go to the dépanneur to buy lots of treats for himself and his sister.

It was another hot day, the corn up high, the heavens raw and sunburnt. The radio in the tractor warned about severe Valley thunderstorms with all this heat. The warm front would collide with a cold front sooner or later. John figured the convoy would be some sort of thank-a-farmer day, farmer appreciation day with face-paint and caramel-apples and honking and waving. Mush waved from his truck. He had his best milk-cow in the trailer with Back Off Government painted across her side. The rest of the folks didn't look like they had any face-paint or caramel-apples. There was nothing jolly about procession of combines, tractors, cows, pigs, horses, trucks, hay-wagons, and large angry men in suspenders and hunting gear that snaked through Fearnoch. John felt he'd made a mistake.

Kirby was also uneasy about the assembly he found himself in. The guardians of the planet rolled their balaclavas down and tied on black bandanas. Some had sticks, air-horns or mace-cans. They barricaded and waited on Fearnoch Road for the convoy. Both sides were convinced they were right, and the arguing was over. They yelled things that

made them feel superior; they slid towards the awful things people do when they're sure they're right and pure. They had been labeled long ago and they stuck to their labels.

Mr. Bachmann wondered how Anna had found his email and also when she might stop emailing him.

It was right there on the Esposito Bachmann Gagnon Accident and Injury Lawyers webpage, said Anna. She was wearing her nicest most professional shirt and a little thin scarf. She drank the perfect foam-drawing of a leaf off the top of her coffee and tried her best not to look like someone who would illegally track down an elderly victim of assault and unlawful confinement.

I'm retired, Mr. Bachmann said. I thought they took me off that. His white hair stuck up at the back and his eyes sagged.

Mr. Bachmann, I don't want to bother you, but I want you to meet—to talk to...the boy.

Yes, you said.

I think it would do wonders for him. He's a sweet boy, he just never had a chance.

He broke my ribs. I have nightmares. They tied me up in my house!

I know. I know that, Mr. Bachmann.

They're lucky I didn't shoot them all.

Well one of them's dead. And they all want Ebenezer dead now.

Do you know just how highly illegal all of this is? You shouldn't say his name, you shouldn't contact me—what am I doing here? Mr. Bachmann looked around, annoyed at all the art that seemed to have gone off a cliff recently in terms of excellence and artistry.

I do not care anymore, said Anna very slowly and softly. What's gonna happen? They're gonna cut me anyway when they can't get their funding. Fuck 'em—I care about Ebenezer. And fuck Matthias too while we're at it, she thought to herself.

You should get a different job, said Mr. Bachmann. What's this Ebenezer like then—what does he like to do other than beat me up and wear my shtreimel?

Well, Anna put her finger on her chin. He likes...the colour blue, and owls, and his sister.

Sounds great, said Mr. Bachmann.

Mikey sat in silence looking at a spot on the rug and Dr. Dolan let him sit there and sort out his head. He thought about the big finish, death, the final piece, and how maybe it didn't always have a nice little fitting cap on it. No culminating flourish of meaning. Maybe if we treated people like shit we got shit endings.

All those dead souls on the Eastern Front, villages burnt and flattened out of history, whole towns crushed in basements, bombed, gassed, raped, shot, bayoneted into pits with not a thought for individual and proper ends.

And Mrs. MacPherson caught suffocating in a plastic Loblaw's bag when he came home one day from the dump, breathing in shallow wheezes, and opening her mouth and

catching his eye when the veterinarian said, give her a little pet now, and squeezed in the pentobarbital.

Or drunk out on the ice in the winter, frozen and piss-himself drunk but memory unmarred of the dark hole that opened to swallow old simple Wilson and his skidoo. Fearnoch tradition was to try to be the first sled across the river to Quebec once it froze. Wilson decided this year was his—he licked his lips, pinned ‘er and went for it, but it was early, not even Christmas. Mikey, John and Kirby were standing in a circle with some ice-fishing enthusiasts closer to the shore. They pulled beers out of holes in the snow with their mitts and laughed at the cruel things they said about other people. Then they stopped and listened to the lone engine die into the water and ran over together in a drunk panicked congregation to gather by the slushy brown hole a sobbing man in an Articat jacket pointed at and said Wilson went through.

By then he was kilometres downstream interred under a ceiling of ice and they found his body in the spring. Mikey had dreams about a hand pressed up on the ice, wondered how long he lived for and if he had time to scream and punch on the ice as the current took him away. Mikey could never remember the last time he saw Wilson alive. It was either when he asked Wilson, who was in charge of the bathroom key at the outdoor rink, why all the lights in the building didn’t work, and Wilson said they did, but they didn’t, and Mikey got angry and peed in an arc in the dark into what he figured was the bathroom and later saw Wilson annoyed and wheeling over the mop bucket. Or it was when he laughed with some other boys at the man when he couldn’t figure out his Proline ticket at Fearnoch Convenience. Wilson stared at them, baffled and wounded and left the store.

He remembered John's mother's funeral and John with his hair combed, and a suit he was too tall for, biting his lip the whole time.

And Mikey considered too Kirby's dad dying from the esophageal varices. He vomited a bright blood puddle in the kitchen then went back to the sofa. The veins in his esophagus were distended and bursting from the cirrhosis in his liver.

What's wrong with your dad? John had whispered back then. Is it alcohol? Is he drinking alcohol?

Mikey had a dim understanding of what alcohol was then, but knew it was a rotten thing, judging at least by Kirby's fearful shaking of the controller when they were trying to play Mortal Kombat in the basement and his father fell all over the place upstairs, smashing cups. Once, after playing shinny under the bridge on Fearnoch Road, Mikey went to Kirby's place to drink a lot of pop. Kirby's dad was upset and Kirby hid in the garage and said, Don't tell Dad I'm in here.

Mikey remembered Kirby's eyes wide in the dark in the garage and equated alcohol with that, at the time. Certainly, his own father didn't do things like that, such as barf on the Christmas tree.

Mikey told Kirby's dad on the way to a hockey tournament in Petawawa about a game called red-ass that they played at school. Mikey loved this game. You got to throw a tennis ball hard as you could right into your friend's ass.

Kirby's father said that a real game was going up in the Storytown Hills there with a pellet-gun and shooting your buddy's ass.

Kirby put his head on his shoulder and looked out the window with his Fearnoch Syrup-Kings toque smushed against the glass.

And years later, then they were trying to watch *Bleu Nuit* in the basement, and Mikey woke up in the middle of the night and heard shouting. Kirby and John were gone and he snuck up the stairs and peeked into the kitchen. John, maybe fourteen but already bigger than Kirby's dad, and wearing only his Ottawa Senators boxer-shorts, stood between Kirby and his father. Kirby's dad's eyes were rolling black, his mouth dribbling blood onto his whiskers, and John stood tall, half-naked and not budging with his pale chest and arms tense.

Touch him again, he said pointing at Kirby, who sat on a chair with his face red, and I'll kill you.

Kirby's dad died soon after, having thrown up all his blood.

Mikey shook his head and readdressed Dr. Dolan who had a look of concern overtop of her notebook. Mikey thought about all the death and pain and tried to think of something eloquent to pull out of it.

The counter-protestors stepped out of the bush and onto Fearnoch Road. Fabian led his group forward with the Soviet flag and a megaphone. John stopped his tractor and thought, what is this a coup now?

Ebenezer walked behind a glowing chicken restaurant with his bag of candies and chocolates. He walked slowly along a chainlink fence with weeds as tall as him grown up through it. Until the 10 p.m. curfew of his house arrest details, he could walk wherever he

pleased, unmonitored, unattended, just a normal person having a walk. He saw several figures in a tight alley across the street but they were all dressed in blue and so he smiled.

Mr. Bachmann paid for the bill and sighed. Anna's blue eyes were big and wet; she looked like someone who'd put everything into an interview but knew she didn't get the job.

Let me just say this, said Mr. Bachmann. He tucked his wallet back in his pocket. You seem very nice. Give up on the boy. I was a prosecutor for eleven years and I'll tell you—anyone who's seventeen and in the system is too far gone. He stood up.

The world, he said, is never fair.

Kirby got a text message from Peace: Kirby please come home now. He ignored it. He noticed John on his tractor and wished neither of them were there.

The two crowds shouted at each other.

Fascists, they yelled. Faggots. Pigs, pussies, they screamed. Carbon, the economy, the government, hick, commissar, the endangered painted shrew-weasel, out of the way, no, fuck, Jesus Christ, Fearnoch.

Kirby come home.

Ebenezer's sister heard the six pops from the apartment.

A fight started beside the combine at the front of the convoy. Horses whinnied and sheep bleated. John saw Mush in the middle of it, surrounded by the people in black. He hopped off his tractor and the surge of Climate Death met him too.

Ebenezer fell back into the fence behind the chicken restaurant. His ears rang, his legs didn't work, his back, eyes, face didn't work, he leaked and burned full of holes on his

side by the fence. A black fog-bank formed over his brains and he tried to put together what was happening and what he should do. The people in Crips-blue, the pops, the bright white circles, and his spine on fire, or in pieces and exposed. Ebenezer tried to roll and cover his face, looked up at the black sky.

John took a big stick to the forearm and tried to grab a protestor by the neck. Mush emitted his Fearnoch battlecry through the spit in his beard and punched Fabian's ski-goggles into tiny neon shards, and the leader of Climate Death slumped to the ground completely unconscious.

Anna's phone went off with a Jurassic Park ringtone in her bag.

Kirby saw John lunge for him and said, John it's me!

But it was too late, John didn't hear, twisted him around, cracked his head back and landed a formidable punch right in his throat. He ripped the balaclava off, glasses fell out of it in John's hand, and Kirby fell forward into John, and of course it was Kirby.

Oh Jesus Kirby!

Anna, Anna Anna. Hospital. Then she heard sirens before the phone call stopped.

Mr. Bachmann turned when Anna ripped a scream of such fundamental anguish it rattled the whole hall of expensive beautiful coffee and hallowed shit-art.

Ebenezer!

Dr. Dolan got up to signal the end of the session, but Mikey remained on the couch and spoke at last.

The minute we d-d-don't have the—the imagination, I'd say—to see everyone else as just like us, trying to get through their shit, well, bad, bad things happen, Mikey said, glass-eyed and drooling like a savant. Nobody knows shit about history and the past is always here as we repeat it. We will always forget and treat people not as people, and we'll do it again and again, and again and again.

He figured that summed it up. And, he added, everyone should be a little more quiet more often.

And still the sky held over them all, they were all in there, under it, the sky full of piss, black and green, humid as an old bastard clogged up with supercells and mesocyclones. It held, but it would be the next day it'd let 'em all have it.

Do you have a car let's go to the hospital! Anna was shaking.

Mr. Bachmann led her by the arm out of the museum, past all the staring patrons.

Which hospital? he asked.

Wherever they take people from Montreal-Nord, Anna said, thinking, and trying to be brave for whatever was coming. Mr. Bachmann held the door for her and she inhaled deeply.

Thanks, she said.

Kirby ran home immediately through the field, breathing in rattles through his contused thorax. John broke free from the brawl, got back up on his tractor and turned it around home. Three RCMP cars with their lights flashing sped on down Fearnoch Road.

Peace sat pale and dismal on the porch with her hair in the wind. She looked into the distance and spoke slowly without crying.

It happened again, Kirby. I won't stop bleeding.

Kirby couldn't speak. Uhhhhh, he said with his mangled throat. Peace put her face into his stomach.

We should go to the doctor, she said. My uterus is assassinating my children, she said, then did cry into Kirby's shirt.

A police officer stopped Anna from running into Ebenezer's room at the hospital. He caught her around the waist and she thought about hitting him.

Let me go, she said.

You cannot go in, the policeman said with a heavy Québécois accent. H'against the rule. He was tall, with large arms and a shaved head.

Why? Anna said. Why not? So you can beat him up and put him back in jail?

The policeman was stunned and even looked a little hurt as he searched for his English words.

I am protecting. It is dangerous, he said.

Anna stared at the man, burning into him with her irises, content to stand there forever until she got what she wanted. Mr. Bachmann tried to fade in the background.

The policeman glanced up the hall. OK, he said. OK. Five minute. Maybe next time you will think not all cops—

He's coming too, Anna pointed at Mr. Bachmann, who looked alarmed.

Who is that? asked the policeman.

Someone Ebenezer beat up, said Anna, pushing into the room and taking a breath before the curtain drawn around the bed. She could hear machines whirring and nurses stirring, but not Ebenezer.

Kirby flushed the toilet after some silent words to his baby, the twelve-week-old plum-sized blood-ball that didn't make it and spiralled away. Peace was in the kitchen with her head on her crossed arms on the flowery tablecloth. Kirby pulled a chair beside her and put his arm around her back. And from the window, John watched. He'd walked through the field to apologize for the fight. He paused at the window and saw Kirby and Peace crying and holding each other. He had a window into his old friend's private hope and pain. John waited at the door for a few minutes before turning and leaving without knocking.

Ebenezer was covered in hoses, tubes, clamps, bandages, braces, valves, slings, blood and gowns. His eyes were closed. Anna finally let herself cry, felt the tears hot on her cheeks, down off her chin and jaw and she tried to keep her mouth closed so she wouldn't scream. She reached for his hand. Mr. Bachmann scratched the back of his head and felt like he might have to be sick.

A young doctor said— non! She was harsh and took Anna's hand. The doctor glared at the policeman, who nodded at her by the door.

Listen to Dr. Kim, said the policeman.

For God's sake, Ebenezer, Anna whispered, trying to touch him again.

Please be careful, Dr. Kim said in perfect English. He's heavily sedated. He'll live, with any luck. He'll never walk, he lost a lot of blood, maybe brain damage, it's too early.

Anna did yelp, and covered her mouth. Her tears fell in dots onto Ebenezer's gown that had tiny blue flowers all over it.

He was shot four times, Dr. Kim continued. In the legs, arm and abdomen. His liver is OK. His spine is not.

Can I touch him, asked Anna.

Please be gentle, said Dr. Kim, who went back to conferring with the nurses.

Anna put her hand into Ebenezer's, being careful not to rattle the IV. She put her other hand on the back of his head. Ebenezer opened his eyes, a tiny crack, and turned his head slightly. He looked at Anna and said something inaudible into his ventilation mask. Then he closed his eyes again. Anna kept hold on his hand and put her head next to his on the hospital pillow.

See, Anna said to Mr. Bachmann, he's just a boy with no luck.

Mr. Bachmann was silent with his eyes wet.

Maybe we can all just forgive, just this one time, said Anna. Why don't you sit with him for a minute? She got up, touched Ebenezer's head once more, and left the plaintiff and the accused to some privacy.

Mr. Bachmann had no idea what to do with himself. He slowly sat down by Ebenezer and inspected the boy. He was tiny. Mr. Bachmann thought for a while and he felt no hate or difference with this boy. He took off his hat and swallowed. An old abused Jewish man and a gunned-up Haitian boy, quiet together in a frantic Montreal hospital that smelt like blood. Mr. Bachmann then reached out and lightly touched the boy's shoulder. Anna heard him whisper something that sounded like Ahkh as she tapped the policeman on the arm and left the room. She saw Ebenezer's sister and mother running down the hall, his sister sprinting with her braids bouncing and her eyes wild and his mother trying to keep up. Anna didn't bother them. She remembered Ebenenzer's mother describing how painful Ebenezer's birth was, how long she'd pushed and pushed and cried—all just so someone could fill him with bullets before he was even an adult.

At home, Anna lay on her bed and looked up Ahkh, which she found was Hebrew for brother.

The next day was Friday, Storytown Fair Friday, the last day of summer, and hot, hotter than a whore's ass, lads, as described by a man who was dropping off a beaten-up Buick LeSabre at the Fearnock dump with his golf shirt sweat through.

Thunderstorms were promised, the thunderstorm of a decade. Down in Toronto, at the Storm Prediction Centre, meteorologists scrambled to report what was coming for folks

up in the Ottawa Valley. It was 36C with the humidity. A dense cold front from the prairies and Northwestern Ontario was pushing into the sweat-box.

At the clinic, Dr. Ayoub and Dr. Dolan sat in the break-room and watched the blistered horizon to the west, half-expecting a cosmic event or a meteorite or some explosion of all the energy at bay. Everywhere in Fearnoch, men took off their shirts and walked around with them stuck out their back pockets. The air was heavy, wet, fattened.

Well something's on its way, said John, out loud and to himself.

He had a present for his dad. He found him walking with Tippy down through the cedars by the creek. John's dad threw a stick a very short distance, which the dog ignored, and walked very slowly with his hands behind his back.

Look at this Dad, said John. The old man turned and John gave him a parcel from the mail.

What is it? said his dad, struggling with all the tape on the parcel.

Seeds! said John.

It's seeds, said his dad.

Yes, see—beans, corn, and squash. I got it from the Historical Society there.

John's dad shook the envelopes and they rattled.

They're seed-strands from the original settlers of Fearnoch. John was very proud to explain the seeds to his father. Last in the world. So you'll be the only person with real Fearnoch beans, say.

The only person with the real beans, his dad repeated. He peered into an envelope.

Yeah, said John.

That's very special, thanks John.

And his dad gave him a hug, which was rare, and John felt a little funny looking down at the top of his head.

John left his father and noticed some more tin had fallen off the barn.

John's dad turned and said, If you have to sell the farm, I won't be upset.

Oh, John said. What?

You can sell it I said, it's OK, he said and continued his walk along the creek through 166 years of Younghusbands and the last bean-seeds in his pocket.

At three o'clock the thermometer hit 40C. Mikey threw up from dragging around piping hot channel-iron at the dump and had to go sit in some shade. He saw Stella in the distance with her scientific instruments.

Kirby and Peace drove to the Fair after the doctor's so Peace could enter some pickles and her best pumpkin in the contests. She carefully buckled the pumpkin into the back seat.

Fuck, she said.

Yvette told Anna she'd cover her tables and she could just go sit in the back for a while. Anna sat on an upside-down bucket and tried to rally herself, then fell asleep and dreamt about taking Ebenezer back to Mont-Royal, this time in a wheelchair.

Stella saw Mikey with his head bobbing around under the only tree at the dump. Enough of this, she thought, and walked towards him. Mikey saw her, checked himself for barf and stood up.

You think it's fucking hot enough to go swimming in the river today? Stella asked loudly.

Yeah, said Mikey. He tried to think of an excuse for not writing back but it was too hot and he couldn't think of any more lies.

You wanna go now? Mikey asked.

Yeah right now, said Stella. She walked to his Hyundai without waiting for him.

Children ran everywhere at the Fair, full of beavertails and poutine, trying to touch piglets and baby goats, ran in front of Peace and Kirby and let their helium balloons free then cried and messed up their face-paint watching the balloons float up forever.

Peace noticed an imposing bearded man waving at Kirby.

Who is that?

Oh my sweet Jesus, said Kirby.

G'day Kirby! Mush bellowed. Fucking been a while!

Yes, yes Mush. Hi, said Kirby. He squeezed Peace's hand hard and she jumped.

This is Peace, my partner, said Kirby. Peace stuck out her hand.

A pleasure, said Mush. Carlos is around here somewhere, he said twisting his humongous head around in the crowd. Carlos! he said.

Carlie, Mush's wife whom he affectionately referred to as Carlos, pushed a stroller over from near the Tilt-a-Whirl. A baby girl with white-blond hair slept with her head cocked to one side in the stroller.

Oh who is this? Peace asked crouching.

This is Irina, said Carlie. She's all beat out.

Beautiful, said Peace. Just gorgeous.

She's from Bolivia, said Mush. He smoothed and fixed her hair, making sure not to wake her.

Belarus, Mush, she's from fucking Belarus, said Carlie, former Miss Fearnoch '04.

That's right, said Mush.

You adopted her? asked Kirby.

It was real expensive, said Carlie. But we tried for years and years.

My dick is fucked, said Mush softly to Kirby. But look at her. She's perfect.

Is he crying? He's crying! thought Kirby.

Well maybe we'll catch you at the combine derby, said Mush with his head turned away. Nice to meet you.

After Mush and Carlie waved goodbye, Kirby relaxed his grip on Peace's hand.

That man used to beat the absolute shit out of me in school, said Kirby.

Irina, mouthed Peace. I love it.

At four o'clock there were one million baby frogs leaping and scrambling along the little spit of sand and towards the dock at the river. An exodus of baby frogs to the water.

Mikey had never seen this baby frog phenomenon in all his years of coming to the river.

He tried not to crush any to death under his bare feet but that proved impossible.

I d-didn't get your text, he said. I'm sorry—it didn't download, I didn't receive it.

Yes you did, said Stella. She took off all her clothes except her underwear and walked to the end of the splintered worn old dock. Read it, she said.

Mikey just watched her, deaf and disoriented. The wind was picking up, hot like breath.

Read it, said Stella.

Yeah, said Mikey.

He took his phone out of his pocket and read the conversation:

Do you want to go swimming in the river?

Do ypu want to go seimming in the river

The rivr

Mikey yes I want to go seimming in the rivr. Are you drunk. I want to go swimming. And I like you—I do. I'll say it if you're too afraid to. Please stop fucking ignoring me. I think you care too much about what people think. Most things almost nothing works out but who cares I don't care. You should know that I'm crazy though. I have borderline personality disorder although I think it's bullshit and it's just trauma from some shit that happened when I was little. But that's the diagnosis. Also I usually date girls. But I like you, I'm lonely. You know when you meet someone every once in a while who you know is completely not bullshit? That's how I feel. You're not a pointless to know per-

son. I am crazy and I will leave, you'll see. But that's it — I like you I want to go swimming and I want to watch a horror movie together I don't care if you live with your parents.

Jesus I should have read that sooner, thought Mikey. He held his phone on the dock with baby frogs hopping on his feet. I am the most bullshit person I know.

What do you think? Stella asked. She turned with her hand on her hip.

All Mikey said was: you're gay?

Stella closed her eyes and let herself fall onto her back into the water.

I'm also crazy, said Mikey, but she was underwater. He ripped off his clothes and ran off the dock.

At 4:15pm, John figured he was close enough to heat-stroke up on the hot tin on the barn roof and scaled down the ladder with some of the tin still flapping in the increasing wind. Johnny chased a plastic bag around the lawn that blew in a looping circle. The sky was tortured, moaning drunk like it was on the verge of a great barf.

Johnny, let's go inside, John said, lifting him up on his shoulders.

Stella popped her head out of the water directly in front of Mikey. She laughed and pulled her wet hair off her neck. The baby frogs made it to the water and swam like tiny experts all around them, the weeds tickled, the sky—green, maroon, black—whatever the fuck it was, didn't matter, began sprinkling onto them in the river. Her face was very close and she said nothing.

Spineless, spineless, spineless, thought Mikey.

And so he kissed her and it was easy and fine, and he kissed her again, longer, and it was, he thought at least, heaven.

Kirby and Peace drove home down Fearnoch Road, straight for the wall of cumulonimbus. The twelve kilometre tall thunderhead, bloated with rising twisting convective clouds, served to remind just how small and forgettable Fearnoch was. A road, a store, a few hay bales and Kirby and Peace's SUV. The trees were blowing in every direction—like they were in a washing machine.

Sailor's warning? Sailor's delight? What the fuck is going on up there? Peace said.

Kirby pulled over and looked up.

Anna got off her bucket and put on her apron. I'm OK, I'm OK, she said to Yvette.

Anna, viens icitte. There's something on the TV, said Yvette. She looked out into the dining room and wiggled her fingers behind her for Anna to grab her hand.

John took Johnny off his shoulders and set him on the kitchen table. The boy slid off the table and ran off.

Something wild out there, said Polly. Something fierce.

Dad said I could sell the farm, John said. He put his hat on the table and slouched.

That's a smart man, your father.

Beaten and crumbling, John looked up at his wife. Why are you hanging around me, he asked.

What?

The farm's dying, anyone with sense would have sold long ago, the animals are fucked, the town's dying, dad's probably dying. You could go to Ottawa, Montreal-what on earth are we doing around here?

Now listen, said Polly. She sat herself down on his lap, put her arm around his back and let her flip-flops fall off her feet. It's how you are with your father. Just how you are with each other. I knew right then.

Knew what?

Knew I'd choose you John lad. That's it that's all. I could give a shit the farm's falling apart.

Tippy howled and paced outside in the storm. The screen-door squeaked and John saw Johnny running after the dog.

Maybe we should go in the basement, said Polly.

At 4:40pm, Mikey drove 140km/h up Fearnoch Road. He paid the heavens no heed, the rain swelled and Stella wrapped a towel around herself and kissed his neck.

I'm crazy too, Mikey said. I have to see a counsellor.

In five minutes, they were sitting on his bed in the loft, getting the comforter wet. Mikey was exceptionally thankful his folks were at the trailer in Calabogie for the weekend. His hands shook and he went through the old VHS movies in a box.

I think there's some goddamn frigging horror in here somewhere, he said, making a racket. Here—this one. It's from the 70's, Italy...bunch of massacred ballerinas or something like that.

Looks great, said Stella without looking. She got under the sheets and wriggled. Mikey heard a slap and saw her wet towel and underwear on the floor.

Mikey got into the bed. A tremor ripped down into his toes, he felt Stella's wet hair on his face and she slid one leg over him.

I forgot to press play, he said.

Stella kissed him, was on top of him and threw the sheets back. She kissed him again with her wet hair all over his face, then she sneezed.

Sorry, she said, and wiped her nose.

We have to do it twice, said Mikey. 'Cause I'm gonna be so bad.

Mikey just stop talking, she said.

Oh Jesus, Mikey whispered. Oh boy.

Stella smiled. Then she said—Jesus! The power went out and she was looking out the window.

A motorboat was motoring down the road just as it would down the river.

Johnny! John yelled into the storm. Hail popped in the lawn and in the fields. Hailstones big as eggs stung in John's back. The cows moaned and backed into the barn or under trees. Tippy ran away and John caught the boy up.

Maybe I should get the genny out, John thought, and then immediately saw the generator roll out of the shed and across the lawn.

At 4:50pm all the cellphones in Fearnoch beeped with an amber alert.

A tornado, said Kirby.

Tornado, said Mikey.

Tornado! yelled John.

Tornado? said Anna.

It was six tornadoes.

Five of them simply went through the bush, swamp and overgrown fields and didn't bother anyone. The sixth could have gone anywhere but chose to cut a perfect diagonal path through the exact centre of the only intersection of Fearnoch. A god-finger pointed directly at all the mortals and sinners together down in Fearnoch. The tornado was rain-wrapped and took three minutes to go through the town, sacking half of Fearnoch's 100-odd houses. It spent about 15 to 20 seconds at any given point. 15 to 20 seconds to be spared or have your entire life blown up. The tornado lived for 40 minutes and bounced across the river into Quebec before dissipating 140 kilometres away.

When people think about tornadoes, they think of Kansas and witches and people getting sucked into the sky. The reality is, when the winds are circling at 260 km/h, the real danger is getting hit with all the projectiles, debris and endless shit caught up in it. You

could be killed by anything, a chocolate bar, a bird, a salt-lick, John's John Deere hat, Peace's needleworks.

Polly and John's father were in the kitchen. Polly screamed for John and her son. John and Johnny ran as the barns, pig-houses, chicken-houses, ice-houses, all the out-buildings ripped free and tumbled one after the other. The sky behind the man and his boy filled and twisted with machinery, cows, chickens, pigs, sheep, oats, barley, wheat.

Anna watched the TV at Café Plus. An EF3 almost an EF4 tornado in Fearnoch. She didn't think anyone even knew it was a place. Matthias, Ebenezer and a tornado. There was shaky footage of Fearnoch Convenience with half the store completely gone.

Fearnoch! A tornado! Old people eating pie started to look at her. Anna shook and pointed at the TV. That's my fucking town!

She called her mother, but the phone didn't even ring.

Mumma! she shouted. Anna turned to Yvette with her blue eyes wild. I gotta go I gotta go see my mum!

Go! Yvette shooed her. Go go — vite vite!!

Anna ran all the way to the metro and squeezed the stainless steel bar running along the ceiling all the way to the Greyhound station.

Mikey and Stella wrapped sheets around themselves and ran outside, which probably wasn't smart. A lot of people that day braved the twister to record it on their phones or

just watch. In Kansas people know the routine—don't hang around, head for the basement—but in Fearnoch this was a rarity.

Mikey held Stella's hand and watched siding, shingles, soffit and fascia from the store lift into the sky. Inside the store the shopkeeper hollered: Everyone into the fucking beer-fridge!

Jesus Christ, there'll be corpses everywhere, Mikey said. I didn't even know we fucking had tornadoes!

But memories are short—in '71 a microburst levelled the curling rink and killed two of the McKenzie's Storytown Fair blue ribbon-winning heavy-horse team.

Stella only stared at the destruction, dumbfounded. She pulled the sheet tighter and clutched it around her neck.

This was the end, just like that, and the ending comes whether you will have it or no. The tornado then growled and turned toward the outdoor rink and community centre.

Jefferson! Mikey shouted. Stella we gotta go!

Peace and Kirby's SUV twisted completely around on the road. All the windows busted in and the SUV filled with thousands of tiny violent airborne glass spherules. They hugged each other and didn't say a word—ready for anything.

Mr. Mulrooney draped himself over Mrs. Mulrooney and Angel Mae and took a blast of granulated shingle and glass to the back. A combine sailed into Moo-Moo's trailer, hewing it in two while he hid in a culvert. The tornado dodged Fabian's house neatly,

then pile-drove the Junior High School where John had kissed Anna in grade eight for the first and only time while the teachers played Aerosmith and checked the students' knapsacks for liquor. The dump issued its filth in a 60 kilometre radius. Mush and Carlie, who were parked at the store, ran through the projectiles to Irina in the truck. The child remained sleeping peacefully with a few glass shards on her eyelashes. Mush's old pants-boat landed over in Quebec. The lady who Mikey helped pump gas was slammed into the wall at her house, ruptured her spleen and spent three weeks in the hospital. Old Mr. MacKay looked out into the war-zone of cratered houses and spent the rest of the day convinced he was back in Ortona. Wayne MacKay watched an oak tree older than Canada crush his taxi from the basement window. The arena was spared, the community centre was a write-off. Power-lines hung in the woods and on the roads. Kirby's house was fine, and John's was not. All in three minutes—three minutes to salvation or destruction.

They were all in there, out there under the tornado. All of them whipped in together, tornadoed up. The tornado came for them all and couldn't care less if they were fighting or in love, or what side of the tracks they all lived on. It cared not at all for history. Whatever had been built up in this town was of no concern. All the acres cleared by hand, the Algonquins, people beating the shit out of Catholics, the first John Younghusband spading dirt onto the grave of his six-month old daughter who got bitten by rats and crying to himself in the hedge, the Fearnoch Syrup-Kings' 1985-86 championship season, Peace bleeding, Kirby's dad bleeding, Mikey passed out by the river with birds all over his back

eating the chips someone'd dumped on him, pigs with their testicles squeezed into nothing—didn't matter, the tornado came for it all.

Kirby and Peace made it home with only a few cuts. One small apple tree was down. They looked to John's property and saw a clearing where the farm had been.

Mikey felt like a mountain lion in the Hyundai, speeding to the community centre with his bed-sheet flying out the window. He saw Jefferson and Roy running like feral children through the cotton-candy forest of insulation behind the community centre.

Jefferson! Mikey shouted. Roy! Oh thank you Jesus.

Jefferson jumped into Mikey's arms with his eyes bugged out.

A twist-uh! A twist-uh! He shook with his hands gripping Mikey's neck. Why are you dressed like a ghost? he said.

Anna rode the 10 p.m. Greyhound to Ottawa with her palms sweaty on her knees. Her mother finally called when Anna was somewhere near Hawkesbury, from a neighbour's cell-phone and said, Yes, we are all OK, the house is fine but there are about one thousand poor dead birds strewn about. Anna didn't see it, but an owl, waking up for the night, opened one eye and watched the bus on the dark highway.

Mikey and Stella continued on in the Hyundai, through the Stygian topography of Fearnoch, hoping they wouldn't find any corpses. Mikey drove down a lane in one of the MacKenzies' fields to escape the roadblocks and barn-rafters on Fearnoch Road.

If the power's out, said Stella, you should check the freezer.

Oh God, said Mikey. He remembered something, and turned the Hyundai around by an old fence stile and drove home.

He ran down to the basement, still with his bed-sheet fluttering around, and Stella following him. Mikey opened the freezer, dug through hundreds of thawing tomatoes until he produced a frosty CCM hockey skates box from the bottom.

Mrs. MacPherson, he said. She had died in the winter when the ground was frozen.

Oh...oh is that—that's not..., Stella said, your cat?

We need a freezer, or a shovel, said Mikey. He put half-frozen Mrs. MacPherson in the trunk of the Hyundai.

And John, John became the man who touched Hell for a moment and fought a tornado. Polly screamed and his dad watched with his mouth open as John launched Johnny into the kitchen out of all the hail and tools and extension cords and pigs ripping around. The room immediately filled with brush and shit that came from miles away. The tornado went ten feet from the door. It was the sound everyone would remember—like a heavy-loaded freight-train with no whistle. John jumped into the house with his shoulder dislocated from one of the million items in the blender outside and his face covered in blood. He tried to slam the door but it ripped out of his hand and he never saw it again. He felt

every force of physics, nature, God, willing him out of the door-hole and into the abyss. With a Herculean effort, he dove away from the door and covered his family. In seconds it was over and everything was quiet; nothing moved but for a peaceful, peaceful breeze.

Soon though, shirtless men were running all over to check on neighbours. It was called a miracle that no one died: mostly because half of Fearnoch was at the Fair. If the tornado had chosen just a few kilometres to the south it would have been a horror movie. Children cut in half by ferris-wheels and bizarre carnie shit.

Cow and goat carcasses were caught in trees, dead chickens littered the fields, horses ran frenzied and gashed with tin, the fences gone, Tippy ran away to wherever he came from, and on Mikey's bedside table, Robert Plant died forever.

Kirby and Peace walked to John's house. The big elm tree had fallen right through the roof. They found John sitting in the field with his family and their farm in pieces all around them. He had his head in his hands and his hat on his knee. Polly was putting the finishing touches on his arm-sling. John looked up and saw Kirby.

Kirby, he said.

John, Kirby said. John, holy Jesus. He scratched his arm and couldn't recognize anything. Peace gave Johnny a juice-box.

John tried to say something but was worried he'd cry.

Come stay with us, said Kirby.

Look! said Johnny, pointing with the juice-box in his head.

John's favourite calf, the cream-coloured gorgeous calf ran up from over the train-tracks.

Ha! said John. Look at that! How did he get all the way down there?

I dunno, said Polly. He looks like he didn't get a scratch.

Anna's mother met her at two in the morning at the station in Ottawa. Her mum cried and hugged her and they sat on the curb. With all the roadblocks, police, CTV and CBC vans, cars, rubberneckers and looters on ATVs, they didn't get to Fearnoch until morning.

Anna looked out the window at the town she never wanted to come back to and it looked like it'd been carpet-bombed. Already there were volunteers cleaning up the road, sawing trees and looking for pets. Anna saw a group of Sikhs working a wood-chipper, Scientologists milling around with Scientology arm-patches, a group of devout people holding hands in a circle with their heads bowed, some Mennonite ladies pulling wagon-load after wagon-load of debris out of a soybean field looking like something from the last century.

At her house an enormous Mennonite man was sawing trees that had fallen onto the driveway.

Hi? said Anna's mother.

I'm Abe, he said.

Hi Abe. Uh—thank you.

It's my religion, he said. I have to do this. He worked a tiny Swede saw expertly through a 100-year-old oak. I'm sorry about your house, Abe said.

No the house didn't get hit.

Oh. Abe looked again at the beaten-up little cottage.

Do you want tools? Anna's mother said. I have a chainsaw.

Oh no ma'am. No power-tools please.

Anna, John, Polly, Mikey, Stella, Peace and Kirby all volunteered with either Red Cross or the Samaritan's Purse. Kirby worked so tirelessly he got the flu. They cleared the fields and the wrecked rental-houses and talked to people worse off than even John. Anna found none of the old-timers were disappointed she wasn't rich and famous, they just wanted to say hello. Kirby saw Mush and Fabian working together to pull a lamb from the rubble, both of them wearing orange Helping in Jesus' Name t-shirts. John saw Lévesque and the rest of the Pontiac hockey team wearing their team sweaters and going around with chainsaws.

Johnny, said Lévesque, and put an arm around his shoulder.

Polly saw John's Browning Rifles hoodie hung way up in a tree across the road.

Look John, she said, your shirt's out to dry. Polly wasn't trying to get right down and out.

John called Fearnoch Valley Disaster Relief Services in a tremendously frustrated mood. He worried he might explode and scream at whoever answered, about ballooning

useless bureaucratic staff, he talked to a lady who'd been up through the night trying to send help, and he was ashamed.

Stella and Mikey got on like they were completely in love and annoyed all the other volunteers.

Would it be a deal-breaker if I had a unibrow? asked Stella. She dragged a tarp covered in brush.

No, that's fine, said Mikey. Moustache is also OK. What if—I joined ISIS? Or wore cargo-pants.

Stella put a hand to her chest.

Oh please don't, she said.

Anna came home exhausted after a day of throwing evil splinters of barn-wood that she was shocked didn't go clean through a least one person's abdomen into the backhoe bucket. She collapsed on the lawn and felt her phone rattling in her pocket. She couldn't think of a single person who'd call her. Maybe she was going to be fired for getting on a bus rather quickly.

Hello? she asked, no idea what area code that was.

Miss Berube, this is Steve Cohen from Cohen Publishing in New York.

What?

Cohen Publishing in New York.

New York City? I'm talking to someone in New York right now? Anna looked at a barn lying on its side in her town no one knew.

Yes—Miss Berube, want do you think of the parcel we sent? It's been a few weeks. We're waiting for your reply.

Anna recalled the parcel, which, best as she knew, was still on her table in St. Henri.

Hello?

I didn't get it, said Anna.

Oh. OK. Well, Miss, let me say—we loved it. We need to publish it. We need it. Cohen needs it. The others are fucked to pass on this.

Anna saw stars. She thought she might be sick.

We're gonna fly you down here, OK? said Steve. Soon as we can.

Anna only nodded, hyperventilating on the lawn. She lay back and let tears run down into her ears.

I'll put you on with my secretary in a minute—where are you now? Canada?

You wouldn't have heard of it, said Anna. Then she thought and said: Actually you might see us on the news. We just got hit by a tornado.

I'm sorry. That's awful. Anyway I just love the book. I've been waiting years for something like this. Something new and different my God!

Thank you, said Anna. Thank you, thank you.

You gotta tell me, though, said Steve. Who did it? Just tell me. I think it was the cuckolded jockey. It was, wasn't it?

On the third day after tornado, the clean-up continued with no end in sight, Mikey and Stella buried Mrs. MacPherson where her old barn had been and helped serve hot meals at the high-school, Peace promised to stop talking to Johnny about the climate, and John's father went missing.

John walked the whole hundred acres all day yelling, then drove around in his truck.

The disaster relief shifted to a missing-persons search. Police went around on horses and four-wheelers and helicopters beat into the sky.

I bet he doesn't know where he is anymore, John said to Polly. If he's dead...I just wanna see my dad!

In all the mess and destruction and talk about #FearnochStrong, everyone had forgotten the old man, who was more Fearnoch than any of them.

The volunteers met at the Younghusband's farm. Mikey's group started at one corner of the rectangle, John's from another, Kirby's from another, and Anna's from the other. They combed the property and met in the middle of the cow field.

Anna stared at her old high-school friends.

Look! Mikey shouted. Is that Anna Berube!

What? John spun around. Anna!

Hi! Anna called. She side-stepped around a mangled manure-spreader and hugged John for the first time in eight years with her hair against his chest.

John, Anna, Mikey and Kirby stood in a circle. Mikey thought about how much he'd miss everyone, if they'd all been blown up in the goddamn tornado.

John, your father...Anna trailed off.

We'll find him, said Mikey.

Then Stella and Polly shouted in unison. There was someone or something in the old farmhouse, the one that John's dad was born in. The old knocked-over Younghusband farmhouse by the tracks.

John ran. Inside his father sat against the wall. He was alive but looked completely gone and stupefied. John helped him up and dusted him off. John's dad looked from face to face and seemed like he was trying to say something but had lost the ability. Peace put a sleeve against a small gash on his forehead.

Dad, John said. Dad.

His father looked at him, looked at the ground and back to John. He tried speaking again but his mouth only hung open silent.

Dad. Dad.

