PONTYPOOL CHANGES EVERYTHING
other books by
TONY BURGESS

The Hellmouths of Bewdley
Caesarea
Fiction for Lovers
Pontypool Changes Everything

A Novel by Tony Burgess
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For my girls Camille and Rachel

with gratitude to Bruce McDonald
PART I
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This is a love song for John and Leisha's Mother.
It wasn't easy. I might not write another.
— Chris Knox

That night I had terrible dreams I was killing people. When I awoke it took some serious self-examination to convince myself that I was not repressing real acts of murder. So completely vivid was my sense of guilt that I felt nothing short of running through a full account of my life could provide me with the peace of mind I needed to fall back asleep. In spite of the three hours I spent combing over the details, I have, to this day, a very persistent certainty that hidden inside me is the revolting knowledge of days when I wasn’t quite myself. I now suspect that my inexplicable bouts of exhaustion are due to the massive effort of keeping those days behind me.
The Nervous Population

Down in the strange hooves of Pontypool’s tanning horses scratches one of Ontario’s thinnest winds. Cold as a needle and far too complicated to ever leave the ground, these picks of air snap at fetlocks, blackening the legs of horses. The anonymous wind gathers its speed in turns around a cannon bone and tears across the ice of a frozen pool. It feels the behaviour of more famous systems and is consumed by the complexity of its origins, breaking into mad daggers and splintering into the phantoms of horses. These horses, vacancies now, or maybe caskets, are places for the wind to rest. And when a wind rests, its heart stops and it is dead forever. The horses on the ice, built from the corpse of a breeze, skate towards each other, not breathing, but intelligent. They leap inside their crazy minds and begin to make plans.

On the shore of the pool the other horses, ageing and brown, unglue their heels from the burning snow and align their bodies with the grain of the sun, counting the minutes, eight in all, until the first warming rays fall from the star’s coat and drape across a horse’s back, raising its withers and bathing its dark crest. The horses of leather and bone and cheek and thigh climb towards an open gate in the cedar fence that surrounds the pool. On the southern post claps the fat orange mitt of a man in a bulging white coat. In his other hand he swivels a bucket, clanging a metal dish against its sides.

The horses, five of them, roll in a line through the gate and are swallowed by the south shadow of the barn before they disappear into an open door. The man closes the gate and, swinging the bucket, follows a shallow gully of mud wending through the snow to a beige truck parked at the side of the road. He walks around the vehicle kicking the heavy ice that juts out, like teeth, from its underside until it loosens and falls, intact and old, onto the soft shoulders of the road. After circling the truck twice, swamp and kicking at random, he tries the tread of his boot in the access step and climbs into the driver’s seat.

Beside him on the passenger seat is a copy of Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Its leather cover is striped with road salt, the tar spine is pot-holed. The inner lining and mulling have surfaced through ruptures. Books x and xi are marked by curled strips of pink paper that would open to the story of Orpheus. On these pages are scribbles and strokes caught in the fresh yellow paths of a highlighter, and in the margins illegible markings run the full length of page after page of the book. The man drops the bucket on the passenger floor, spraying a new chain of spots across the volume, which he opens and peruses for a second into the upholstery. He pops open the glove compartment with his huge orange thumb, lifts the book in the soft potato of his mitt and drops it on a stack of crisp white flyers.

Across the top of the flyers, in lettering flown with ears and arches, are the calligraphied words: “The Pontypool Players Present King Lear.” Beneath this: “directed by Les Reardon.” The opening performance is dated today. The man, who is in fact the same Les Reardon, claps the glove box three times until it closes. He removes his gloves and starts the truck. While he waits for it to warm up he turns on the radio.

If you’ve just tuned in we’re asking the question: Was it really our responsibility to feed the deer this winter? The problem is that the severity of the season has made food scarce. So a huge number of the deer population are not expected to survive. This huge population is a result of, is caused by, a previous government’s winter feeding program.

Les squints out through the salted windshield looking for rampant feeding programs. Or deer. He finds neither.

So what we’re asking today is this: Should we just put the whole business back in nature’s hands, or do we go on spending tax dollars to wreak ecological havoc just so a few shortsighted animal lovers can feel all warm and fuzzy? That’s the question. Hello caller. What do you make of this?

I don’t think there’s any question. This is what nature wants. Let her trim the population.

OK. You don’t have a problem with preventable mass deaths?

It’s not the ones that die that are important, it’s the ones that live, the strong ones.

Survival of the fittest, eh?
You got it.

OK. Sounds good to me. Hello. Who am I speaking to?

Les rolls the window up until it seals. He breathes onto its surface, and in this opacity he draws with his finger a man in a hat. He puts a pipe in the man’s mouth, but it looks more like an oar, so he wipes the window clear with the mitt he lifts from his lap.

Peter. Listen, a living thing's a living thing, and if we can save them we should.

But aren’t we just contributing to the problem?

No. We’re responsible for the problem, and our responsibility is to protect these herds.

Says who, Peter?

Me. I say so.

Well, if you say so Petey. Hello?

Hello. I just can’t stand to think of those poor animals starving in the cold, mothers with their little does shivering in the wind. I think it’s terrible. How much does it cost to feed them, anyway?

Well, actually, nothing, it’s always been a volunteer thing, but hey, that’s not the point. It’s not a matter of economics, it’s really a matter of what nature wants, and somehow I don’t think she spends a lot of time caring for a surplus of weakened animals at the expense of a healthy population.
A Healthy Population

Deep in the woods a female deer lies on her side as thirty baby deer slide easily from her birth canal on an immense sluice of effluence. As the moon appears above the trees its tidal effect on the afterbirth is visible. In the morning, children in full hockey gear skate across the purple and red ice, weaving around an obstacle course of tan corpses. Several of the deer stand frozen, and the children cut down all but two. They become the opposing nets of a makeshift hockey rink. A heart thawed over a small fire is used to draw the centre line and goal creases. A great deal of time is spent disembowelling the baby creatures so that their frozen feces can be used as pucks; however, having never eaten, their little bodies are as clean as packaged straws. The children settle for the mother’s hoof, which twists off easily.

As the sun climbs to a height that the clouds can’t reach, its rays smooth down the amniotic ice, turning it silver around children who slide out of control. The hockey players drift horizontally, like beads of mercury, losing the hoof, while they grab at the exposed backs of baby deer to keep themselves from being drawn along on their bellies toward some remote, invisible cliff.

Les pulls his truck onto the highway and, flicking off the radio, lifts a cell phone from his side to dial a number.

“Mary, howdy, Les here. Yeah, they’re good. Hey, what do you think of doing Ovid?”

Les makes a right up a long ice-covered driveway and stops halfway between the highway and a brick farmhouse that stands alone on a white hill in a field. Long rows of dark soil break intermittently through the snow.

“I know, but we could adapt them.”

Les reaches over and pops open the glove box and pulls out the book. Encircling the steering wheel with his arms, he turns to his marked pages. A powder of crystals swirls in through the driver’s window he’s cracked open again, glittering the book. Les tries to blow the pages clean but his warm breath melts the ice that sinks through the letters.

“A horror story? They want to do a horror story?”

Les tosses the book onto the dash and pulls off his toque, letting loose a six-inch whip of grey hair that he pulls back over the top of his balding head.

“I was thinking about Orpheus. Now that’s a horror story.”

Les stares out the side window while he listens, occasionally rolling his eyes, and at a distance he watches a man with a rifle emerge from the woods.

“Ed Gein? Now who the hell is Ed Gein?”

While Les listens to the story of how Ed Gein redecorated his farmhouse with body parts, he can’t shake the story’s dramaturgical inevitability as a home-shopping network sketch. Besides working for a livestock farmer, Les plans to direct the Campbellcroft High School yearly theatrical production. His ambition is to elevate a small troupe of drama students to a recognized regional company. He has printed flyers for productions of King Lear, Oedipus Rex, The Rez Sisters and Artichoke. Flyers that no one has ever seen. Les Reardon now believes that he is also destined to write the play he will direct. He wants to adapt the mythology of Orpheus into an outdoor spectacle — to include the music of the forest, the photosynthetic process, its colours and its honey and the trembling of stones, the abdomen of bees and the shadows of snakes. He wants to conjure an Orpheus, be possessed by him. And you know, Les thinks, people love outdoor theatre. Like in Toronto, the Shakespeare-in-the-park thing. I could have an annual Orphic festival. Except. Except now these kids want to do a serial killer. These kids think they discovered the low brow thrill allegory. So, it’s the Ed Gein Home Shopping Network-in-the-park.

“OK. Listen, if they wanna do this cannibal thing, God help us, I wanna write my Orpheus into it.”

Les grabs his Ovid by the spine, spilling several pages to the floor.

“Shit! OK. Listen, I can do it. It’ll work. It’ll be great. Look I gotta go. I got a hunter on my property, and I gotta chase him off. I’ll call you later.”
A Hunted Population

The hunter stops and turns towards the sound of the truck door slamming. The two men square off opposite each other, a full acre apart. As Les reaches behind to flip the door handle to check that it is locked, the hunter holds his rifle out from his waist, his hands gripping in formal distances from either end. Les recognizes this as a military move, a way to hold a rifle safely and run. In order to accentuate the joke being formed between them, Les begins to walk towards the man as casually as he can, stopping occasionally to cock his head and lift his hands in surrender. When they are within twenty metres of each other the hunter turns and starts lifting his knees in a strange slow run. Les raises his wind-chapped hands to his wind-chapped cheeks.

“Hey! Hey buddy, hang on there!”

Buddy manoeuvres evasively around a stack of cord-wood, successfully disappearing from the enemy’s sight. Les has grown annoyed, and as he reaches the spot where the hunter has disappeared he shouts, “Hey, asshole!” Three feet to his right the asshole crouches against the woodpile and kicks his feet out in order to roll onto his belly. He becomes tangled in the low boughs of a tree. Resorting to a clumsy series of civilian manoeuvres, the hunter, still on his side, slaps at the tree, which has snatched the barrel of his rifle.

Growing concerned for the safety of both man and conifer, Les approaches the battling pair with his hands out — hands that flit in a signal between harmlessness and helpfulness, careful not to trigger the wrong response in this man. With a final grunt and tug the man frees the weapon, driving its expensive butt directly into Les’s shoulder. Before the first impact has even had a chance to hurt, the weapon fires and kicks Les again. Spinning onto his back, Les feels his shoulder disappear into the ground. He reaches to see if it’s still there. It is. The pain surfaces out of the snow to find the shoulder. The brightness of this feeling springs through his body and sweat fills his boots. Les lies still for a moment, and he hears the hunter crashing through the forest. He sits up painfully and realizes that he is now seriously angry. You want an enemy? Les thinks, well, you’ve got one. And I’m gonna wrap that precious weapon of yours around your neck.

The anger arranges itself directly over the pain, and when Les stands he is already sprinting after the hunter. The path of the man’s escape is itself a spectacle. He’s not gone between trees but attempted to run through them. On their cracked branches hang, like Christmas decorations, little shreds of a camouflage snowsuit. At one point Les hops over the discarded knapsack of his quarry. Later, black latex goggles lay in the path, crumpled like S&M gear tossed off in a moment of passion; at some distance the rifle itself, pretty and scented with oil, reclines across a pillow of snow.

Les pauses here beside the rifle and thinks, coldly and soberly, I might kill this son of a bitch. Les lifts the rifle. The elegant black backsight rises up from the stock. Across the empty space over the barrel a thin line leads to the foresight at the weapon’s conclusion. Les lowers the rifle without checking the safety, and he strolls — dangerously, he knows — handling the weapon dangerously. He flips his frozen finger in and out of the trigger guard, the scent of it warming his hand.

He reaches a frozen stream where the hunter has obviously grown confused, his trail doubling back over itself, aborting directions. He’s lost. Stupid bugger. Scared stiff. Les lifts the rifle and turns the bolt handle, flipping the round out into the snow. He throws the safety on before cradling the gun over his shoulder. After spending several minutes tracing the meandering steps of the hunter he determines that he’s probably heading down the centre of the frozen river.

One hundred metres along Les discovers the hunter lying on his side, facing away. He grows alarmed and, moving closer to the figure on the ice, notices blood spreading out from its face. Leaning over the body he sees that, in fact, there is very little face left. By the aggression of the act and the senseless snatch of missing face, of missing life, Les knows that a human being has done this.

Has just done this.
Falling

The detective looks like a hockey player. He has a penalty box chin and eyes that recede way up into the cheap seats, the greys, faint in a mist beneath his heavy brow. His tie flips across his chest like a cat’s tail, alive, kinking against his knuckles for attention. The suit is not his preferred uniform, not the one he trains in. That one has action figure invisibility, so he ignores what he’s wearing, and the suit sails up over his shoes, gathers thickly in his armpits, and keeps rising north. He looks over at the man sitting across from him. *Quiet. Patient.* The detective thinks of himself as a people scientist. *Les Reardon is a quiet, patient man.*

Sitting in the little coatroom of a country church, surrounded by a dragon of wire coat hangers, Les Reardon has been shifting uncomfortably on a small wooden chair for two hours. Expecting to leave any second, he’s kept his coat on. Now that the detective has come in and sat down, Les regards the chain of hangers circling him as a lost opportunity. With his coat off he might have appeared cooperative, casual, at home in the investigation. Les puts his heavily padded elbows on his knees and twirls his cap in his hands. He feels restless. He wants to say something.

The detective continues writing in a folder. He’ll do this for five minutes. Testing his theory. *Mr. Reardon is a quiet, patient man. Mr. Reardon works with someone else’s cows and horses. He’s a drama teacher.* The detective likes men with decent effeminate professions. He looks up at Les to assess the femaleness of the man, to determine whether to contest it or flirt with him. The detective notices that his own handwriting is pioneering the interview, the dots are pecking impatiently on the outskirts of the “i”s, and a brusque circle around the date misses something crucial. The detective introduces himself.

“Mr. Reardon, I’m detective Peterson. How are you? I appreciate you co-operating.”

The detective attempts to untuck his sleeves at the elbow, but can’t.

“I guess what I need to hear from you is exactly what happened out there.”

Les tells his story. He remembers it as a western, a shootout, but he tells it as if he were a decent man, protecting his property. As he tells the story, “I found a wounded deer in the garage last year, so I have posted the property …” in Les’s head, or rather his imagination, a crazy bulb swings at the end of a cord, and the drama teacher stands in its green light, staring down the sights of a weapon. His grin hangs off the side of his face, a stirrup lost across the ankle of a boot. When he’s finished, the detective gauges the effect of the murder scene on Les. *A drama coach, or whatever he is, he’s not so decent. He’s acting.*

*Let’s see a show.*

“Awright, I have a dead man, and I have a man here, sitting across from me, who I found at the scene. You chased the victim into the dense brush, swinging his rifle at your side, and all of a sudden it’s a homicide scene. Now, what do I say? What do I do with your connection here?”

Les straightens the label on the inside of his cap. It curls back against his baby finger, a tighter furl for having been unwound.

“Uh. Detective, I didn’t shoot him. He wasn’t shot. He was … uh … he was …”

“Yeah, yeah, we don’t know what he was yet. Was there anybody else with you?”

“With me? No. Not with me. I didn’t see anybody else.”

“You live alone Mr. Reardon?”

“Yep.”

“Ever married?”

“Well, not quite.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I lived with a woman for four years.”

“Here in Pontypool?”

“No. In Toronto. In Parkdale.”

“Any children?”
“Yeah, uh … one.”
“How old?”
“One month.”
“Really. Daughter?”
“Son.”
“Aright, Mr. Reardon, we’re going to be in touch with you. So, make sure you stay available. If you should happen to remember anything, anything at all, call me at this number.”

The detective gives Les his card and leaves the coatroom door open as he goes. He turns down a hallway that he’s sure Les will not take when he leaves. Peterson leans his thighs against a radiator that runs the length of a wall underneath a basement window. He looks up at the parking lot that spreads out from his chin. A lone vehicle sits in the southwest corner. The truck is Les Reardon, remote, beige, built for leaving in. Closer to the detective is a pyramid of ice, jaundiced and sore with crystal pellets. This is the son. The detective looks for the baby’s mother. The small parking lot is bordered by a winter-toughened hedge. In its chipped line are rocks of ice. No mother. Beyond, the highway. Car-free. Further, the heavy trees and, not visible from this little window, a frozen river that has a crazy, pink spot in its eye. No mother. A month old. Jesus, what happened there?

Les stands four feet from his car with his arms stretched out and his knees bent. A warm wind arrives, just as he steps onto a large patch of ice. Now he hangs like a surfer against a blue screen — dipping and rising — not walking. Eventually he falls. In the middle of his wheel to the earth he doesn’t think of his son, he thinks of the infant’s mother. He remembers — when Helen’s blood sugar levels slipped off and she would seem to lose sight of everything and her hands made small, brittle help-me flights up to her face — how impossibly cold her lips became. He’d kiss them just to feel their cold, their distinct mark on his own melting mouth. He loved her then.

The ice slams against his temple. He holds his head in his hands as he lies there, pulling his knees up. Les is crying, and if he’s crying for anyone it’s himself, even though a tiny bug, in the centre of his brain, shaped like a baby, is crying as well. The baby’s crying. Les moves to the edge of the ice, and he presses the tips of his fingers over the frozen bubbles drawing himself forward. He manages to get to his feet and recovers quickly. He crawls the truck to the edge of the highway and pauses to join the traffic on the empty road.

Detective Peterson has his hand over his mouth, as much to stifle noise as to keep a piece of sandwich from flying loose. He’s just seen Les fall, and he’s laughing with his back to the wall. As his laughter hardens, he slides down onto the radiator. It will spread heat up through the seat of his pants, and he will have to jump forward, yelping. He will lose a little nugget of bread and fish while he spins around, palming the cheeks of his ass.

As funny as this is, and it’s probably funnier than it seems, it’s more. It’s what you get for laughing cruelly at the pain of others.
Les is going to meet with Mary at the school. He wants to talk about the Ed Gein thing. As he drives he pictures his own revulsion at the children’s proposal. Mary’s considered it, accepted it. Les pictures higher and higher moments of fine discomfort. His Orpheus. Les looks out the window at the snow fields passing in long checkers of white and black. Out there. Out there is a killer for God’s sake. For a moment he includes his afternoon encounter with bloody death as just the very reason why Ed Gein is an inappropriate subject.

He looks forward to the centre line shooting its bars at the grill. Slow? Fast? What kind of a phrase is it?

Les adds up his argument for Ovid and against Ed Gein. Shape Shifter versus Killer. The former can also be the latter, but the latter can only destroy the former. Open. Closed. Dead. Alive. Good. Very bad. Except, he can’t quite hear the speech, something is holding it in front of the truck, not letting it in where it could be audible. Les looks out and watches a barn, black as the moon, and he knows why he has no speech. Because there really is a killer out there. I crossed paths with a predator today. Someone bloody. Out of control. In control? He’s out there. Now. He feels the tickle of fear grow. He pictures the rough hands of Ed Gein pounding the side of a horse.

“Hi Les."

Mary is the principal of the school. Her background is military, and when the province attempted to redistribute talent outside the cities it met with a firmer resolve than its own in Mary. She is well liked, far friendlier, with more imagination and sanity than the young, unstable reformers so popularized by the government. At least that’s the local perception. She is a veteran of the tough decision, respectful of things beyond her control, with an angry, emotional bottom line. She detests the current government’s flippant emergencies. She is alarmed at the appearance of Les.

“Les, are you OK?”

She lowers Les into a chair in her office and he tells her his story. His back aches and his eyes water as he recounts the horror of what he’s seen. The scene has grown slightly bloodier now that it has taken possession of him, and he feels the bowling ball holes of the hunter’s eyes slipping behind his own sockets as he speaks. Looking down at his hands retracting between his knees, Les knows that he has changed. He feels that this person he’s becoming is not reliable, and of course he’s right. He’s attempting to absorb a great deal of unrelated material into a fairly primitive emotional machine. As the spinning blades descend into the febrile jar, what is going to be made of it all? An enlarged estranged lover, a son so new he’s still in orbit, a dead man’s cuttlefish face — and the cuttlefish himself, out there, scrubbing blood from his hands in the snow. He can’t help but make mistakes. I am at the centre of this. I am somehow made of this now.

Ashamed, he confuses Mary’s hand on his shoulder with Helen’s.

Something she never did. She never let me soften. Not like Mary does.

He gives Mary a look so sodden with feeling that she turns away.

This man is in shock, Mary thinks, and she asks him to wait while she goes to get the nurse.

Shock has made Les dull. He looks automatically to his wristwatch, but is unable to distinguish the time as being any different from when he had sat waiting for the detective. He rocks the face between his thumb and forefinger, feeling the tightness of the band around his wrist. A swirl of fake snow, distributed up from the base of the watch, covers the front of a dark church, and falls again quickly, frosting the little plastic cemetery on its grounds. Les shakes his hand, stirring up the scene as he winds his watch. He peers at its face and this time he can see a tiny robot, clad in a torn hunting vest, mechanically dipping and lifting a shovel in the cemetery. Les scours the icy black forest behind the church, looking for the killer. It is no surprise, then, that he does not understand that there is more than one killer on the loose.

The first killer, whose work Les has already seen, is now burrowing his upper body in the snow, thrashing his open mouth against the frozen ground. He is soon going to die a death like no other. Another killer is brandishing the same open mouth at a nurse, not thirty metres from where Les now sits. This killer has the nurse’s lips in his mouth and, with enough power to break both their necks, he shakes her face until its muscles pop from their moorings. The nurse falls against the cabinet, just out of reach of Les’s wild sight, and slides onto the floor. The killer’s neck is broken and he stands over the nurse with his head dropping to his chest. His mouth is open, a bright
red gasket through which the bleating of animals can be heard. The sound he makes isn’t human; the message, however, is unmistakable. He’s saying: *This doesn’t work, I’m failing.*

The killer flees up the hallway, led by his own open mouth. Distended by its searching, it now flails forward. When Mary arrives in the nurse’s room she stops at the door, going no further than the single bloody hand wrapped around the door frame. *Murder scene,* she thinks. *Get Les, get out of the building.*

She runs down the hall, back to her office. Les looks up, calm and blind. He makes a child’s resistant face when Mary drags him up by the arm. She doesn’t explain, leading him through the gymnasium toward a side door that exits onto the parking lot.

Mary pulls Les back, swinging his slightly stupid body behind her.

*There he is.*

The killer is sitting against the wall beside the door. He is rocking his upper body, his arms bowing at his sides. At their ends are upturned hands. Dead hands. Dead legs. His extremities, face, fingers and feet, are creased with jellied blood. Mary takes a step back, knocking into Les. He trips in a fall that brings Mary down with him. The killer is stirred and he sways his torso backward, turning his head to see them. Mary takes a four-legged step away. The killer tilts his body in her direction, as if he is part of her movement. Mary freezes, knowing that this man isn’t thinking, that he’s responding to his environment automatically. She sees his eyes. His eyes. Like split thumbs they rise in his sockets and turn in their glue of prehensile clots. Towards her. Looking. The thing coils slightly, and Mary knows exactly what it will do.

It jumps across the floor.
Les focuses finally, resorting to a default set of perceptions. So, when he feels the weight of Mary on him, he thinks this is the morning after, that she is marsupial in her affection. He feels a centipede walking along his neck and he opens his eyes. Far above is the gymnasium ceiling, Mechano blue and space shuttle white. Mary is bleeding on him. She grinds against him to escape a man who is pushing her head with his own. She shakes herself and detaches the killer’s mouth, letting it free fall directly onto Les’s cheek. Les feels the lamprey gathering of skin and he rolls, sliding Mary out from between them. Beside him, the cannibal folds in half.

There have been two killings. Maybe a third. And nearly a fourth. But for now the Killings are a pair, a couple. And like couples do, the Killings look for what they have in common. They stand in line like all the other couples. Like other couples, the Killings share financial burden, discovering that as two they can afford so much more. They can take trips and buy things that as single nouns or verbs they never could. The Killings are combining their relatively limited horizons into something without limits, something dreamy. They share ambitions. Which is fine. Again, all couples do. All couples become all couples; however, they also harbour the seeds of their divorce. Right from the very beginning, in fact, what facilitated the attraction is always a tiny version of the end. He loved her because she broke the spines of books when she read. She loved him because he pretended he was misunderstood, which gave her licence to pretend she broke her ankle. In the end he felt she didn’t even try, and as she turned to tell him that he was being oblique, she twisted her leg. Tiny story. But now the Killings are open to each other. A gymnasium shadow over a frozen river. An exchange of vows leaps like flame from one pair of mouths to the other. Except, the tiny story, what brought them together, is never spoken of again: the unstable Les Reardon.

And so it follows that when the Killings end they will hold up Les as the reason that they could never have succeeded, when everyone knows that Les, in fact, was how they met. He was their medium of attraction. For now, however, Les is just driving his truck, with Mary breathing in the passenger seat beside him. He decides he’ll drive her to the hospital and phone the police. They should probably call the military. In the rear-view mirror a car that Les has already seen today appears. The detective is catching up, and Les reacts by pushing his foot down on the gas pedal. As his truck surges, Mary rolls over against the passenger window and dies with her teeth rung around an orange button. Her first act as a dead person is to seize, jacking her head up, lifting the button, freeing up the door, which opens.

Her second act as a dead person is to drop out of a speeding car pursued by a detective. Les watches her legs twirl like propellers as she departs. Like the bladed device that Les has been sorting out his life with, Mary’s new machine takes her across the line. From sound body to unsound body.

The detective really can’t believe his eyes as the body cartwheels like a roadside zoetrope, alongside his car. He smacks his glove box and tosses a red light out and onto the roof of the car. Bands of candy run across the snow as the siren cuts open the side of another world. Mary’s body is held in the air for a second by this technology, caught at a right angle with its underside, until the engines of her disappearance coax her to the edge of Doppler. And then she is gone. The detective is thinking, no, actually he’s saying, “Holy Fuck! Holy Fuck! Holy Fuck!”

Peterson is not prepared when Les slows down to turn onto Highway 35, and the detective loses control of his vehicle. The car flips onto its side, and like a snow-removal device it bumps smoothly, still on its edge, fitting perfectly into the ditch where it plows sixty metres of snow. When it stops, the detective is alive, not even injured. Still, there is something altogether deadly occurring, something totally unrelated to this accident.

The detective, who has refolded himself to a sitting position on the driver’s window, looks up at the sun peeking in over the passenger’s seatbelt above his head. His head is clear of wounds and his eyes squint at the light. At the very moment his car began its clever trip along the ditch, up on its ear, a virus that Detective Peterson has carried for some time began a full relationship with its host. As he exits the car and drags his ass backwards up onto the icy shoulder, he does so as a man with a disease. The first thing he says, as a man with a disease, is also his first symptom: “How is the part I get for?”

He slaps the edges of his boots together and the cold seepage of melting ice through the seat of his pants causes him to jump to attention. He is not aware of the obvious. The thing he said aloud did not succeed. He knows exactly what he meant. In fact, even without being overheard, it probably would have been equal to what he actually said:
How is the part I get for? This is not to say that he could remain oblivious to the disease. It will become dramatic. The detective climbs over the car again and drops his arm through the open window. He fishes his hand against the dash and retrieves the cord to his radio. The length of this cord, two, maybe two and a half feet, is all he has left. He doesn’t know how slowly to ravel it in his hand. He doesn’t see the resemblance between the handset and the tiny coffin of an infant. He squeezes the little dead hand in his, breaking its baby finger, making it cry.

The detective is a foolish man, not smart or pleasant; so, while he becomes even less appealing in these last days of his life, an angel will be assigned to him: the soul of an innocent child whose murderer he brought to justice. The angel is assigned to him to remind us that we are tormenting a man who is loved by God.
Les Reardon is heading west on Highway 7 between Nestleton Station and Port Perry. This part of the country looks like a vast set of stairs, carpeted with trees, and is, in fact, the steps that lead down to the big city and its lake. Highway 7 runs along the edge of an incline, and to Les’s south the land drops away, greying into the phantom of a horizon. To the north the land sits high in the sun, like a cresting wave. The land is a market of conversions: farms into gravel pits, gravel pits into heavy machinery depots. And then these depots become the instant little communities that the machines have abandoned. Many people have travelled this highway to Port Perry, and many have carried tragedy. Children catching fire in the back seat with the meningitis that kills them between towns. A young man cradling a severed forearm between his thighs. The terrible family trips that end in violence on a sideroad. Les has joined those people who have suffered the unique agony of trying to escape impending doom by taking in the scenery. Most prefer to watch the land fall to the south, where they can be lost among hospitals. The north, on the right, has always risen in an opera of murder; it will broadside every family member, set in motion the suicides of giant people. Les, however, is looking across the front of his truck, into the white, for a place to pull over. He has vomited on himself and his vehicle is dark with the blood of a recent passenger. He pulls over at the sideroad to Caesarea and steps from the vehicle.

They think I’m doing this.

Les pushes handfuls of ice across the muck of his coat. He opens the passenger door and hurls snow across the seat and dash. He stands beside his car to wait until he himself comes to a full stop. In this stop he is reunited with the feelings that he woke with this morning.

I am a man who is trying. Helen. My son. This day has nothing to do with me. What am I doing? I’ve jeopardized everything. The police will catch this man. I have only done what anyone would do. Helen knows that. I have to turn around and help that detective. I have to report this.

Helen left Les just as he finished university. Going back to school had been his idea. At first it was a way of rehabilitating himself, of learning to live with a mental illness. He had worked in sanitation for twenty-five years; every day he’d pulled a garbage truck from the lot at four in the morning. On those mornings the sun rose on an isolated little man who waged a visionary war.

And then the war became real.

The bags of garbage held bodies, and the dogs in the street were licking the entrails of orphaned children caught in the crossfire. Next came the truly terrible morning, when Helen guessed, and he thought she was a spy. It was all so real. Even now, in the sometimes fragile, smart system of a new chemistry, Les is holding out until the day the war is acknowledged by Ontario and his wife is forced to return to him. A matter of national security. Their marriage, their son. He had become a drama teacher, and Helen left him, in the first month of her pregnancy, to live with a writer in the village of Parkdale. The post-breakdown Les asked far too many smart questions. He had begun to desire things that had never been discussed with Helen.

Les has never seen his son. He doesn’t even know his name. He’d moved to Pontypool, to work at the farm and the school, the summer before the boy was born. Les feels calm as he returns to the driver’s seat of his truck. The events of the day have guided him out of crisis, and he rolls the vehicle toward Caesarea, where he’ll telephone the OPP. He feels the safety and the sadness of this decision drop his gearshift from neutral to drive.

At a breakfast table in Caesarea a couple sit across from each other. Their mouths are opened and liver coloured. She tries to lick her bottom lip but misses, catching her tongue in the slippery well of skin at the base of her gums. The tongue pushes to a point in this pocket until the O of her lips reaches its limit and the tongue springs out, releasing a full pouch of liquid down her chin. Her husband mimics this, but he extends his tongue directly through the O, clearing its edges, missing the point. Like all the other zombies, the only expression that these two can achieve is one of supernatural failure. Like gargoyles, they frown in exhausted masks of hopelessness. Her eyes rise
into the bridge of her nose and tunnel up beneath her brow; the lashes have fallen into the tails of goldfish that fan across her cheeks. His eyes are the same, but for heavier lower lids that scoop out like wading pools, vividly red and beating with vulnerable membrane. This couple, unlike the Killings, will never act out the tiny story that brought them together. Instead, they are doomed to suspension, to act out a compulsion that has never been fully explained. But as Les Reardon steps up to their front door the compulsion will be given another opportunity to shock and revile.

No one answers the door, so Les pounds it harder, knocking it back under his knuckles. Les steps through the opening and immediately understands, by the choir of animal sounds coming from within, that the killer is here. How does he know? Who is this? Les steps backward outside, but too late. Two people in dressing gowns move into the hall like vampires and with surprising swiftness they stuff their hands across the frame just as Les slams the door. He looks down at the fingers he’s grinding. Wiggling zombie pawns. Sacrificed, they break and snap. The things are relentless, and as he repeatedly bangs the door on their hands they manage to stuff their arms through, up to their elbows. They will get through.

They are getting through. Les lets go of the door and tears down the driveway. The zombies grab at the flesh of his buttocks and the backs of his legs. Dozens of clumsy pincers spring him into the air. They are just below him, still pinching the ghost of his ass, but out of reach. Les has never flown before and when he notices that his feet are flailing at the tops of bushes he collapses. He waits for the shale to hit him, but it doesn’t, not until he drops through two feet of frigid water. Les looks up across a lake. The shore behind him holds the zombies at a distance of two metres. Les dunks his head below the surface. He removes his shoes and lays them side by side on the bottom of Lake Scugog. A layer of slush hangs just beneath the surface and it bites, cold, into Les’s ribs. Within seconds he feels his own death in this water. He sees a small boat down the shore at a dock and begins a mad dog paddle.
If his illness is acting up a little bit, it’s only to be expected. It does not really compromise his ability to discern much of his immediate physical dilemma. In fact, he dismisses the delusional worms gathering in each of the cottages he can see with far firmer resolve than any historically sane person could. The sky is harmlessly transformed into the underside of a table, and the clouds lengthen and thin into the wicked webs of spiders. The sun flattens and hardens into a round seal of pink gum pressed under a corner of the table. Les does not think that the menace his atmosphere represents is overstated, and he rightly thanks his illness for peeling back at least one layer from the hideous stop of the sky. Underwater he can hear the shuffle of feet beneath a table, the tapping of a signal, the little music of coins in a pocket. Since he feels he has the option, he rises from the water to Handel.

As he flops onto the dock, Les decides that, whatever it eventually means, for now at least he is a fugitive. Uncurling the rope holding the boat, he drifts in it, on a current that will take him to Port Perry. The sun is warm enough to break the ice in his veins into painful throbs. The card table has dissipated and a less likely blue sky has taken its place. Les lies in the bottom of the boat.

I have never been an organized man. I will never know what the inner life of other people is like. That can never matter again. In Port Perry I will steal a car. I’m going to Parkdale.

From the shore a loon offers Les both its name and its Haunting Cry. He turns his head in the bottom of the boat, bunching his cheek against aluminum rivets, and smiles.

None of you has anything for me anymore. I am Ed Gein. I want my wife and child.

At his nose is a dead worm, glossy and hard; it forms an almost audible S. Les flicks the brittle lower loop, creating a question mark. Stupid. He flicks the upper loop, creating a bar of worm that appears to have shot off its ends in a centrifugal action. Better. Better question.

For the next four hours Les lies freezing in the drifting boat, turning away from, and then back to, his worm. He pictures his son in little screens that open up in the aluminum just above the watermark. He names the child. He changes the name. The baby has a face like a walnut, a uniform surface of wrinkles, and Helen wipes yellow food from his chin. Les tilts his jaw toward the bait-littered bottom of the boat, and Helen reaches up and cleans three tiny crayfish legs from the side of his face. Her hand slips back beneath the brackish water an inch deep beneath Les. They live in an inch of water. No air. They can’t see. The fins of pickerel and the snouts of summer frogs hide the light. A rusted fish hook has just fallen in the baby’s food.
Detective Peterson pulls a rental car up into his driveway. He sits with his face in his hands. When he asks himself what’s happening? he’s not thinking of cannibal drama teachers and their flying passengers. Peterson is thinking about the difficulty he has had all afternoon. I can’t seem to speak properly. An understatement. I don’t feel any different. I can think clearly. At least I think I can.

He’s right. There is nothing detectably wrong with his thoughts; however, he has struggled all afternoon with a strange inability to control the words he uses. At the car-rental outlet the young attendee didn’t want to give him a vehicle. Peterson limited himself to single-word prompts: car, rent. But even these simple words betrayed him. He could find them but couldn’t repeat them easily — car, cove, tummy… It was only when Peterson showed his detective’s badge that the teenage boy proceeded, silently, suspiciously, to rent the car.

Peterson lays his hands on the dash and says, “Dash.” He grips the steering wheel with both hands and says, “Messy car.”

Messy car? Messy car? He looks at the steering wheel. The image of a car is on the horn bar. A sort of medallion of the rental place. Messy car? Is that it? The steering wheel is messy with a car? Peterson attempts to slide a key into this and says, “Bad boy Walt Whitman.” His heart sinks. Yes, he thinks clearly, there is a mess in the car. I just can’t say it.

Peterson steps from his car and carefully closes the door. The wet brown lawn runs down to the road. A crescent-shaped garden with rocks. Spring is coming. Today. The snow has melted since this morning. Peterson admires these things. Nothing resists him. He traces the perimeter of the garden with his eyes. Across. Long. Down. Up. These are lengths and directions. Peterson feels agitated. Angry. His house has something that he doesn’t. He looks at the front door. White metal, with a bronze knocker and a black knob. He says, “door.” In the upper left window he sees his wife pass. He thinks her.

In this simple word, spoken, though not aloud, he slips another key carefully into a lock. He turns it, gently. Her. The lock clicks and he applies a light pressure. Her fault. Aloud: “Her fault.” He stands in the hallway at the base of the stairs, armed with his first complicated phrase of this long afternoon, and he removes his coat. Out of the corner of his eye he catches himself in the hallway mirror. He feels encouraged by the image — a man opening a closet door, a gun belt slung across his back — a complex person, integrated by his own actions into a complicated world. This appears even more obvious by the controlled way he removes the gun belt and hangs it on an ornate hook beside the closet door. He turns and looks at himself directly. He watches his mouth and thinks: Her fault. Closed mouth. Her coat — mouth open. Closed — fault. Open — fault.

Ellen Peterson lowers herself onto the couch in the TV room. The television is off and a macramé throw hangs in front of the screen. She sets a mug of coffee onto a table beside the couch.

Ellen Peterson is forty-two years old, tall, with handsome short grey hair. Her eyebrows are rigged to set off her expression with irony, and her mouth operates with the quick lips of a young person. Her hands are hinged with a loose agility, their gestures can accommodate the approximate and the exact. In short, Ellen’s anatomy is a perfect compliment to intelligence.

She raises the cup to her mouth but stops halfway. The gesture is not surprising, an index of intellectual life: her face twitches once to release the pause, and she brings the mug to her lips. She pushes the rim with her tongue, breaching the sipping seal, and coffee flows across her chin. It turns in a black braid down her neck and fans out through the fabric of her red T-shirt. Ellen Peterson is the reeve for Pontypool, Bewdley and Caesarea. She married Detective Peterson twelve years ago when he was just an OPP officer and she was a real estate agent. She managed to become successfully elected reeve because of her passion and familiarity with the rural life of the area. Ellen has never lived in a city, and her sophistication and intelligence are considered by her constituents to be the best of their own. She has pioneered a sensibility for rural Ontario that will carry it into the next millennium with as much wit and ability as her urban counterparts. And what’s more, she will bring the mystery of the backroads to sluggish minds in boardrooms. Ellen Peterson is also a member of a local sisterhood of Wicca, and the Bewdley Seers’ Festival is a project that she lovingly organizes, with some anonymity, at a careful distance from the office she holds. This past year of Ellen’s life, however, has been shot with a tragedy of devastating proportion.
On May 19, 1995, Ellen Peterson was attempting to intervene in what she perceived was a rash seizure of property by the game warden. The warden had stumbled on a family of four standing nearly waist deep in a small river-fed pond. The family were slapping the water with surveyor’s stakes as they ran back and forth, falling and squealing. As he got closer the game warden realized that they were playing a sort of British Bulldog with a school of carp. When the family saw the man they rushed back up to shore, more embarrassed and excited than aware that they were doing anything wrong. None of the carp was harmed, and in fact many of them left the game to mate upstream with renewed vigour.

Ellen didn’t see any harm in what they were doing, but the warden tried to describe the removal of surveyor’s stakes as vandalism, or at least as an illegal use of spears. He wanted to seize the family home and prosecute to the full extent of the law. Ellen recognized a man whose heart, unlike her husband’s, would beat faster if only the world were just a little more crooked than it already is.

As she looked for a phrase that would let the game warden and the family off the hook, a phrase that didn’t include the word *eager*, Ellen had a stroke. The stroke was the first of three that would hit her over the next year, each one dropping her deeper beneath the last, placing a baffling distance between her thought and the words that negotiate it. The second stroke caused the doctors to prematurely diagnose Pick’s disease, a gradual shrinking of the brain. This was suggested when a brain scan and several tests, involving draining her brain pan of fluid and inflating it with air, revealed a wider gap than a previous test. For days Ellen lay in the hospital, frightened by the fierce pain and the needle jolts of electricity in her head. Whenever she turned her head on the pillow her brain slid off its cushion of air and clunked, like a bumper car, into a corner of her skull.

After the third stroke and a third scan the doctors noticed that the affected area had changed appearance, shrinking from the size and shape of Sarnia to that of, say, Bewdley. Their prognosis this time was brighter. No organic damage. A part of her brain had been sealed off from the rest, and its contents needed to be coached out of the shadow they’d been cast in and reintroduced to the engines of their history: the physical context of their temporarily unavailable contents. The doctors thought that two years of therapy could bring her language back fully. When asked if she would be able to function as well as she had, however, they responded honestly: no.

Detective Peterson was given the impression that he had asked for too much and from then on he felt uneasy, like he was offending every doctor he consulted. Ellen kept her job as reeve and her secret position in the Wiccan religion. Detective Peterson knew this was the desire of the community — but only until the world replaced the role model that it had so wantonly destroyed. The sadness and, at times, the despair of the detective and the people of Pontypool were matched only by the millions of tiny tears shed by twenty-four thousand carp as they squeezed out their eggs and misted them with sperm. These tears lost their distinctive drop shape in the current of the river and were thus saved from appearing sentimental. They sank to the bottom and formed a rough fur of salted water over stones. Sediment.

The detective, on the other hand, took to sentimentalizing everything. He refused to treat Ellen differently, though she had become a different person, and he felt his own denial as a terrible sentence that he alone must unfairly endure. If her mood lightened, which it did sometimes in the afternoon, he felt a searing rage. And when, at night, fatigue caused her to repeat the words *dead … dead* over and over again, he felt a calmness fall over the house. At these times he also felt joy.

A walk through the kitchen for him contained enough signs of their other life together that he sometimes ate out for several days in a row to avoid being confronted by a past that, as the doctors had said, could be expected to return someday — changed, reduced, perverse. This was what frightened the detective the most. *The return.*

After her third stroke Ellen’s therapy began to take, and her progress exceeded the expectations of the specialists. She was able to go out and shop for groceries, provided that she rehearsed the shopping list before heading off. Ellen prepared for these outings tirelessly, and except for the occasional tantrum, usually triggered by having to make an unexpected decision, she was successful: decision making was often accompanied by terrible sensations.

Each shopping list disappeared from her when it was discarded. Along with it, the domestic life signified by the taxonomy was also lost. Ellen experienced these words and lists as thick, heavy blanks and their weight pulled at the muscles in her back. In order to make the words bearable she cored them with noise, a bright, prickling noise that vacuumed the area inside and immediately around them. Doing this, she was able to lift herself from the couch or walk into the kitchen.

Soon, as she stood in front of a stack of frozen fish or sat over a pile of unsigned documents, Ellen began detailing, with a meticulousness and energy she had never known, a catalogue of seals, made hermetic by the new shoots that were growing off the signs of her world. A pentagram of signatures burned against the side of a trout, its...
eye a frozen pea, the “P” that begins her last name.

A tomato was told to keep all of the events of her life before the stroke beneath the sheen of its skin. It was obedient.

In her tomato, in one of its tiny translucent seeds, Ellen has every plot of land she ever sold. Stored there are her various machines for telling the future.

She now studies future images in the afternoon, before the sun abandons her to suicide, and she translates them, using another set of machines sealed between the halves of an adjacent seed. Many of the images depict scenes of murder, but Ellen knows they only shock her to get her attention.

Occasionally, however, she will open a seal and a brief piece of song or snippet of conversation will make her laugh at some discrepancy. This is the mischief of her seals and machines.
Ellen bites the tip of her tongue to squeeze the coffee from it and she tastes blood the moment she drops her mug. The sound of the mug as it spins and stops, hitting the leg of the table, causes her to cry. She bunches up the cold wet of her shirt and pushes her fists into her mouth. She clenches her eyes shut, feeling the blankness of the event scare her, and she hears the voice of a little girl in her mouth.

Detective Peterson hears his wife’s strange sobs and he pounds up the stairs, remembering as he gets to the top: *Don’t make a big deal of this, don’t make a big deal of this.* When he reaches the television room Ellen is holding herself tightly, straining to keep the voice from her throat. The detective slips in beside her and gently loosens the knot of her arms. He guides her head onto his shoulder and encourages her to cry. She does, and it’s the cry of a grown woman, full of softness for the little girl who is so scared. While he rocks his wife Detective Peterson realizes, without guilt, that none of this is Ellen’s fault. He says, “Is banned, in cape.” She looks up, grateful for the words; restored, she feels his affection diminish the barrier. The detective has failed to notice that he did not, in fact, say the words *It’s OK, it’s OK.* Rather, he felt their effect on Ellen. At this point he feels ashamed, knowing how wrong he was to have blamed her. Detective Peterson scoops up the mug and asks Ellen if she wants another and she explains to him that she’s already had two cups and maybe better not. He kisses her cheek and leaves the room, turning back as he steps into the hallway to ask if she wants to watch television with him later. She says that she would. It has been so long. Television has been a source of great anguish to her, but maybe now, with her husband sitting beside her, it would be like it was. Detective Peterson walks into the kitchen just as the phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Detective?”

“Yes?”

“We need a report on what happened this afternoon. The sargent has called in the *RCS* on this one. They think we got more than one killer. We gotta find Les Reardon.”

“Purse snatch … purse snatch … fucker …”

Peterson lowers the phone and feels a wind across his face. Bits of words catch in the sunlight across the top of the stove like barbs off a wire. He swings the receiver through them and they part in eddies around his wrist. He brings the phone back up to his ear.

“What? Detective Peterson, are you there? Hello?”

“Hello?”

“Yeah, sir, what did you say?”

“What?”

“What did you say?”

“Say?”

“Yeah, what did you say?”

“Say?”

“Are you OK, sir?”

“Yes, sir, is messy.”

“I think I’ll come out there, sir, if that’s all right. I gotta couple of things to do first, but I think I’ll come out there. Is that all right, sir?”

Peterson thinks, *Well, there isn’t anything wrong. I’m fine for fuck’s sake, I just can’t seem to say so.* And he says: “Dirty dump … dirty day.”

“Uh … detective, we have a very serious situation unfolding in the region and if you don’t think you can … uh … handle it right now … I have to tell somebody.”

“Dirty, dirty, dirty.”
Peterson places the phone back in its cradle. He hears his wife call his name and he jumps. A flash of rage fills his chest. He runs into the living room and snatches the TV Guide before dashing up the stairs. By the time he reaches the top he calms again. He hears Ellen singing softly to herself. The song is very familiar. He can’t name it. As he enters the television room and lays the TV Guide in her lap he asks her what the song is. She tells him and he smiles, remembering its source. He hums a bar as he flips the macramé throw over the top of the television screen. Ellen suggests a television show and the detective pretends to consider it — he’s going to watch whatever she wants, and eventually smiles at her choice. The television pops on and the Rembrandt hues of a soap opera appear. This is the program they had decided on, and as they settle in each other’s arms to begin watching it they both feel an identical discomfort. Without discussing it Ellen switches the channel until she finds something. It happens to be exactly what the detective would have chosen.

Night Court. A rerun.

As Bull looks for a place to hide a mop, the Petersons nod to the closet that waits off camera.
The moon breaks into little pieces and sprinkles itself as confetti onto the front lawn of the Peterson household. A man in uniform steps up to the front door. He lays the back of his hand flat across the doorbell and by sinking his second knuckle he depresses the button.

Inside the house, up the flight of stairs that the front door opens to, is the television room. Detective Peterson sits up on the edge of the couch, straightening his arms to his knees. His head turns in the direction of the door. His eyes are new. Near him a wounded caribou pulls at a leg wedged in ice. Ellen looks to him, in the way she has had to these last few months, and when the bell rings a second time he turns on her, clasping one hand around her face and the other across the back of her neck. He attempts to shush her, but his teeth are too wet and his bottom lip is too sloppy.

The Honeymoon in Aphasia is over.

Detective Peterson’s difficulties speaking have spread out to his face, and now, in his panic, he feels that he must escape through the only door left open: his own mouth.

Ellen scrambles to resurrect the barrier between them — He is sick, really sick — and she rolls her tomato backwards from the corner of her mouth, subtracting the afternoon. Something is wrong with my husband. He’s holding my head like a newspaper. The detective drops Ellen’s head from his hands, giving her neck an assaultive twist, and he leaps from the couch. He pulls a painting off the wall and throws it across the television. Ellen has a sudden impatience with her own disorder and she belts her better self into action. She rises off the couch. He’s willing to break his own neck to stop me. She pushes her husband back against the wall and runs up the hall and down the stairs.

Before she can reach the bottom her husband’s body rolls against the backs of her legs. She knows the level this has reached. So fast. He’s going to break his neck to stop me. Ellen sweeps aside her disability with a flat hand on her husband’s back and she vaults over his pommel horse body. The detective spins and swipes at her ankle before she reaches the door.

The man on the other side enters the scene by slamming his body against the barrier. Ellen has rolled out of the way and the new man in her life is wrapped around the old one. The uniform pulls his head back to take in what he holds in his arms. No time. A hot mouth clamps onto his lips and sinks its teeth to close them. The uniform feels the power of an industrial press punching into the centre of his face.

Ellen scuttles backwards down the hall, and as her husband flicks his head she hears the snap of both men’s necks breaking. The detective drops the body to the ground and he turns his damaged upper torso toward Ellen. His mouth is full and he releases the contents down his shirt, hissing across bloody teeth. His bottom lip jumps up to make a consonant but falls short and swings slack across his chin. He sways his head, grinding the break in his neck. Ellen thinks she sees a wolf appear in shadow across the back of his throat and she fires at the blue moon of his uvula.

The already taxed anatomy of the detective surrenders utterly to the bullet and his head lifts from his shoulders; clear of them, it flips like a coin. The head drops to the floor, sitting against the door on the empty sock of its neck, and looks directly at Ellen. The look, though inanimate, is fresh with the experience of abjection, of failure. This look, familiar to the followers of zombies, is not entirely new to Ellen either. And if she weren’t so tightly packaged with terror she would, probably, cry.
The long pier in Port Perry floats its spine out into Lake Scugog, and among its ribs bob long sanitary sailboats with their own spare and polished spines. Seagulls lead each other’s capes in and off the tips of these skeletons, keeping the temperature just past winter with their cries. A great deal of soap floats in white castles out from the orange waterlines of the boats and they repel the surface slicks of gasoline like poles meeting. A boy wearing an outsized captain’s hat that loops off his head sits on the edge of a boat watching the patterns of gasoline as they leap clear on the smooth woven surface of the water. A giant goldfish, in fat flames, appears below. The boy catches his breath. The carp is almost as big as he is. The two creatures hang in the air marvelling at their equal volume, sharing the suspension, the yellow light of gills and the white ring of an ankle. The carp leans off the surface and carries its glow to the bottom, disappearing from the boy, who looks up at the seagulls that have brought their paper flight to within feet of him. He thinks that if clouds could shit they’d shit seagulls. He notices an empty boat floating close to shore across the harbour.

Les Reardon opens his eyes and watches a seagull at his feet tearing through the back of a perch. He slams the side of the boat with his foot, but the seagull doesn’t move. He flaps both his legs apart, hitting the sides, and this time the bird jumps into the air. It rises a foot or two and then returns inverted, standing this time with the tip of its beak through the forehead of the fish. Les leaps up and, missing the bird, squishes the desiccated fish in his hands, sending it in a slurp up into the air and overboard. The seagull hangs above his head, screaming, and finally lifts backward.

On shore Les discovers he has difficulty walking. He steps around sloppily on guitar-shaped legs until a succession of steps brings him out of the sand and onto a brown lawn. An elderly woman, in a purple silk bathrobe, is standing on the clean bare floor of a bare room that looks out at the lake through a tall window. She watches the man who has just appeared in her backyard. He appears drunk. Filthy. She slides the door open a few inches, sniffing at the outside before speaking.

“Hello there. Can I help you?”

Les waves at her as he steps forward. He approaches the woman deceitfully. She only has time to say “Oh my!” before he knocks her to the floor. A little bald man in pyjamas appears squinting at the bar in the corner of the room, and he takes three quick steps toward his fallen wife. He is also knocked over by Les.

This couple distinguish themselves from the Killings by being the Knockouts.
Les pulls over in the little grey car he stole from the Knockouts. He steps out to fill it with gas. As the numbers are flying through their eleventh dollar an attendant lurches from his booth. Les recognizes him. *Zombie.* Les masses the trigger of the nozzle with his finger, recognizing the weapon. *Gun.* The zombie attendant stops within two metres of Les and is confused. Its circular mouth rotates a few degrees and clicks into a new position, tightening an aperture of skin along its rim. The zombie may or may not be preparing to attack. Les flips the nozzle from the side of the car and in two sprinted steps he drives the hooked tube down the attendant’s throat. He pulls the trigger, jetting gasoline into the zombie’s stomach — its lizard — instantly killing the organ. The pump clicks off automatically as the fluid washes back into the zombie’s mouth. Les steps up onto the low concrete island, tossing the hose against its recoil wire, toward the creature that has collapsed. Unable to close its mouth, it cacks from the back of its throat and lays its upturned hands in the crude water that it has released onto the ground. It looks down into the dark pool growing around its hips and sees the red lights of the car reflected there. As Les pulls away from the island the zombie turns its hand over on the surface of its fecal blood, caging the car too late. The silver bumper drifts to the edge, disappearing into the gravel.

Les leaves Manchester with nearly half a tank of gas and he makes his way south through wicked Canada. He has isolated a part of himself that he commits to sanity, and from here he has decided that the difference between his relapsed psyche and the outside world is so negligible that to worry about losing touch is not the most urgent game. In fact, Les is sure that the behaviour of the world is somehow blueprinted by his paranoia. This is not a new delusion, he realizes; and it’s a delusion with more benefits than liabilities. Les knows that the balance does expire, and he prays that the world will one day be worthy of a new prescription, another antipsychotic medication. But for now the difference is both negligible and essential. Les lets his contaminated body drive while he watches the shadows of barns for any signs of Helen.

In the years prior to his breakdown, actually since childhood, Les knew that a terrible thing was waiting for him. He detected it first in adults. He remembers clearly watching their panicky faces, their overwhelmed expressions, and thinking that they were all so frightened. He watched the adult world battle against his awareness, deny it, and react angrily if he acknowledged it in any way. In fact, as he grew older and the disastrous world grew closer, he decided that he would never act out the tiny little cartoon of adult exhaustion. He would live in ruin if he had to, but he would never pretend that his every living moment wasn’t heading in a painfully wrong direction — and one day, when the entire human race is seized with the first pangs of consciousness, it would look to him who had suffered.

Throughout school Les struggled to hide his disorganized inner world and its hot painful cuts, and he survived, barely, giving his teachers and parents a rough facsimile of what they wanted. It would take years before these people would finally give up on him, and when they did Les felt a great relief. The first thing he did, as a relieved person, was get his trucking licence, and soon, after landing a good-paying, secure job with the city, he began to haul its garbage in the very early morning.

Les enjoyed his job so much that he began to mythologize it. That was when the war in Ontario began. At first he was surprised at what was happening. The body bags hidden in people’s garbage shocked and frightened him. He checked newspapers for anything on missing people, but he found only stories about other wars: race wars, drug wars, the war on poverty.

The adult world squirmed closer to him. Not knowing yet; not reporting. Les started to notice that the body bags sometimes weren’t sealed and a pale yellow arm or leg would arch across the gutter.

Then one day he watched a co-worker through his side-view mirror. Stepping off the back of the truck and swinging down to scoop up the bags, the worker rolled, with the side of his boot, the tiny round corpse of an infant back into an open garbage bag. This was the turning point. Les knew that he had been wrong all his life. Not only did people know about the panic that scratched their world, they had been secretly coordinating, conspiring with it. An Underground that knew all about this, knew all about Les, was preparing to wake up the world and invite it to a Canada’s Wonderland made of bodies. Giant bloodslides. Houses of torture where children’s kidneys are twisted like sponges in the fat hands of musclemen. There would be buns crammed with the cooked knuckles of teenagers, and a king, sitting on a mountain of kings, eating his own shoulder.

Les turned the truck around, leaving the worker, bag in hand, calling from the curb. This was the day of his
breakdown. He was taken directly to the Clark Institute. After a month that he can barely recall he entered the strange tent city of the ICU. He wandered alone, silent, among the shrouded beds, occasionally stepping out onto an impossible acreage of tile that restrained patients with its emptiness. Tall windows held back an aquarium of nurses and doctors who swam around each other in turquoise water, feeding on plants and communicating through unstable bubbles that burst across their cheeks. Les felt nothing in these weeks. No one spoke to him.

He was eventually moved, through the aquarium, into a proper room with a proper roommate.

When Helen visited him the first time a thousand emotions sprang to life in his chest, and with each visit these emotions, unnamable and new, began to crawl to a surface. When the doctors spoke to him Les described the War in Ontario as the twisted invention of a paranoid mind, which, more than being precisely what they wanted to hear, Les knew was true. The Underground didn’t exist. He told the doctors this. He told the doctors less of what he actually believed. Les believed that the War was merely a bad interpretation made in a diseased body. Yes, but what was it actually an interpretation of? Les vowed to himself that he would do exactly what they told him. He would devote himself to becoming stable and sound so that he could be a more reliable interpreter. He hid from them this fact: that the War would always be for him a sign of what it could never express. He also devoted all of his new emotions to Helen.

These emotions, brilliant and strange as they -were, were also very painful. They collected themselves — safety in numbers — around the finger that Les pointed at his girlfriend. They all became love. When Les returned home, Helen had the disturbing sense that in the bright light of his new devotion she had somehow lost her substance. For Les, Helen had never had more substance. She existed as the luminous form of an entire emotional spectrum.

And then, as she was about to enter the second month of her first pregnancy, she left him.
The first car dealerships of Brooklyn start to appear. Les scans the swooping parking lots, trimmed by drying lightbulbs and coloured flags, for zombies. A man standing at the side of the road balances two heavy plastic bags. He watches the car approach and he steps out onto the road precisely as it passes him. Les looks in his rear-view mirror and sees the man step across the centreline. Some are not zombies. He slows the car, wondering if he shouldn’t grab this opportunity to talk to an uncontaminated person. He remembers the Knockouts. Opportunity. I’m contaminated.

Brooklyn soon disappears with the same chrome mirage that brought it into view. Past Green River, the drive will begin to congest into suburban corridors — corridors that drop, like champagne dribbling from glass to glass down a pyramid, into Parkdale. Helen. Traffic lights change the relationships between cars and Les waits anxiously at each red, not looking at the vehicles beside him that have become carriers, little Trojan horses, breachable barriers.

As he descends down Dufferin Street, toward Parkdale, Les turns his hands inward around the steering wheel, sliding its grips deep into his palms. He’s braver. The miracle of his thinking is refreshed. He can distinguish between his strategies and his delusions. Negligible difference. Essential. The child in the back window of the car ahead is not a weapon of war, but he bears the mark; his parents, though, might just be slack-jawed cannibals looking for a parking lot to pull over in so that they can twist off his little blond head and share his face. That’s possible.

Les feels the galvanizing effect of knowing the difference. The mad patterns and buzzing geometry sneaking over him are protective prisms of light, deflecting poisons, redirecting unexplained intrusions. The zombies, on the other hand, are as immediate as hornets. Les flips down the sun visor, where he had earlier stashed Helen’s address, and pulls the piece of paper from behind an elastic band. He unfolds the page across the steering wheel. Number 3, Temple Avenue. Helen and our son.

And some cocksucking writer.

At King and Dufferin Les pulls into the McDonald’s parking lot. He watches panhandlers mill around in front of the Hasty Market. A young woman steps out of Money Mart. A tall, thin man in a fat man’s suit pushes off from the golden arch he had been leaning on and walks toward the grey Datsun. Les examines the face closely. A gaunt, black face. Startled eyes. A slightly open mouth. He lifts a cigarette to his lips and fingers that are medicated scissors, broken and soft, flatten across his mouth, sloppily reinforcing the seal, which is never made. The man inhales and exhales through his teeth. Les sees a keener man in the sharp corners of his eyes, a man who has paid close attention to the way people watch him shuffle. He has taken great care that the shuffle be guided intelligently. Not a zombie.

Les leans into the passenger seat and waves his hand through the window. The panhandler begins talking anyway, making a face, “Yes, I know, but we need to talk.” And for a second, Les falls for the solicitation. The man accidentally slips, losing his target, and Les repeats the hand wave, this time cutting it short, stopping the panhandler in his tracks. Les looks up and the panhandler has already hopped up the step in front of the Money Mart. Les gets out of the car and a loud roar rumbles up his legs. He looks over his shoulder as a military truck moves along King Street and turns down Spencer Avenue. Another follows. The panhandlers don’t look. Across the street a table of cowboys with long grey hair lean over their early morning drafts and watch the small convoy. One of them, cool looking in mirror shades and white mustache, interprets the scene for his friends. Les and the man lock eyes and they share a reptile’s wink across a common lateral lid. Les feels the tiny pop of disconnection as he breaks eye contact. Not a zombie. Who will be the first?

Les’s question is answered almost immediately. A loud squawk comes from the laundromat across the street. A man’s jean jacket falls open across a red T-shirt. He kicks his white cowboy boots back into a washer as he is pushed backwards up and onto it. Another man in an undershirt wiggles with a ferret’s body onto the chest of the cowboy. He sits up, a tattooed incubus, and when he turns to look through the window Les sees a familiar face. His eyes poke out through the chipped blue “a” of “Laundry,” and his pupils, like hard clots, shake once across Les’s car. Behind the lower curve of the “a,” a bleached tongue licks the space inside a blood-rimmed wheel. Les starts the car and pulls past the laundromat. Everyone at the intersection, including the panhandlers, is watching a storefront
puppet show in which men act like pit bulls. Joined at the mouth, they break each other’s necks. 

As he turns the car down Spencer, Les feels each house pass. They’re being subtracted from the distance between him and Helen.

Temple Avenue.

He is unable to turn on Temple. Four large trucks surrounded by military personnel block his access. He parks the car illegally on Spencer, at a fire hydrant just before Springhurst. It’s now or never. Les goes through backyards, scaling fences until he has counted from the number 9 backwards to 3. All of the drapes are closed, and behind them no lights are lit. Les knocks on the door. Nothing. He steps back into the yard and looks at the upper windows. He calls up.

“Helen!”

Nothing. He calls louder.

“Helen!”

Over the roof where the sky lets the house pass into the front yard, four men with rifles surround two full-blown zombies. The soldiers look up, spooked by the voice calling Helen coming in over their heads. The zombies echo the voice in words they bark at the soldiers: “Helen!” “Hello!” “Help!” They are agitated by the alliteration and their barks become frenzied: “Helly!” “Hello!” “Helen!” “Hessy!” The soldiers open fire, peppering zombie torsos with firecrackers. The bullets that enter the zombies cause them to turn slightly. This changes the trajectories of the missiles, so that as they exit they fly toward the front of the house and hit several inches away from where they would have had the zombies not been there. A little plaster gnome shatters where a summer rose might have been cut down. Once free of the bullets, the zombies stand still. Les, on the other hand, jumps clear into the air. He runs for the door with his elbows out like fins on a battering ram.

At the outskirts of this scene a small observing crowd has assembled. Among them are three people in the early stages of the disease. They step back and look at each other meaningfully. They’ve been given something: “Hello. Helen. Hello.” And further back, in a house on the corner, a full-blown zombie sits at an open window howling “Helen!” across southern Parkdale.

A woman who is stepping across the railway tracks that cut through the CNE looks up and calls back through a bloodstained bubble: “Hello!”
Inside the house Les lies across a kitchen counter, frozen momentarily by the burn of hairline fractures in his elbows. He straightens them painfully, making angel wings of space in the dishes and debris that he’s sent crashing to the floor. He wiggles his nose like a witch at the thick gas of garbage. He notices a wasp’s nest of crack pipes on the kitchen table.

*Helen’s a drug addict.*

Les steps into the hall and cranes his head around the corner.

A living room. Empty. A huge new sofa and a television. There are about eighty burns packed tightly into a small area on the outer edge of one of the cushions. A laptop computer idles on the floor. It’s marked twice with long burnt grooves. *The writer’s a drug addict.* Les proceeds up the hall. There are five cell phones and two pagers on a low table by the front door. *They’re dealing.* Les hears someone coming down the stairs, so he steps back through a door into a small bathroom. He closes the door, softly releasing the knob to close it silently.

A man’s voice. “What the fuck is the army doing out there?”


“What the fuck? Hey! Is somebody in here?”

Les grabs one of the plastic jugs. The side has been cut away. Les turns the opening upward. It holds a crazy tiara of stingers; bright, gleaming needles fill the space. *Never touch us, don’t even look at us for very long.* When the door opens behind him, Les swings the jug, releasing a swarm of tiny missiles across a man’s face and chest. The view from inside this man’s body would appear something like the night sky in the city, thousands of stars becoming visible. In the country, millions. One of the needles slides precisely into his tearduct, destroying its tiny architecture before burrowing far enough to permanently ruin the man’s ability to narrow his eyes. This particular jab also causes the man to flip a gun out of his hand. The gun slams heavily against the back of the toilet, cracking it, and then spins halfway around the rim before being carried to the bottom by the weight of its handle. The man collapses against the wall, disbeliefing — *You just don’t do that* — and he watches Les retrieve the weapon from the bowl.

The first thing to exit the gun is a twist-tie drool of toilet water. The second is a speeding bullet. The bullet disappears into the man’s head and exits along with a single chunk of brain. The tofu cube of brain walks down the wall on its slippery corners and covers the black spider hole left by the bullet.

All of the doors are closed at the top of the stairs. Les bangs on one. A baby cries.

“What Helen?”

No answer.

“What Helen?”

He breaks the door down. The room is empty except for a baby who doesn’t look over as he continues wailing. Les feels an energizing burst of relief.

“What Helen?”

No answer. Les steps over to another door, and this time kicks it in. Helen is in this room. She is lying on her back across a bed. She has been dead for days. Her yellow arms are marked with bruises that run from her shoulders to hands that are pulled back in retraction. Eyeliner-black track marks fill the crooks of her arms. Her face is dry and large, with purple roots beneath the skin. A cracked riverbed of fluid crosses her cheek.

Helen is dead.

Beside the cupped toes of her right foot a spoon lies halfway under a roll in the carpet where she has kicked it. *Not paying attention.* The smell of her body causes Les to grab his mouth, and this sweet odour sinks deep enough into his face to prevent tears. He yells her name.
“Helen!”

The zombies in the yard outside are dead, and so the alliterative chain does not begin again. The first chain, however, is now speeding across Vaughn Township and west, deep into Mississauga.

Les returns to the playpen and lifts out his son.

The intersection of King and Dufferin is a solid cube of ice that Les has to pass through. The sun is lowering shadows and Les sees the dark drifts of jawlines, the eyes that spin like worms away from each other. A woman, her blanketed shoulders pinned against the bus shelter, listens to a siren: all mother she ignores it. Disappointed again, she pulls a towel up across her face. The ice cube melts behind him and Les spreads his fingers across the baby’s belly. *I am the adult*. He feels the tiny bird cage of the child’s chest. *Mother*. He remembers a guidance counsellor in grade 10 closing a file and, with a hand-washing return of a pencil to its packet, sliding his chair back from the desk to introduce the door to Les, saying: “You will probably end up alone. You shut me out, I shut you out.”

*This baby is strange. The most important thing in my life … 15 strange to me.*

And it is crying.
Loud.
Les Reardon has not even pictured where he will go. The place does exist, of course. But where he goes is only partially dependent on pictures. For now the picture is a billboard in Gravenhurst. Not yet subjected to feasibility, it confuses southbound motorists with its baby-blue pajamas, blonde widow’s peak and praying hands.

Ellen’s praying hands, pointed under her chin with infant formality, drop to her side; she leaves a fingerprint of her husband’s blood there, like a broad cleft. Her head is clearer and softer now. She stands at a full open acre of intersection in Pontypool and confers with a greater range of Ellens than ever before. The real estate agent, the Bewdley priestess, the killer of her husband, the reeve, the degenerated mind. Near the center of each is a shrewd and deflecting person, more lens than light, who will tell Ellen when she has stopped being useful to herself.

Not yet. Ellen feels a clam-sized piece of breakfast seal off the base of her throat. It frightens her.

Now is when you just choke to death.

She presses four fingers deeply into the top of her chest. The clam leans off the opening and releases her swallow. The relief softens her mind further and she makes a fist of her long hand to push against her mouth. The crying that she feels is very young, and she cannot trust herself to let it up. The reeve soothes Ellen, telling her that these next few moments won’t matter, she can feel exactly as she wishes — cry, Ellen, go ahead, cry.

A car leaps into the air over a hill to the west. As it slows, Ellen, the killer of her husband, turns her back, not daring to look down at what she’s wearing. She stares out into the field and, imitating a painting she once saw, holds her hand like a visor off her brow. She reaches down to bunch the side of her dress, still in imitation of the painting, and recognizes the fabric. Damn, I’m in my dressing gown.

The car slows before it reaches the crossroad and it stops on the shoulder beside her. There is no way to collect herself, she knows, and even if there were she would still be incapable of speech. The sound of a man’s voice. In the turn she makes toward it, Ellen decides to present herself as unstable and unaware. A golf pro struck by lightning. A movie star found wandering.

“Excuse me?” The passenger window drops and a thin face appears. “Oh, my dear woman! Oh, precious, listen, get in the car.”

Ellen steps back and pulls the collars of her robe against her chin.

“OK sweetheart, it looks to me like you already failed Street Proofing 101, so you be brave and step over here and talk to Steve, OK? I just want to help.”

Steve pops the car door open and slaps the seat. Ellen looks at his face and decides this man is so exactly who she wouldn’t approach for help on a country road that he just has to be fine. As soon as she is seated inside the car a violent shake seizes her and her bare feet wag noisily across the plastic ribs of the floor mat.

“Good Lord! You’re having a trauma! What’s your name darling? You poor thing. Have you eaten? You’re lucky I came by. I have something for you. Here, have some tea. It’s calming. Chamomile.”

The man reaches in the back seat and lifts up a bright blue plastic bag. He pulls out a thermos and a folded black cloth. He lays the cloth across Ellen’s knees and pours her a cup in a yellow plastic lid. Ellen feels the steam warm her face and she lifts the cup, against the backdrop of Steve’s guiding hand, to her mouth. Heat, warmth. Steve is the little girl, and I am the monster. The tiny radiance in her mouth loosens an easy word: “Thanks.”

“There you go! You can talk. But no more. I’m taking you to a doctor. You have blood on you! Oh my God! Don’t say anything. Save your strength. You just sit back. I’m taking you to a doctor.”

Steve knows instantly what his role is, and he accepts it, creates it, with sensible limitations. He will take this woman to safety and from there apologize on his cell phone to his business partners for being sidetracked. With the silent woman beside him, looking out the passenger window, Steve does a mental inventory of the contents of his knapsack. Tommy Hilfiger aftershave. Vitamin B complex . . . If I was her, that and some echinacea. Condoms. Address book. Band-Aids. A Swiss army knife. He wants to suggest the echinacea and he turns to her. Profound. Too late or too soon for the holistic approach.

Steve believes that most people have labelled the important things frivolous and he knows that they suffer for it. Ellen has suffered for it. Steve decides that she needs some serious comforting, but seeing as they are strangers he can’t really reach across to her.

“We’ll be at Dr. Mendez’s soon, he’ll help you.”
Ellen doesn’t respond. Steve makes a concentrating face for a few seconds. Then, in frail voice and perfect key, he sings a song. The song is such a pretty replica of the original that it causes Ellen to look over to check that his lips are moving. *He’s a bit loony, isn’t he?*

“Her name was Rio, and she dances on the sand. Just like that river twisting through the dusty land.”

*A stupid song. A stupid, stupid song.* Ellen feels the sweep of a fish-eye lens bending the side of a sailboat. Tight, colourful shorts and leaping young men with bleached hair and tanned thighs. The boat surges up — breathtaking — and it cuts across a breaking wave. Ellen sings softly, not intruding on Steve’s note-perfect voice.

“And when she shines she really shows you all she can. Oh Rio, Rio, Rio — cross the Rio Grande.”

The song moves through her without seams or connection, and like a gentle learning curve it explains nothing while giving her the joyful experience of riding it. Steve smiles, encouraging her to sing. He closes his mouth to supply only a prompting hum. Ellen remembers that at one time the whole world seemed to love *Duran Duran*. And now, now, no one does. Steve drops the windows an inch, letting a warm wind pull at Ellen’s hair. Ellen turns her face and mouths the song; its lyrics are lost again in the new spring air. Cow shit. Wet trees. The first lungful of the new season is a rainbow of young gasses that thoroughly clean the world that has survived. A valley dips below the surface of the road, dragging trees down. The forest then flies back up, banking high above the car. Ellen gasps and touches her mouth. Four large white mailboxes skip by the window. Tiny red flags. Ellen has gone silent and thoughtful. For the rest of the trip Steve will continue singing snatches of songs. *Girls On Film. This Is Planet Earth. Reflex. View To A Kill.*
In the waiting room of Dr. Mendez are crammed a thousand people. This place has a capacity of maybe seventy, so over nine hundred of these people are dead, crushed beyond recognition. Their internal organs have been pushed out and across a firm terrain of shoulders. For a full hour a popcorn flurry of brains, squeezed through the open lids atop hundreds of heads, have jigged and danced against each other in the free air above the dead. Blood has found a way to the floor and it moves around ankles. The bodies are under a pressure that binds most in the upper torso, gently curving them in an arched structure across the room. It is under the centre, where legs have been lifted, that the survivors huddle. Their chins push above the blood’s surface and the tops of their heads drive up into the soles of stiff feet, trying to bend them at the ankle. They gasp desperately in these tiny pockets of red air.

Dr. Mendez is seated at his desk, across which is stretched a body. He has decided to perform an unscheduled autopsy. So many strange deaths. Nothing to lose. Maybe a quick answer will show itself.

All of the body cavities have been opened and then hastily folded shut. Mendez lifts a corner of cheek back into position with his pen. The structure of the room behind him groans, the studs are returning to ninety-degree relationships. The waiting room is emptying.

All over the floor I imagine.

Dr. Mendez is right. As the crammed bodies redistribute their contents, under pressure, to fill the upper and lower parts of the space, the waiting room is returning to its shape. The living few are drowning and will not survive.

An epidemic of broken necks.

As he says this to himself Mendez knows that in two million years another species will unearth the skeletons of human beings. And then they will begin a great pastime. What broke all their necks? Did they build their ceilings too low? Did kick-boxing aliens once visit this planet? Did a meteor fall from the sky and whip around the globe at shoulder height? Mendez stands and approaches his file cabinet. He thinks: Well this is when the good physician should off himself, overwhelmed and thrust suddenly into such a medieval role. But no, instead he counts the bodies on his floor — six. The best is probably yet to come.

Down the road from the doctor’s office Ellen and Steve sit silently in the car. Steve is shaking his head. He wonders what all these cars are doing here. Ellen knows. She can hear the movement of zombies in the woods. The hunting stealth of exact steps carrying rabid people in the dark, just inside the bushes. Coiling their necks like cobras. Painful, empty minds. Their hundreds of round, open mouths hanging like bats from slick, wet branches.

Ellen knocks her door open and runs up the centre of the road, back beyond the cars, and turns quickly to leap blind into a wall of soft cedar. Steve remains in the car. He is so afraid that he can’t even move. The zombies are indiscriminate, and even though Steve has been sweet beyond compare, they will snatch him from behind the wheel and fight among themselves for the chance to snap his neck.

At that moment the angel who has been patiently rocking the ghost of the shallow and inconsolable Detective Peterson will look up with interest.

Ellen hides just inside the trees. Huddled, she stays still and silent. Just a few feet from where she sits a continuous line of zombies make their way down a path that runs parallel to, but hidden from, the road. She closes her eyes and feels herself drop inside and then plunge like a loose elevator. She has no time to imagine where she’s going. The core of her experience is free falling and the only visible sign of this is in the tightening of her lips. When she comes to rest she looks up the hundreds of feet above her head where she is crouched beside a tree. The atmosphere around her is black and cavernous. Ellen thinks: So long as this is somewhere that I am, someone can find me. She blinking her eyes, attempting to adjust to the darkness, and discovers fine streamers of red waving vertically, caught in an updraft just beyond her reach. She steps toward them, thinking, again: If I can move in this place, someone can find me here. I am in a place that can support life. She presses her hands against the invisible wall and feels a cork-board of resistance; it finally feathers against her fingers and disappears. If you come here to find me, I hope you discover this: the walls aren’t really walls here. Keep going, keep going. You’ll find me.
In this place, a bony little peninsula slicing into shallow silver water, Ellen is stepping forward, her bare toes gripping rock and displacing little black egg cups of water. When she reaches the crooked tip she returns to her crouch. She looks off into the air above the water, into the streaks of a soft illumination around her, a hanging moss, impenetrable and glowing. *This is an isolated place.* Her heart sinks. *People don’t come here.* She drops her chin onto her knee and glides the backs of her knuckles, as if stroking a cat, in a little velvet inlet by her foot.
How often is a baby supposed to cry? There are probably answers. You can picture them. A doctor is saying every crying baby is in distress. Another says every crying baby is an exploring person. Ten times a day. The baby cried constantly. The baby cried in the morning but only for an hour. An hour? Doctor? An hour? The baby never cries. Never? No, never. Ok, we’ll have to run some tests. Never?

Always. Les pulls over in Green River. The baby has been bent in a rigid bow on the seat beside him, crying a continuous wail for a full half-hour. Les slides his hand under the space beneath the baby’s arched back. Too intense. He tilts the stiff body back to rest across his palm. The wailing rises sharply. He’s in pain.

Les carefully slips his hand away. He makes a reassuring face to the infant. He touches its toes and its face inflames. Why, little boy? A man nearby pulls himself out from under an open hood. He looks over at Les. Les panics for a second. He cups both his hands, scaring himself. They are made for stifling babies. He feels a rush of compassion for the baby, but his compassionate hands can only press into the seat surrounding it, and failing thus he lifts them to his chest and grabs handfuls of himself, compassionately. I don’t know your name.

Its fingers are as blue as a baby sparrow’s head, and its entire body is locked in scream. Les looks out the window to make sure nobody else is nearby. The man repairing his car has gone. Repaired. The screams have caused the forest to close itself off and tuck its edges into a finer line under the sky. The painful tone sustains a frequency of such duration that it becomes soundless, and Les feels the blood leave his face. The silence packs his ears. He is afraid because he knows that the soundless car, leaning like a spike among the tick of gas pumps, is prompting him to know something — to know exactly, now, why his son is in such pain.

Withdrawal.

An opiate withdrawals crack jones intolerance of time.

I may have to kill my son.

Les hovers his hands over the baby, now little more than a knot of his own agony, and drops three fingers lightly on its face. Such a small commitment to infanticide. He curls the fingers up into his palm and withdraws the fist. Loving his son has suddenly become impossible. Les steps out of the car, and when he slams the door he again hears the little creature’s pain. He feels a terrible flood of guilt and grief. These feelings are kept from spilling by a tiny mopping sponge of self-pity.

His encroaching insanity has already converted this shadowy experience, which sits near his centre, into a delicate model. A mobile of silver half moons and flat gold slippers redistributes Les around the car. He feels the threads of suspension and the little wind that means so much now. Something is still here. Something can be done. If I Jail, I will destroy that baby and kill myself. Strong alternatives are needed. My son and I are crossing the line from sound to unsound body.

Across the highway is a mall. A drugstore. Les feels a strange smirk twist his face, and for the first time he loves his son, the little drug addict son of a bitch. He was born knowing what I know. When he reenters the car he opens the surface of his body onto the searing noise, feeling it drill deeply, and he smiles at his son through this atmosphere of pain.
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Sound

Having never robbed a store before, Les has a nagging feeling, as he fingers the antihistamines, that the handgun tucked against his back just isn’t enough. He looks up at a camera swaying like a metal remora in the corner, and he brings his hand up to his face. Mask. He goes down the school-supplies aisle and, sure enough, finds a plastic mask tucked behind stack of lab books. It’s a cheap one. A thin elastic is hastily attached to the sides with staples. Small. He turns it over. A smiling blonde witch. A good witch. Les puts it on and reaches behind for the gun as he makes his way to the pharmacist. He waves the gun at a shape he can little more than locate through the slit windows of the dark interior of the mask. He sees a young man, a sideburn. Hand comes up. Stops. Goes down again.

“OK. Don’t shoot. Anything you want.”

Suddenly the elastic snaps and Les feels a wasp sting his ear. The mask jumps from his face directly into the open, pleading hands of the pharmacist. Les pulls the trigger of the gun and it clicks. It just clicks. No bullets. Les instinctively coughs to cover up the tiny noise, to camouflage it quickly. The pharmacist is looking down with horror at the mask in his hands. He feels the sheer panic of torn impulses and misses the click. He drops the mask on the counter.

“I won’t look. I didn’t see you. Please don’t shoot.”

Realizing he’s still in the game, Les sweeps the mask up, inadvertently dragging its code across a smudged window, setting off the piercing beep. A fuckin’ alarm. Les levels the gun at the pharmacist and fires. Click. This second click is covered up by the louder clang of the cash register opening as the pharmacist tries to illustrate the source of the beep. Les thinks, I’m doing a lot of killing. He waves the gun and instructs the pharmacist: “Dilaudid. All of your Dilaudid.”

The pharmacist races down an aisle and returns with a large plastic jar and drops it in front of Les. As he turns to leave, an elderly couple who have been watching everything take a step backward. He raises the gun and clicks it three times. Kill everybody. The couple don’t even flinch. Les barks at them and they run. Kill everybody.
As they pull out of Green River, father and son are dissolving the blue halves of a Dilaudid under their tongues. As they sail through Greenwood, some minutes later, Dad thinks to himself: _Well really, if the baby gets half, maybe I should take one and a half._ He twirls off the lid and pops another into his mouth. Beside him his son is quiet. _This is what it takes._ Les flops a hand across the comfort of the steering wheel. _I'm stoned._ He feels the tiny fractures in his elbow melt over and strengthen. _I have been conscripted into an army._ Les smiles to himself. _That kid at the pharmacy knows a little more now._ The world has revealed the gun it points at him. Along the stretch of road between Brooklyn and Manchester, Les has his first fantasy about life with his son. A son he names Ernie.
The church in Pontypool is one of those rural teeth that have turned slightly toward the back of the throat, missed by the toothbrush. It appears as a space, sometimes dark with dirt, sometimes cast in shadow. A round black-orange structure that sits off the back, under the trees, hides a tiny cemetery from the road. Two black Labradors are running between white-skinned headstones. One dog moves with a dip and find gait, and the other follows, not trusting its own navigation because of the chopstick deformity in its jaw which causes its lower teeth to slap eastward when it goes south. The dogs stop in the woods just beyond the back row of headstones and they circle a contraption made of metal tubing and the flesh of old tires. The lead dog takes a hunk of this rubber in its mouth and growl whines at the other while it blinks its intelligent eye from side to side. The contraption is a large cartoon of a bear trap made out of a bike rack. Around the playing dogs are trees cut to their stumps.

This is the theatre of Les Reardon. The sculpture, now being dragged to the back door of the church by one of the Labs, is the skeletal form of a stage prop that was to have been central in his first production, The Harrowing of Hell. Les had spent many afternoons sitting on a stump here, blowing cigarette smoke at the bugs in his face — a new habit — picturing the children of Pontypool emerging through hinged jaws to climb up onto a sunlit bed of moss and lie spent and ancient at the feet of their proud parents. The Harrowing of Hell was not to be. The drama coach of Pontypool, Les Reardon suffered a massive relapse of a painful mental illness. He was treated; however, that treatment forced him to eventually stagger off home from school, under the draining influence of strong medication. His wife, Helen, and their son, Ernie, spent the last couple of months walking as light as prayer around Les as he lay on the couch under an orange throw. He clutched the remote in two fingers that he poked through the loose crochet of the blanket. The medication eventually worked, and the drama of his psychosis quieted; still, he was so weighted with the drug’s wisdom that he was unable to coach, unable to lead the children from hell to their parents’ feet.

The priest who had donated an area around the cemetery to the teacher’s project took pity on the man who lost his mind in the woods behind his church. When Les returned some weeks later, altered but less wild, to wander with stiff limbs across his stage, the priest offered him a job. The job that the holy man concocted for Les already existed in larger city parishes. He applied for the funding and was immediately granted the means to hire the first rural Custodian of Dogs. Les managed to walk and feed the dogs for one week only — the brief spell after his energy rose from under the medication and before that energy was wasted against a chaotic range of depressions. As his desire to live met with the life he would have to live, Les slipped on his own weight, down a rope that dropped him under a crocheted blanket on the couch, where he sits, once again, with two fingers poking through the loose weave to direct a remote control. This summer, Ernie experiences his first vacation from school as an adolescent. The priest, who still needed an employee, gave the son the father’s job and Ernie inherited the title Custodian of Dogs.

Ernie spent July wandering in disgust among the ruins of his father’s life: the destroyed bits of forest, the hiding places under plastic. And the job: waiting for dogs to shit — a wait his father was now unable to endure. In the evening he couldn’t bear to be in the same house as the man, so he’d invent things he had to do at the church and then drive off in the car his father could barely understand. His nightly request for the keys was met with an uncomprehending stare and lips so dry that Ernie winced when they touched to speak.

Tonight, Helen will answer the phone and learn that someone has stolen one hundred and forty-six dollars from the church’s petty cash. In three days the police will call to tell her that they have apprehended Ernie Reardon. She spends these days comforting a poor husband who has long retreated into an uncaring silence. In the coming months, as his depression sinks into a lifelong organization, Les will never miss an opportunity to appear misunderstood and wounded. He feels himself domineering, emerging in his family for the first time, and he will twist forever in a kind of happiness that will never abandon him.
As they pull through Myrtle Station an OPP car passes them and slows. Les looks at the baby drowsing peacefully on the seat, its small feet pressed against the barrel of a handgun and the bulk jar of Dilaudid sitting on the floor mat. The arrangement makes Les think of pieces gathered at the start square of a board game. He moves the handgun onto the floor and slides it with his foot under the seat. The lights on the OPP cruiser fire off and Les pulls his stolen car onto the shoulder. The cop steps out onto the pavement of the highway and, before approaching Les’s vehicle, takes in the spot: the six cows gathered near the muddy back of a barn, the twenty odd birds strung like pointy teeth on a hydro wire. He calculates something, reading the fresh spring with a local’s discerning eye, and moves his hat forward to accept a message given. He stops halfway between the two cars and realizes that he’s approaching a stolen vehicle. He drops to a squat, withdraws his sidearm and, with his hands joined and fingers pointing along with the barrel, shouts from his elbows. Les lays his hand on the spot that has grown so comforting to him, his son’s warm belly, and decides, while there’s time, barely perhaps, to imagine yet another life for him and little Ern.
Yet Another Life For Him and Little Em

“Did Ernie take the Boy or the Girl for lunch?”

Helen hasn’t sat down all morning. She hovers over the kitchen sink: above it stretches a narrow shelf littered with Mommy’s drug things. A spoon with a soggy bit of filter; a lighter; three origami packets lined in some priority to the left; a thin razor blade. Helen pushes a long fingernail into the enveloped opening at the top of one of the packets.

“Les, honey.”

Les is seated at the kitchen table. A light sweat has broken out on his forehead.

“No, thank you dear.”

Helen stops twirling the plunger of a syringe in her spoon and looks over her shoulder at her husband.

“No? I mean, no. What do you mean? I didn’t get that.”

Les scratches his shoulders with crossed arms.

“I mean no, darling, I’m OK. I did some of the Girl after I did the Boy, so I’m alright — you just make yourself right, there, don’t worry about me.”

“OK, OK. I’m glad that you did the Girl already, that’s what I’m fixing here, but I asked whether Ernie went off with the Boy and the Girl. He never forgets the Boy, he thinks that’s all he needs, but he misses half his lessons, so I tell him if he takes some of the Girl, not too much y’know, but a little wake up, and he’ll do better at school. Makes the Boy a nice after-school wind down. So I was asking, did Ernie take the Girl with him to school this morning?”

Les is doing his morning reading, an interview with Liv Tyler in Details; beside his right hand is a thawing cup of wheat grass juice.

“Oh honey, I don’t know. He left early.”

Helen walks across the kitchen floor with a syringe dangling and clinging to the crook of her arm. She stands in front of a large television. A Breakfast Television celebrity is watching a small man drag a comb through brown paint to create a fake wood grain. Helen observes the process, mindless of the unadministered drug laying like a broken branch from her arm. As the segment concludes, opening a replay box over the audience and a scroll of the next segment beneath them, Helen lifts the syringe away from her forearm and works it slowly, playing in her arm with its searching tip. She is obviously enjoying herself as she parries with the moment of injection. The moment comes and goes and Helen returns to the kitchen sink. She turns her back to it and leans long enough to push herself into a walk through the kitchen again. Her walking, not quite a pace, and not without some meaningful gestures, is what she concentrates on, experimenting with the pleasure of appearing not so crazy.

“I think … I think … Lester, I think Ernie is doing really well at school.”

Les is reading the advertisement for a hair-loss treatment on the page opposite the Liv Tyler interview. The interview continues seventy-five pages later, but Les thinks he may never return to this particular point in the magazine again, so he’s taking his time before moving on. Helen has left the kitchen again, and she exits down the hallway. But she returns too soon to have actually left for any other reason than the opportunity to come back to the kitchen.

“He’s really good with math, y’know? He gets that from me, I think. I have a cousin who’s an architect. But he also gets it from you, you’re good with numbers.”

Helen disappears and returns again, this time having retrieved three notebooks from a room down the hall. She sits across from Les, who has moved on to the conclusion of the Liv Tyler interview. Helen stacks the books in front of her and opens the first with a formality that reminds her of her own mother.

“Look at this … Oh my god! … This is totally neat … He’s doing algebra … I knew it . . .”

Helen looks up, irritated. Les is flipping through the magazine now, comparing the icons that signify the conclusions of articles, wondering whether the feeling of conclusion is just an effect of their appearance on the pages.
“Oh, look, he does drawings here in the margins . . . That’s cool . . . He could draw for the comics . . .”

Les looks up, closing the magazine on a finger to mark his place.

“Do some of the Boy. I think I need some of the Boy — let’s split a tenth, honey.”

Helen closes the notebook and returns to her narrow shelf. “I wonder if he forgot those books this morning. He needs his notebooks.” She opens the lid of a packet with a fingernail. “A student can’t take notes without a notebook. How come he left his notebooks here?” As she sets up a small blue jar of distilled water on the counter she flips two antiseptic swipes out of her pyjama pocket. “Maybe he has a locker. Maybe the books he uses at school are in his locker.”

Les is distracted. He’s looking at a large photograph of Lena Olin that fills a tall page in an old issue of Interview. A bar of sand clings to the side of her bare foot. So wrinkled, he thinks. Not age, just . . . foot wrinkled.

“Sweety, I’ve only got a quarter left . . .”

Les rumples his nose with a loose fist; the skin of his face, now arid, folds and bends without resisting.

“Sweety, how … uh … how much do you have?”

Les scratches the back of his head with the vigour of a porch dog. He has been preparing to ignore this question long before it has occurred to Helen. Not that he won’t answer, and she won’t mind asking two or three times, it’s just a kind of protocol of married life.

“Hmmmm … I thought I had at least a half . . . Well, let’s do a Tee anyway, right honey?”

Les is drawing bubbles on a photograph of a martini glass. Mmmmm. Hmmm.

“OK, yes, a nice half-Tee, that’ll be nice for us. Uh . . . Les, how much do you have left?”

Les draws the stick of an umbrella leaning out of the martini.

“Sorry, sugar. What did you say?”

Helen snaps a blade through a pebble of heroin, pinning the halves on either side of the tiny knife with her fingers. She asks again with a voice that is patient and refreshed.

“Oh, I was just wondering how much of the Boy you have left.”

Les pushes the magazine to the edge of the table, conscious of what it would take to send it sailing onto the floor.

“How much of the Girl is left there?”

Helen lifts her hands from what she’s doing and slides another packet into the area of her operation. She opens it without lifting it from the shelf.

“Two big grams.”

She looks over her shoulder at Les. She feels she deserves her answer now.

“Three-quarters. Second drawer. In the purple box. Pull it out.”

Les puts a flint of power in his mouth and it only allows him to use short sentences. When Helen puts the larger bindle on the table in front of Les, he covers it with one hand, watching her back while she loads two syringes.

“Here darling.”

They silently administer the heroin and listen, in the seconds that follow, for more comfortable breathing in each other. Helen smiles at Les and he returns the gesture. Her smile twists apologetically and she returns to the shelf.

The Girl again. Christ. Helen, you’re not in control of what you’re doing. Les says nothing as he spins the packet towards himself and opens it.

“What the fuck is this?”

Helen jumps, dropping a new syringe into the sink.

“Fuck Les, fuck!”

“No. No. Really, Helen, what the fuck is this? There’s only a couple of Tees here.”

“No! Oh no! Fuck! Fuck! Are you sure? Lemme see!”

“There was almost a gram in here this morning! Where the fuck is it?”

“I don’t know, Les! I don’t fucking know. Oh God!”

Helen is screaming now. Crying and angry, she reaches across the table for the packet. Les makes quick fists, striking distance; to protect her he stomps his feet.
“Ernie! Fucking Ernie! He’s selling at school! The fucker!”
Helen whips open the top drawer and pulls out a handgun.
“Ok you little fuck! I can’t fuckin’ believe him! I’ll kill him.”
“No you won’t.”
Helen looks up, confused, still crying, the rims of her eyes are flicking around her sockets.
“But keep the fucking gun out anyway.”
Helen places the gun on the table and with a gluey pull at her nose she returns to the shelf. Les stares at her back. She is struggling with the cocaine, messing up her fix and saying “Fuck!” every six or seven seconds. Les picks up the gun, checks the chamber for rounds, and lays it flat against the inside of his thigh.
“I can’t fucking take this. I need some music.”
Les looks down at his son before stepping out onto the highway. He takes the word Ernie away from his boy. He leaves the baby to scratch, nameless and alone, at the red patches that have risen on his wrists. The OPP officer and Les stare at each other. Neither of them has a clear idea of what happens next. They are both expecting to die, though they have probably never been in safer company. In fact, they are both pretty much willing to die for each other. The officer makes the first move. Gracefully and delicately, he floats his right hand out and down. Down. Lie down. The gesture is so compelling that a shrub nearby bends several of its tiny white flowers toward the ditch it overhangs. It encourages Les to crouch against the road, to block out a place there. On his stomach, Les breathes out the weight of his back onto his lungs, blowing clear a patch of asphalt by his cheek.

This is the end of the line.

At the station house Les is put into custody. He is asked quietly for his rare possessions. The arresting officer is agreeable and polite. The superficial pleasure of the procedure baffles Les. It reminds him of a Latin exercise from school. He is a noun in declension — all the handcuffs, the five coils of smoke on his fingertips, the secretive case, the ablative justice of the peace and an entire world that will, except for him, run on a series of sentences that begin with the letter O.

Les is sitting in just such a circle. He has given his son up to the law. He has surrendered his illegal firearm. The controlled substance he shared with the baby. The stolen vehicle and its violent history. Murder. He has given the OPP a murder.

Les sits in a chair in the small police station outside Caesarea not knowing that a growing number of people in Ontario are now also giving the OPP murder. All across the province vicious gangs of cannibals are moving on the police, sweeping through like a system of weather, snatching up large parts of the population. Les fishes in his pocket for one of the Dilaudid that he had managed to scoop from the jar before his arrest and he pops it in his mouth. He has already begun to contemplate other forms of consuming the drug, and he anticipates, with an excitement that makes him chew the pill, a man he’ll meet in the shower who’ll slip a syringe into his hand and then drop his fingers against the side of his penis. The officer has left him sitting alone for over an hour to picture prison life. In an adjacent room Les hears the first yelp of a son who is stirring back up into cutting discomfort.

There is another system, more beaded than weather or murder, that is moving up into the province. As Les leaves the chair to investigate his son’s crying a thousand zombies form an alliterative fog around Lake Scugog and beyond, mouthing the words Helen, hello, help. This fog predominates the region; however, other systems compete, bursting and winding with vowels braiding into diphthongs so long that they dissipate across a thousand panting lips. In the suburbs of Barrie, for instance, an alliteration that began with the wail of a cat in heat picked up the consonant “Guh” from a fisherman caught by surprise on Lake Simcoe. The echoing coves of the lake added a sort of meter, and by the time these sounds arrived in Gravenhurst, the people there were certain that a musical was blaring from speakers in the woods. All across the province, zombies, like extras in a crowd scene, imitate a thousand conversations. They open and close their mouths on things and the sound is a heavy carpet of mumbling, a pre-production monstrosity. In minutes the Pontypool fog will march on the town of Sunderland and over the barriers south of Lindsay.

If Les were to remove his shirt, turn his broad back to a light source and allow a map to be drawn there, sharp metal flags could be used to mark the progress of his dead wife’s name, while the top of his underwear could be used to absorb blood as it flows past his belt. The curved red stain that dips over the cleft of his buttocks resembles the smile that has yet to become important to him.

He stands over his son, a little pink twitching man, and he shrugs out our pushpins as he lifts the infant in his blanket. The baby spits out the pill. Les has to insert it into the baby’s throat across the tongue with a finger. Les holds the tiny body against himself; it resists like an insect would, kicking with limbs that improvise. Les holds on in a crush, waiting. Waiting. Waiting. Soon the baby slackens, the way that babies do when they give up, and Les realizes that he is alone in the police station. Alone with his son and, lying beside a jar of Dilaudid, on the desk, both his gun and the keys to his car. Les puts the keys in his pocket and, juggling the jar and baby like twins, thinks: not mine, really, nobody’s.
He leaves the empty station and finds his car. Driving it from the small pound, he feels a little less excited about his escape than he had about his capture. The objects he carries cling together in inventory. They are only designed to go full circle and he feels them moving beside him. He hears them: “How can we stay meaningful in this, the loose wing of your adventure?”

Les looks down at the son he renames Ernie in desperation, and he cries because a mighty army of questions is bursting in on him from somewhere. *I am too small.* A tear, followed quickly by another, hangs off his upper lip and turns to a salty drizzle on his tongue. *I want to be him.* Les lays his hand across baby Ernie’s tiny forearm and he feels the cool chiaroscuro of the tubular limb in his palm — a peaceful place, a narcotic baby world.

*I want to drive my car in there.*
25

_Somewhere Familiar_

One of the circles that remains for Les to complete is made round in Caesarea. Les pulls the grey Datsun up into a driveway over an oil stain that drops like a tumbler beneath the car, clicking into place midway along the chassis. The house is a long lakefront structure with wide windows. He steps out of the car. He doesn’t recognise this place, though he has been here before. He does hear the distant jungle thrum of his wife’s name distorted and repeated by a relay of zombie mumbling. He can’t distinguish the word as he stands searching the white air for the source of what he thinks, with alarm, must be a very loud noise somewhere. *Some kind of crazy tree bugs.* Les scoops his inventory out of the car and sneaks like Santa Claus around the house, into the backyard that slopes its fine yellow lawn down to Lake Scugog.

“What’s going on?”

The voice is deep and torn; booming out around him it scrapes the water.

“What the hell? Les turns from the boat he’s loading with guns and drugs and babies. The Knockouts. The woman he had struck earlier, still in her pyjamas, is lying on her back, tucked under the hedge that Les has just walked by. She waves a hand that’s missing two fingers and bangs her knees together in what sounds like an attempt to strike out the consonant L.

“What!?” The little bald man appears through the sliding door. He is not Helen. He is also in pyjamas that bear a long stripe of mud. He grabs the doorframe and launches himself, on hips that pop audibly, into a surprisingly quick flight across the yard. In seconds he is on the dock driving his open mouth at Les’s face. The zombie’s mouth is now telescopic in its reach, and migrating birds take off and land through a hole that opens on his cheek. Les clamps onto the fiend’s arms and propels him into the water. He then jumps into the boat and hauls on the rip cord. The Knockout emerges waist high at the rear of the craft. He has been screaming under water and his voice pierces the air, exploding past sluggish submarine vibrations. He leaps up into the boat, locking his teeth on Les’s knee, and grabs the gun from the seat. With a dorsal fin flip of his arm the gun flies up onto the shore. Les pulls on the cord again, knocking the zombie’s head from his knee with a speeding elbow. The engine finally blathers to life.

The propeller, it should be said, is entering the zombie’s stomach. It releases an underwater ticker tape parade around the man’s waist. His intestines blow their contents out into the lake like party favours unravelling and filling with breath, marking and limiting the excitement. A school of perch, with pointy hats that fall drunkenly over their eyes and straps that pull at delicate gills, is circulating through the loose ambergris. The zombie caves in over the cannon ball in its middle and folds in half on the bottom of Lake Scugog. The boat, something of a paintbrush now, is still tied to the dock. As it extends itself it floats a long feather boa of blood on the clear water. Les scrambles to the front to untie the boat, and after some jagged manoeuvring, made complicated by the interfering scalp of the zombie, the boat is soon cutting the lake into one of the infinite number of wakes that water places under all vessels. Les and his son are finally carried away, on a silver tray, out from Ontario’s zombies towards and horribly close to a fierce little island that is caught in a discrete destiny, one that’s strange to the rest of the province.
Ellen Peterson is not a zombie. She is standing in the dark, at the edge of a pool. She is not entirely sure whether she has walked here or whether magical inward steps have led her here to a place that she makes of herself. The surface of the pool reflects the full moon, and, Ellen thinks, it looks like a large plate in the centre of a satin tablecloth. Ellen drops to a crouch and places the tips of her fingers into the cool, still water. She wriggles her fingers and watches the reflected moon. It soon breaks into diamonds on the surface — diamonds she feels against the back of her hand. Ellen stops moving her fingers and the moon collects itself as white filings haloed over a magnet. Then it breaks again. This time clear in half. Someone is in the water. Ellen shrinks back from the edge. She focuses in the dark and silhouettes start to appear. A fallen tree lies across the bushes. This is familiar. A boulder, now lightly glowing, sits in the water at the far side of the pool.

"This is the carp pond."

Ellen is relieved that she is in fact somewhere: a somewhere that she knows. I am the reeve of this pond. Someone is gliding through the water near the boulder. Ellen feels less threatened. She has jurisdiction here.

"Hello there."

Ellen stands on the bank, closing the front of her bathrobe: a reeve in a bathrobe is better than no reeve at all. The person in the water stops and turns toward her with a splash.

"Excuse me, hello, is everything alright in there?"

"What do you mean?"

The man’s voice is whiny and defensive. There is something disturbing in the question.

"I’m Ellen Peterson, the reeve of Pontypool. There’s a great deal of trouble in the area tonight, and I’m asking if everything is ok with you in there. Aren’t you cold?"

Another voice to her left.

"Why, if he’s cold will he freeze?"

The voice, so tremulous, makes her shiver. The question somehow hasn’t been put to her rhetorically.

"Well, no, I don’t think he’ll freeze."

A third voice in the bushes behind her.

"Are you lying to him? Is he going to freeze?"

The voice is so frightened that Ellen covers her mouth. The man in the water has slipped behind the boulder and he holds its sides with his hands.

"If you’re lying to me then you could hate me."

Ellen drops her hand. She feels the pull of sadness in the light that has emerged on the surface of the tree hiding these people.

"I don’t know you; I couldn’t … hate you."

The head and shoulders of the man to her left glide into view at the centre of the pool.

"You don’t hate him yet. But if you don’t know him will you stab him with a knife?"

The man behind her squeals sharply, and he flees crashing through the trees. Ellen can’t quite believe this conversation. She has no idea how to meet its requirements.

The conversation that she is having isn’t, of course, normal. That conversation would have its several participating members hitting a variety of vocal registers using a tiny lexicon. This lexicon has migrated to them from Parkdale, and they communicate through it with the sonic sensitivity of birds. They repeat the words Helen, help and hello in an evolution of the alliteration that’s more like an imbrication, shingling the words over a now silent H. And exactly who is stepping down into the pond and repeating the phrase “messy car, dirty bird”? Ellen has not detected the eighteen silent beings that surround the pool, hiding in fear among the trees. Each of them moves three words from cheek to cheek, like loose peas in a whistle.

"What do you mean stab you?"
Ellen’s robe rides in a terry cloth wake around her as she steps through the water toward the boulder.

“That’s what I said. That’s what I meant.”

Ellen stops still as three other beings float out from under branches that overhang the pool’s edge. They move steadily in the moonlight, forming a guard around the boulder.

“He means what he said. Now you want to kill him.”

“No. I don’t.”

“If you don’t want to kill him, does that mean that you want to run him over with a car?”

One of the silhouettes yelps as if struck and dives to the side.

“I … I … don’t want to hurt any of you.”

Ellen is aware that the pool is now occupied by at least a dozen of these strange people.

“Not hurt? Not hurt? Do you mean not hurt now, but later? Like in the morning you’ll want to punch all of us? Punch us with a cannon?”

“Or a missile?”

“Or … or … maybe poison?”

“And angry now? Are you angry now?”

Three zombies splash at the water in a strange seizure that ends in one of them attacking another. The zombie being attacked strokes the back of his assailant with a consoling hand. The assailant bites uncontrollably at the man’s chest, opening a honeycomb of muscle and flesh. The victim soon slides under the water, and his mouth, the last cup on his body to be filled, glides away to drown. Ellen feels a panic lock her.

The killer stands up straight and exhales heavily, sending a piece of tongue flipping into the water. A woman directly behind Ellen speaks.

“Say sorry.”

The killer shakes his hands in the water. He closes his eyes, and in an emotional outburst that is small and painful he rolls his head back.

“I can’t.”

Ellen steps forward, her heart pounding in her chest. She raises open hands across the water and moves slowly toward the killer.

“You don’t have to be sorry.”

A teenage girl jumps out of a tree and stands in a moonlit path that drops into the pool.

“He doesn’t?”

Ellen feels a carp slide itself like a cat against her ankle. A mile long. She catches her breath and waits for it to pass.

“No, he doesn’t have to be sorry.”

Another carp swims into Ellen’s joined heels. She turns her foot, letting it move between her calves. It’s slippery and fat and it tickles. A group of eight zombies moves quietly off the bank into the water. Several of them ask the same question at once.

“It’s OK that he killed Albert?”

Ellen scoops water up onto her dry lips. She notices the little bump of Albert’s floating tongue.

“It’s OK. It’s OK.”
Now the pool is becoming crowded with quiet zombies. They all seem to like being submerged up to their chests, so when they enter the water they sink to their knees in the mud and stone of its black bottom. Ellen is standing and she appears elevated on an artificial surface. Ellen notices that some of them have turned their backs and are busily working at something on the bank at the water’s edge. The soft fan of a tail runs against her shin. The carp is sitting on the floor of the pool, stationary. It caresses Ellen’s leg, and she is reminded again of a cat.

Nearly all the zombies have turned their backs on her. A woman working beside the fallen log turns her head to a man beside her.

“It’s OK to kill biting, y’know.”

The man remains hunched over.

“And I know it’s OK to tear fuckin’ fuckers’ heads off.”

The woman pulls from her spot and turns to Ellen.

“Is it OK?”

Ellen can see mud dripping down the woman’s chin. It looks like the chinstrap of a warrior’s helmet.

“Is what OK?”

All of the zombies stop, some of them grab the tree branches above their heads. A rhythm of ripples on the water’s surface smoothes. Ellen slips farther under, to her knees. She feels the little plosive blast as her carp propels itself off her thigh.

“It’s OK to … uh … sure, it’s OK.”

“How about killing them?”

Ellen feels a carp’s face in the upturned soul of her foot. It extends its sucker mouth and kisses her there. Ellen answers the question through a smile caused by a second carp on her other foot.

“Killing them is alright.”

“And slapping and slapping all the assholes in their heads?”

“Yes. Yes. It’s OK.”

“What else is alright?”

The carp have now settled into a synchronized kissing and Ellen drops her hands to her sides. She feels the soft drapery of fish moving along the insides of her wrists.

“Anything.”

“Can’t I ask?”

A zombie becomes agitated and turns from the bank.

“If she asks are you going to hit her in the ass?”

“No, no, she can ask whatever she wants.”

“Can I too?”

“Yes.”

“OK, OK. Is it OK to have a policeman banging on the door?”

“Yes.”

“Me too, me too. Um, I don’t have a question.”

“Will you bash his face in if he doesn’t have a question?”

“No. No, I won’t.”

As they turn and lobby questions at Ellen she finds herself struggling, with some success, to configure the affirmation. She begins to focus her eyes on what it is that they’re doing on the bank. A busy geometry of forms
begins to emerge. It sits lit on the surface of the dark and appears like a computer language, a dense and complex
glyphic architecture. The patterns emerging are uniform all around her. Ellen recognizes something in the tightly
braided wall. She remembers doing things. After she got sick. She remembers emptying an ice cube tray into the
sink and filling it again. Returning it to the freezer. And the terrible waiting for the water to freeze so that she could
refill it with fresh water. It was in filling those awful hours that Ellen built, out of the contents of a cupboard, her
library of seals. She recalls her surprise, her astonishment, that she was able to create and retain an infinite machine
on a single shelf in the pantry. The complex stability of the number six in a can of pears, each half-fruit changing.
The not-yet-ten in tiers across the cookie bag. The disappointing threes risen into a number only guessed at, but
always guessed correctly, by a red hexagonal tower in the shadows. And when she had finished visiting her shelf she
would check the ice cubes. And if they were not yet frozen, maybe nearly, little windowed boxes of water, she’d sit
at the kitchen table and feel comfortable that she had set things in motion.

On the surface of the white cupboards a scroll of light marks fly rapidly from left to right — the stories released
by the machines behind their doors, and Ellen memorizes each one. Some days they are the long, incomprehensible
speeches of angels. Sometimes they detail the death of a child. And other times they list all of the things that Ellen
hasn’t said yet. If these marks were to stop moving and rise in relief from the cupboards, and lift off like a new wall,
slipping through the floor to line the banks of a pond in the dark, then Ellen would be looking at them over the
shoulders of busy zombies. She strokes the head of a giant fish banging against her knees and opens her legs. These
poor people have all suffered strokes. A zombie approaches the pool carrying a large, full garbage bag. She empties
the contents out onto the surface of the water behind the working zombies. They reach, without looking back, to
scoop up eggshells and plastic bottles.
What is an autobiography? What can fairly be said to lie within its bounds, share in its purpose? Is there someone hidden in Les Reardon? Was he a garbage truck driver who had a psychotic breakdown? Did he then become a drama teacher? Did a woman one month pregnant leave him in the middle of this career shift? Did he battle zombies across Ontario in a stolen car with his son wailing in drug withdrawal beside him? Are these little autobiographemes inserted into imagined lives? Probably. But still, that’s not autobiography. Not really.

Is this an autobiography?
Yes.
Twelve years ago you were living on the streets of Vancouver. You panhandled every day on Robson with a partner named Tommy. Those were miserable days — the good ones spent on the nod, the bad ones spent in a Lysol induced aggression. You had come to these dire straits in the usual way — an enduring dependence on substances and a persistent holocaust of personality. Usual, yes, but very difficult to survive. You tell this story not to mark yourself with it or to gain sympathy — it is, after all, only the story of a stubborn little bastard. You are telling this story, or at least just enough of it, so that you will never have to mention it again.

This one day you stirred to life beneath a shrub in Oppenhiemer Park. The shirt you were wearing had a light green fuzz growing across the back. You remember it because it was pretty. You had a sharp pain in your right forearm. You made your way across the park to where you knew Tommy would be waiting. You noticed you were getting a lot of attention from people who had, like you, spent the night in the park. There was something wrong with the way you looked. You remember someone saying to you, “In the first month you get stabbed; in the second month you’ll stab someone.” You had the feeling that somehow you were entering one of those months when people pay their last respects. Tommy grabbed you by your good arm and hurried you towards Robson. He was excited about something that had happened. At the best of times you can’t understand him and this morning he’s so stimulated by something that you can only grunt back at him in the language you share. You know that you have been barking at people lately. In fact, that’s why you got thrown out of the Columbia Hotel. “Do you know you’ve been barking at people in the lobby?” You shrug miserably at this kind of question.

No, I’m afraid I didn’t know.

You notice people staring at you while Tommy pantomimes a little war scene. You smile and feel something warm drip off your chin. You cup your hand against your face and watch it fill with fresh blood. Oh dear. Sometimes you can’t help notice how sick you’re becoming. You look over your shoulder, but nobody’s looking. They have stopped staring. Tommy drags you into a public washroom. You throw up in the sink. It’s a dry heave, productive only in the spray of blood it forces out of your face. You look up into the mirror. You have two black eyes, cut deeply, and a missing eyebrow. Your bottom lip has fallen free of your mouth and is lying in the fresh blood on your chin.

You can’t pretend that you don’t feel very sorry for this man and his self-portrait. He has completely lost the ability to take care of himself. He will die soon, and the fact that that is merely all he ever wanted doesn’t make you feel any less protective of him now. You remember looking in the mirror and feeling awe: the self-portrait is complete. You think that you have found the face that can finally say goodbye.

That’s when Tommy slipped, unconscious, to the floor. You stepped over his body to find him a coffee. When you returned a few minutes later an ambulance was pulled up on the grassy hill that sloped down to the men’s washroom. Two attendants were putting Tommy’s body in the back of the vehicle. You attempted to stop them, dropping the coffees and yelling what you can’t say for certain now wasn’t barking. You tried to tell them that he was fine, that he just needed coffee, that he’d be OK. You tried to tell them that you needed him. As the ambulance drove off you felt an idea throbbing in your forearm. You’ll meet him at the emergency. You’ll tell them about your arm. They’ll let you in.

No one at the hospital had seen or heard of Tommy. You waited for three hours to see a doctor. Every time a door opened or a gurney banged through swinging glass you’d look up for your friend. One of the effects of the wait that you hadn’t counted on was that you were beginning a fairly complicated process of withdrawal. Your legs began to hurt. Your arm began to shake.

When the doctor finally takes you in she searches the holes and bruises in your head. It’s not your head, however, that you want her to look at. It’s your arm and you hold it up. She holds it gently and lays cool fingers on your wrist. She disappears, and soon a technician appears to take you to X-ray. It takes him a few runs to get a good shot. Your arm began to shake.

“Well, there’s three hairline fractures on your fibula.”

The doctor supports your hand by the palm with three of her powerful fingers.
“We’ll have to put it in a cast.”

She lays your arm on your thigh and it jumps up across your knee. She watches this and then turns to a cabinet. She pulls a gauze sleeve over your wrist and your fingers catch on the fibre, each one snapping out independently. She stops. You can tell that she’s looking at your face, your self-portrait. You don’t look up. You hold it as still as you can.

“You’re going to have some trouble with this. I’m going to get a Valium for you, maybe two.”

When she leaves you hold your forearm up. A long, white glove. You let a falcon land on it and draw it closer, allowing its hooked beak to close on your lips. The bird flits a tiny brown tongue along the rip of your bottom lip. By the time the doctor returns you have an erection. You fold your wrists in your lap and as she unties the swollen arm from the thin one she sees your cock standing against the filthy fabric of your crotch. It’s confusing to you. Clear to her. She places two powder blue pills in your good hand and you pop them across your mouth and down your throat. She leaves again; to let the benzodiazapine have its effect, you think.

Your arm softens in your lap, your erection subsides, and you feel the emotional catchbasin of interrupted withdrawal back up, clogging your pores, drying your forehead. More of a wreck for the abating anxiety. There is an opiate drizzling weakly across the agony in your back.

The doctor comes back.
“Do you drink?”
You smile. Well, isn’t it a shame?
“I notice you have track marks on your arms.”
You make a face like Buster Keaton, tilting your jaw. Yes, the problem is huge, altogether too far gone, I think.
“I’ve been talking to another physician and he’s calling a detox for you now.”
You look up. No, you don’t have to do that for me, but thank you so very much. Do you think it will help?
Doctor? You can tell she likes you, which is such a strong feeling that you are already looking forward to saying goodbye. A man appears in the door and they look at each other. A sweet history of desire links them and you believe, as you watch them, you see her panties tugging upward and the jelly mould of his cock melting down his leg. You believe that they are becoming linked through you.

“Uh … I contacted a detox and, well, you’ve been banned from there for thirty days.”
The female doctor drags four spears of black hair from her forehead with the plaster-speckled back of her hand.
“Well, there’s more than one detox in the city.”
You think they will take you home.

“You know doctor, I’ve tried a few actually, and there’s a …” He nods to you, too late to say serious things, it’s time to load the bier. “There’s a province-wide ban on the fella.”

The doctor looks at you. The worse you are, the more you matter to her. She would do anything not to insult you now. Now that you are what these two have always shared, the patient still living who will be lost. She pauses dramatically over the wounds on your face, and you turn your head slightly, so the light catches the medical rainbow that bends across your left cheek.

“I can’t believe that. What are we supposed to do with him?”

With him, you think. She didn’t say for him. You feel a light whip turn over inside your arm. We all love each other, that is obvious now.

The emergency ward has wide windows that slide open at the prompting of ocean air, warm air that moves in across the sunlit desk. There is a white grit of beach sand on the floor emptied out from the sneakers of hundreds of children who pass the same foot wound back and forth around a giant log in English Bay. You are standing halfway to the sliding door, with a white cast and dark smelling clothes. She is upset, standing behind the desk. She looks to him, we can’t just let him go.

He looks back. We have to. We can’t kill him. He looks to you. I wish we could, but we can’t.

Then they smile. We have to learn how to say goodbye now. You smile back, not so confused by the pitch of emotion as they are. You are, after all, the one who is going to die, the one they’ll think about.

As you leave through the doors you look over your shoulder and see them hook arms; the wave they share to you says: No one has mattered until you, thank you. They have an enthusiasm about where you’re going that you know
will take you there.

You decide that you have enjoyed saying goodbye so much that you will spend the rest of the day looking for people to say goodbye to. You make your way to the social services office.

You tell them that you are leaving the province. There are two women behind desks who are visibly relieved.

“Oh, I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

The other, more serious, looks up above her glasses.

“You would die here soon, you know. That’s what happens, I’ve seen it. Good for you. You should go.”

“Yes, yes, congratulations. I think you’ve finally come to something.”

It’s all they can do to remain at their desks and not come around and kiss you. You lift your cast and wiggle your fingers. They return the wave, nodding to your cast. It hangs now from a rear-view mirror. You include everything in the enthusiasm that you feel.

You have trouble finding more people to say goodbye to, and as the afternoon tips toward the end of office hours your Valium stay is starting to come loose. Buildings close in, much like you’d imagine, and you start to react fearfully to the people around you.

Soon you’re in a small parking lot between two cars fighting with two guys. They seem to think the key to the struggle is to pin your elbows together. You remember clearly piping in a voice to throw them off:

_A calmer head prevails, and, sirs, it is the same head that bites you._

You say in a universally appealing voice: “I can see a straitjacket working rather well in this type of situation.”

It is the first clear sentence that you’ve spoken aloud in weeks. One of the men raises his hand and grunts. He hates you. You grunt back. You’re not saying goodbye to these fuckers. As far as these things go, you’ll just stick to formula and soon you’ll be unconscious. Put there either by the blows they deliver or by violently ducking from hands that reach down to help you.

The next day you are a psychiatric patient at St. Joseph’s Hospital. They start you almost immediately on a diet of Lithium, Amitriptiline and Ativan, with a methadone taper. _Fine_, you think. You know exactly how long it will be before these drugs change your circuitry. _Fine. A long way off._ You spend the day sitting on the brand new couch in a tiny smoking room. Floating across the carpet at your feet, like an immense cat, is H/ellen.

H/ellen is about sixty, with long grey hair, and she is pulling at the hem of a light linen smock that is too short. She lies on her side, and you think she must weigh about three hundred pounds. She has the expression of an eight year old in trouble. Around her swollen hand on the carpet lie cigarette spokes. Twelve of them, browned at the tips, but unsmoked, they fan out from her splayed fingers.

“Gotta smoke?”

You flip H/ellen a cigarette. In ten minutes you flip her another, this time watching what she does with it. She puts it in her mouth and reaches down to a pack of matches folded into her sleeve. The heads of the matches are bent up like a fleeing mob and she twists off a stick to strike it. She manages this, rolling onto her back, and she takes the flame before it becomes orange and extinguishes it in the tip of the cigarette. She rolls back onto her side and smiles at you brattishly and asks for another cigarette. You give it to her. You think she confuses lighting cigarettes with putting them out. You think that’s it. You lay your pack open on the floor beside her, and she leaves it alone. Instead, she asks you for a cigarette every five minutes, without taking one. Soon she lies on her belly, drawing her hem midway up her back, rocking the giant white cheeks of her ass in the sun. She looks up at you, flirting and smiling. You return her looks and nudge the pack with your toe, closer to her. She laughs. You’ve surprised her somehow.

And then she says: “And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.”

“What is that?”

H/ellen knocks a cigarette out of the pack.

“Walt Whitman, part-time carpenter.”

You sit up on the edge of the couch, looking down at her face. You don’t know what else to ask. She looks up and licks the air between you.

“Ahhh. There you are. I’ve been looking for you, young man.”

A doctor is standing at H/ellen’s feet.
“Pull down your dress H/ellen. Do you think we all want to see you?”

The doctor pats you on the shoulder and stretches an arm leading to his office down the hall. You follow. As you approach his office you can tell that something is making him uncomfortable. Something is bothering him. You sit in his office and he flips open a file. You can tell he’s not reading it.

“So, so, so.” How twitchy this man is. You see a lot of doctors and you’ve begun to wonder: What on earth do they have in common?

“So, so, so.” He’s trying to say something, but he doesn’t know how. “You’re a painter, huh?”

You milk the painter angle whenever you can, it seems to satisfy something about you.

“Yes.”

“OK, you’re gonna think this is a little odd, but I want your professional opinion on something.”

You recognize the building in the painting. It’s the Queen St. Mental Health Centre. And it’s painted by Mendelson Joe.

Yeah, that’s Mendelson Joe, isn’t it?”

The doctor becomes tense again. Your observation is almost too astute.

“Well, I wanted to know if it’s … if you thought, whether you thought it was any good.”

You stand up and square off in front of the painting. You try to raise your hand to your mouth, but the cast clunks against the desk.

“Oh dear!”

You gesture for him to stay seated.

“I’m fine. I’m OK.”

“Well, what do you think?”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

The doctor sits up.

“Really? You think so? I thought so. Sort of … uh … primitive, wouldn’t you say?”

You cough and hold your mouth in a plaster palm.

“Yeah, I like this kind of thing. Sure. I was there.”

The doctor nods seriously. You were there. Oh yes, oh, I see. You were there.

You’re lying. You were in the Clarke Institute.

“Well, good. Everything else is OK? We have you on the medication now, do we?”

You cough again.

“Yes, but I think that the Lorazipam dose is too low and I think I need some Percodan.”

You hold out your hands and they jump involuntarily at the air. You wince and pull your cast to your chest.

“Ah, yes, it’s going to be a rough couple of days for you. I’ll tell the med-girl to double up on that for a while.”
No More Zombies

It’s Friday night, so the staff allows the patients to rent a movie and stay up to watch it. The titles patients request are all meant to upset and disturb the nurses. *Science Crazed, Phantasm, 2,000 Maniacs, The Evil Dead, Carnival of Souls.* The nurse on duty looks at the selection and says: “You don’t think this is funny, do you?”

No one answers; instead, you all look down at her hand, flipping your list against her thigh. Her fingers are yellowed with slick nicotine tips and you look at each other. There is only one smoking room. *Where does she smoke?* The tiny world of the nurse hiding in the half moons on her fingernails scratches to the surface. This suggests to you, emotionally, negligently, that her people can get away with anything. They would like you to watch *Terms of Endearment.* You don’t even know how to begin to explain how hateful this movie is.

At the appointed hour she turns off the college basketball game you’re watching and brings a heel down an inch from H/ellen’s face. March Madness. She adjusts the blue of a blue screen with a remote. H/ellen turns her head on the floor and looks at you. She gives the universal sign for being in close proximity to a hated person’s smelly foot. The nurse leaves before the movie begins and it proves unwatchable right from the beginning. Not a fault of the film exactly; the nurse has adjusted the colour up into a spectrum where everyone appears to be wearing huge, flaming life preservers. Jeff Daniels is in more trouble than most of the actors. His character frequently drops his head toward his chest, exposing his face to the charring effects of flame. You each decide silently that the nurse has unwittingly given you the kind of movie you wanted after all. You turn the sound up so loud that the *Terms of Endearment* are transformed into the *Agonizing Screams of Endearment.*

H/ellen asks you for a cigarette. You give her one. You just recycle the ones she doesn’t smoke. She has a beautiful smile. Crazy. All trouble. Never learning.

Just as Jack Nicholson attempts to extinguish the fire covering Shirley MacLaine by driving an ultra-violet car into a white ocean, the nurse comes running across the room. She’s pissed. She turns the television off, looking at no one. She kicks the air over H/ellen and flees the room. The VCR is still running, so it takes a few minutes for people to pull themselves away. When they do, H/ellen and you are left alone to smoke and listen to the movie purring along in its machine.

H/ellen asks you for a cigarette. You give her one.

She sits up to grab the cigarette, and instead of lying back down slides over to the coffee table. She looks you straight in the eye as she lifts her little dress up over her hips. She pulls the leg of the table between her legs. You look down quickly and then look up again. She looks down herself, encouraging you to do the same. The foot of the leg is surrounded by her large vagina and she draws it against her flesh by flexing her thighs. She looks back up to you and, while you are looking directly into each other’s eyes, you unbutton the top of your pants and slip down your hand.

You feel for a brief second, Tommy’s laboured breathing. He lays on his back, sleeping, with medication applied to the scrapes on his face and a white sheet pulled tight across his tall chest. He will wake up soon and come to find you. You concentrate on this.

This was exactly twelve years ago. Four days later you will discover a surprising alternative to suicide.
In the waiting room of Dr. John Mendez the corpses of a woman and her teenage son are being unwoven from the stiff limbs that have held them through the week. Dr. Mendez lays the bodies out on the floor of an examining room. There are already three other bodies there, stacked on the cushioned table. There is such an abundance of diving board stiffness in the people that surround him that Mendez finds himself performing loose little dances to distinguish himself. He is conscious of not being dead. He is less conscious of the people around him not being alive, and so along with his dancing he’s carrying on conversations with the cadavers.

He jigs down to a squat and pulls blond hair off the youth’s forehead.

“Hello young man.”

Mendez steps around, still in a squat, so that he’s looking across the teenager’s chest.

“Now we have no choice. We’re starting to really get to know one another, aren’t we?”

Mendez places a hand on the boy’s chest.

“You’re a beautiful lad, Doomsday Boy. You’ve backed off a bit from all this, though, haven’t you?”

He lifts the youth’s forearm and his entire upper body comes off the floor.

“I can’t believe that you’re like wood now, Doomsday Boy! Five days ago I said to your mother that little bags of marijuana never killed anyone. And now where is she? There, beside you. What a pair. Like planks of wood! Jesus has left a few carvings for me.”

Mendez pushes the tip of his finger into the hard skin between the boy’s eyebrows.

“I think you were just starting to go crazy with the world — right in here, Doomsday Boy, where your eyebrows are preparing to reach across and join hands. The long Ontario boy, now just a little carving of the rest of the world.”

A telephone rings in the reception area across the hall. Mendez lets it ring three times before tapping the boy’s shoulder with a closed hand and rising to his feet. He counts the other corpses with his eyes. “All you exhausted and serious people. I think I will take a walk to the telephone.”

One week ago the plague of cannibals in Ontario stopped moving. The population that had been crouched in a corner, under the shadow of hands dripping off the walls, with their own arms held protectively over their heads, had been holding their breaths. One week ago the zombies sat down quietly, the spirit of revenge, of murder, slipping from them. As the population exhaled it felt the silly relief of survival. We began to clean our parks and fields of the dead and the near dead. Slowly the province became less self-absorbed.

We discovered that while we were fleeing from vampires a giant in Texas began tossing babies like footballs from a bridge, breaking their little bodies open against the pebbles of a dried riverbed.

The receding hairline of the land continued its steady progress while we were gone and the little black glasses perched on the world’s nose lost some of their effectiveness. If we can accept our recent history, then we can now take a place among the slow cells that muddy the thought of the world.
edge, but the organ slips through and swings under the plywood, suspended like a pendulum. The weight of the lung tugs where it’s attached inside the chest cavity and the heart springs up onto the corpse.

“Little monkeys! Come on, get back up here!”

Mendez rests the chain of organs between the arm and the chest.

“Well, you rascal, before I let you go about exploding all over the place I have something to tell you.”

Mendez drags a thumbnail through a burnt crust that covers the shoulders.

“Now listen carefully: I think you must have had an awful fire at your back. And as you were opening your mouth to warn me, the air crawled in and blistered you on the inside.”

Mendez piles the organs back into the torn pocket of the man’s abdomen and lays a clipboard against him. He writes the name and age of the man. Death by smoke inhalation. Mendez notices the position of the hands. Something’s missing from them. They died holding something. The last two fingers on the left hand are raised slightly against the cup formed by the palm. Guiding a shape, carefully supporting a contour. Something gentle, Mendez thinks, something in this place.

“Well, I have to put you back in the fire, but why don’t you carry that little space with you, eh? You tell the flames to burn carefully around it.”

Mendez rolls the table on its wheels down through the valley, bouncing it across the wrists and knuckles that cripple out along the banks. The bodies that have been processed are deposited in the girls’ change room, where a team binds them into groups of six. From there they are transported to an incinerating facility in Pickering. Three teenage girls, in blue gym shorts and slack training bras, pull the body of Les Reardon loose from the slivers that hold him to the gurney. They lower him, face down, onto a plastic sheet. Les shares the sheet with the leather tents of two dead cows. Mendez attempts to back the empty table through the door. One of the girls steps off the sheet, wipes red gruel from her hands onto her gym shorts, and holds the door for the doctor.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you. We are a terrible team. Thank you.”

As he turns a corner around the southern mountain, Mendez notices a dark ledge of scorched heads and shoulders. He parks the gurney beneath the discoloured bodies and steps up onto a back that supports his weight. With a pinching grip that breaks through the blackened skin around the back of a woman’s neck, Mendez attempts to pull the body down. The head tumbles out of its spot, surprising Mendez as it bounces to the ground.

“There are people in bits up here! Blown to pieces! What have we been missing in all this?”

Mendez looks up at the spot where the head fell loose. A dark sink of charred bodies. It covers an area halfway up the mountain like the shadow of a cloud.

“Oh dear, a bomb blew up the lot of you.”

This tarred spot of Ontario represents the tiny population of a compound on Scugog Island who had lived out their final days in a highly specialized struggle. They might be conventionally referred to as a type of suicide cult, and they lived as characters crossed somewhere between the Factory of Andy Warhol and the crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise. They had isolated themselves from the rest of the province, behind tall white walls, on top of which swung a battalion of surveying cameras. Within these walls they abandoned depth-of-self as a spiritual corruption and built of themselves a shiny, reflective surface. It was on this gleaming surface, hard to picture in the sweltering heat, that they polished themselves into a supreme medium of contact. The only thing preventing them from achieving unity with the greeting that they were becoming was the fact that they continued to live.

They grew anxious to put their lives behind them, to heave the snake of longing off, to blink clear in a phatic collective, with arms stretched out flat across flat friends in a flat place. The leader, perhaps the flattest of them all, introduced them to the speed of touch, the superiority of skin over skeleton, and taught them to express love by brushing the hair on each other’s arms. The day was fast approaching, skating backwards from the future on a mirror, when they would twin themselves in a “hello” that the universe had been preparing for itself since the beginning. They decided that the best way to achieve this would be through a giant explosion. This day, flat as it was becoming, was pushed ahead by the speed bumps of the tricky weeks preceding it. These speed bumps were
caused by another unrelated drama that crept up to, and under the walls of, the compound. This is what the doctor has yet to discover.

Mendez places the glistening blue-black head on the floor to mark the spot. He wants to return here later, to put a story together out of the burnt pieces of people.

“Stay here, little acorn. I’ll take care of you and your friends today, I promise.”

He turns another foot of the mountain and parks the table back in the space where he had found Les Reardon. Mendez has grown tired of recording broken necks, and inspired by the discovery of new causes of death he scans the mound for anyone else who might have died with an intact spinal column.

“Hello, hello, hello! You! Up there. Something new.”

Mendez climbs up to another area of darkened skin. He reaches it quickly with his hill-climbing limbs and slaps a hand on the top of a head. He rotates the head to test the neck and, finding it unbroken, works the body loose like a child’s tooth from baby-pink gums. It surfs down the slope across a runningboard of sloppy necks. Mendez bounds down the hill after it, jumping off hard chests and rigid thighs, losing his footing in the bend of an old man’s back, nearly falling.

Mendez sits on the floor between two outstretched hands. He bends them back under the mountain.

“Trying to grab my wheels, uh?”

He drags the body he followed onto his lap and unsticks the long black hair from its face.

“Oh good heavens! You’re not a burnt man, are you?”

Mendez places his hands on either side of the head and it shakes: No.

“A good neck to sleep with isn’t it?”

Mendez pushes a thumb on the chin, creaking the head down on its rigid neck.

“So the Native man isn’t dying like the others, is he? I can see your friends from here. Chins up, the group of you.”

“Maybe the plague is just after the white ones, what do you think?”

Mendez turns his hand over on the mouth of the dead man.

“You see that? I have brown skin, not so black. Not so much like you either. More like copper, hmm? Maybe that’s why I’m alive now, sitting in your sleeping country. Let’s do a little survey and see.”

Mendez rolls the body to the side and stands stiffly, stretching his back and shaking out his arms.

“Your country reminds me of Columbia, do you know that? Sure. All these soft hills and perfect valleys. Not as green, but the same God working out his favourite shapes.”

Mendez turns and looks to a particularly steep rise to the south.

“So I will look for the colour of coffee and we’ll test our theory, hmmm?”

Mendez walks past his table and stares into the bluing flesh and scrub land of open mouths and clenched hands.

“There are not very many black people in this part of Ontario, are there?”

Mendez walks east up the wending river floor. He notices for the first time that climbing ropes are draped across a mound piled against the long back wall. He approaches a rope and turns it out from under the elbow that has been used to anchor it. He looks down at his feet.

“Oh! Oh! There we are! A good black skin!”

Mendez goes down on his knees and counts heads — eleven in all. He turns a hand over, extending a finger to rub the bright pink of the palm.

“Oh my. All the way from Nairobi by the look of you. Look at what has happened to you.”

Mendez lifts the back of the woman’s head. It flips out of his hand and turns backwards, twisting the flesh of her neck. Mendez touches the other heads, lightly tossing them on their broken vertebrae.

“Ah well. Back to work, Mendez.”

Mendez stands and, as he strolls back to his table, notices that he can now spot several dark bodies, the remains of black people, here and there across the smooth crests and pitched surface of the corpses.

“Ok, you’re next. I’ll need some help with you, I think.”
Mendez removes a cloth from a shelf under the table and brushes the surface.

“Girls! I need a girl over here! Hello!”

A teenage girl with long raven hair comes around the base of a cliff. The white of her training bra is leopard spotted with blood and her white gym socks are thick with the black glue of a hundred leaking bodies. She flips the hair from her cheeks and sniffs at the back of her hand. Her eyes are a beautiful green fire, and she squints them at the doctor as she approaches, disapproving and hurt. The doctor is turned away from her and she notices that his shoulders are raised slightly in the ragged act of emotion.

“Hello? Doctor? Are you OK?”

Mendez remains turned away. He lowers his shoulders and tries to take deep breaths that catch in his rising chest.

“I’m having a little cry. It’s not like there isn’t good reason.”

The girl hangs her hair back over her face.

“I have them every so often, and you should too. I knew some of these people quite well, and the others, the others are not living anymore either, you see?”

Mendez flattens his hands on his wet cheeks.

“So let’s not be seagulls, eh? Let’s cry every so often.”

The girl hangs her head under a veil of hair. She brings a hand up to her face and lightly bites the tip of a finger. She looks up and Mendez sees that she is frightened of him.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m saying most of the time. Please ignore me. How about giving me a hand putting this big man on the table, hmmm?”

They lift the man between them and before she leaves she pats Mendez once on the back of his upper arm. He looks to her, smiling, and she’s gone — west, toward the change room.

The man that Mendez is about to cut into has lungs filled with cinders. Like the bodies that surround him in the mountain, this man represents the speed bumps that caught fire at the walls of the suicide compound. In the weeks that the cult was preparing to die, a Native reservation that abutted its property was preparing to take back possession of the land. The Natives banged on drums up and down the wall. Some performed traditional rites and dances, while others sat to the side with dull cloths pulled over their faces and rifles bouncing against their knees to keep time. Within the walls the suicide cult kept postponing the moment they would die. They were offended by the Natives’ crazed defiance of a superficial life. Everyone wanted to die on his or her own land, but the suicide cult believed that they were the only people who understood this land. Its flatness. Its perfect lack of depth. The little pouches of dust and bone that did, in fact, exist beneath the compound floor were beastly fetishes of the world’s terrible love of things beneath the surface. Depth of feeling. Depth of belief. Depth of character. A place built beneath us to hide in. Hateful repositories.

The suicide cult kept putting off the day, until finally they snapped. Filling empty drums with fuel and twist-tying together sticks of dynamite one afternoon, they prepared to die. The same afternoon three groups from the reserve crawled through the hidden entrances of three sweat lodges near the southeast corner outside the compound. Then the explosion punched the sky with a single orange fist that drove upward into a furry black glove. The heat melted the plastic coat of the forest, and the rocks, once cool in their light green pyjamas, broke into blisters. Inside the twiggy domes, the speed bumps of worship, men and women poured cedar tea on glowing boulders that hissed in a pit at their feet. They continued the ritual, oblivious to the flames that were curling in from the roof as they systematically honoured everything in existence. Long before the invisible ash and tiny red pins destroyed them they managed to exceed their bodies enough to miss entirely the moment when they expired. It will be centuries before one of them taps another and says, “I can’t help but notice, but … I think … we have, apparently we’ve been dead for some time.” His companion will look across, in the manner of spirits, and reply, “Good Lord, you’re right. I’ve been so busy …”

When the island exploded Les Reardon was sitting on a tiny peninsula of flat stones. He had given himself over fully to the energy of his creeping delusions. He held his son carefully to his chest and smiled the smile that was, at last, important to him. Looking up into the sky or whatever it was, he said, “So that was the world, after all.”

Les felt the heat at his back before hearing the crack of the fireball. He tossed his son into the tiny waves of Lake Scugog. As he lay flat, dying of heat on the flat stones, Les saw a tiny form surface and lift his son’s head above the water.

These hands will take the baby who has been borne so hastily by an autobiography and drag him to the bottom of
the lake, where he can live out a life that is now so very few pages away.

Mendez folds the flat, wet pillow of poisoned lung back into the man’s chest. He wipes his throat, smearing a juice of connective tissue and cinder across his Adam’s apple. He lifts the back wheels of the table over a bag of broken vertebrae that he’s been collecting and he steers the big man’s body down the path.

“Girls! Girls!”

The change room door is held open by the girl with long black hair. Mendez can see the other two inside, sitting on the smooth wooden benches that line the back wall. They are grinding half-smoked cigarettes out with the tips of their running shoes.

“I think this fellow is my limit for the day. I’m due for a cry now. I suggest you do the same, ladies.”

Mendez nods to the bent cigarettes on the floor and pulls his mouth down in a way that gently suggests that he isn’t quite accepting. As the door closes the girls jump to hide a pack of cigarettes and sweep the butts under the sheet. Mendez swings the door back open in the timing of all adults; without acknowledging the cover-up in progress he says, “I can give you young ladies a ride home if you’d like. It’s getting dark now. I’ll be outside.”

Mendez sits in his car, waiting for the girls. He watches a military vehicle being loaded with corpses in the teachers’ parking lot.

“My heavens, suspicious behaviour looks so pointless today. Go ahead, little army, hide your dirty deeds! You’ll hold the world together with your secrets, I’m sure.”

Mendez notices that the muddy bodies being put in the long van have all been shot in the head. He recognizes the body of a woman being swung like a sack. She is tossed high up into the back of the vehicle.

“That hits hard. Oh dear, why did they shoot poor Ellen Peterson?”

The rear doors of the car open and close on the three girls who have piled together in the back.

“I have to have a moment here, ladies. You can join me. The body of our lovely reeve is now in transit to a final resting place.”

The three girls lean forward and look over the arm Mendez has slung from the passenger headrest. Two of the girls watch the men, with guns hanging across their backs, as they leap up into the cab of the truck. The truck rambles out of the light that’s mounted behind the backboard of a basketball hoop, and it fades into where the light is diminishing under the road dust.

The third girl is staring with horror at the long hairs on Mendez’s arm. She will have a nightmare tonight about these wild grey wires and the soft wrinkled pad of skin that droops off the elbow into the dark of the back seat. Mendez pulls his arm down and puts the car in gear. He rolls his face quickly into a raised shoulder to clear his eyes of tears.

“Well, ladies, let’s go home.”
PART II
NOVEL

Yeah, they’re dead all right — they’re all messed up.
— Sheriff, in Night of the Living Dead
In the beginning was a virus.
Its shape towered over all other early life.

The earliest carnivore, this virus slurped at the rim over which every animated thing first appeared. It recombined bitten elemental life in its cheek, releasing it back into the atmosphere in stringy vomit. These were the little dishes it invented for itself to make dinner more interesting, and life, thus interrupted, became the virus’s menu, little bi-copy houses, walking self-perpetuating delivery services, DNA was born. Living things were doomed to repeat their second step throughout eternity, into waiting mouths, never to know what direction they were actually spilling towards, condemned to contemplate forever, to nearly recall, the absolute independence that a third step would have brought.

The virus farmed the organisms into complexity, playing in this system like Disney World, reddening and pinking and bluing and dulling everything. The organisms evolved to the point where they comprehended themselves as copy machines, and almost instantly ecosystems began to dry up. The virus, fearful of this hostile extension — mechanical reproduction — jumped from the imperilled species into the imperious one. First, it adapted itself to life inside computer memory. In the year 1996 the virus finally came home.

The virus had hid silently for decades up in the roofs of adjectives, its little paws growing sensitive, first to the modifications performed there; then, sensing something more concrete pulling at a distance, the virus jumped into paradigms. It was unable to reach the interior workings of the paradigm, however, due to its own disappearance near the core. The viruses bit wildly at the exterior shimmer of the paradigms, jamming selection with pointed double fangs. A terrible squealing ripped beneath the surface of the paradigms as they were destroyed. The shattered structure automatically redistributed its contents along syntagma, smuggling vertical mobiles across horizontal ropes. What was in the air had to travel as ground and the virus sauntered right into these new spaces, taking them over. Radical spaces evolved to compensate. Negative space became a fortune telling device. Positive space arched its back painfully, now pocked horribly by the frenzied migration of vehicles into the ground.

The plague first manifests itself in the infected person as a type of déjà vu, with an accompanying aphasia. Everything that happened presented itself as already happened. This infinitely complicated things. For as soon as the person adjusted, understanding that this sensation was merely a symptom of the plague, his or her understanding slipped backward into the already happened. Each realization had to be doubled against itself into becoming understood next: an impossible therapy to maintain. The present tense was a slippery slope to anyone in remission. The “now” became a deepening lesion, and from it rose the smell of this new sickness.

The disease developed in terrifying stages. First, the patient panicked and then sat stunned, silent, in a kind of exile. The person would eventually slip into a depression and exhibit ghastly physical symptoms. Typically the tongue would hang out, becoming dry and swollen, stiffening against the chin. This usually marked the end of the person’s exile from the living.

The advanced stages of the disease involved, astonishingly, revenge. This revenge was not the type we might recognize; it was not tied to an emotion or a desire, but to the other: a symptom of the disease. The disease is commonly referred to as Acquired Meta-structural Pediculosis. Or, AMPS.

The patients at this advanced stage turn into violent zombies. Cannibals. They knock people to the ground and bite away at their mouths. They devour skin and flesh, throat and tongue. Finally both the AMPS victim and the AMPS victim’s victim are destroyed by a single violent whip of the head that breaks their necks.

A carnival barker with a blond moustache wicked up either side of his nose is drawn in a panel by a cartoonist, beside a tall open mouth. Smoke curls up over the mouth’s giant upper lip. Greg closes this page, the last one, and he checks the cover price before sliding it behind the next comic on the shelf that’s part of this series.
City of Feeling

Their heads sway above their shoulders on Queen Street.

One of the first signs of viral presence is an addiction to Big Town TV. The station repeats itself, quotes itself, touches itself in a way that is somehow comforting to the early victims who cling outside the building tonight. This spectacle used to be reserved for those evenings when Electric Sex Party was broadcast live; now the crowds only appear when the program is rerun the following evening. Greg is standing somewhat apart from the crowd. He tested positive for the disease earlier this week, and though he’s asymptomatic he’s come to observe the people he will soon be forced to join. The crowd is not a dance crowd. They do not dance. They merely stand, watching the monitors, occasionally slumping, smiling weakly. Some have lain down to sleep on the sidewalk. Greg looks at the purple neon band reflected up in a black puddle between his legs. He follows this clean light as it pulls itself out of the water and embroiders a brilliant shadow between the stones in the asphalt. Greg twists at the front of his Monster Magnet T-shirt and whispers, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change . . .”

Greg looks up at a vendor and spits towards him. The vendor picks up a sausage from the grill with a blackened fork and wags it at Greg, wiggling his tongue lecherously. Greg waits patiently, and sure enough his Higher Power, dressed entirely in black, emerges from a donut shop. He strolls out into the traffic holding his chin, sharing with Greg the difficulty of saying anything at this point.
Grant Mazzy

Behind the white glass panels that make up the edifice of Big Town TV, Grant Mazzy is scratching the top of his head, releasing a white dusting of dandruff that showers onto his pants. He presses his palms against his thighs and, pulling them aside, admires the glittery effect. Out of the corner of his eye he spots a technician strolling breezily through the open concept.

“Hey Bob.”

“It’s Carl.”

“Yeah, sorry Carl. Anyway, when the hell are those production people gonna be done with the closed coupling thing, whatever it is?”

Closed coupling is an idea developed by Big Town TV to accommodate its AMPS viewer. The closed coupling involves a tight repetition, a delay sample that they believe would conform to the rhythm that AMPS consume information. It is a woefully unscientific instrument, utterly useless to the AMPS victim, whose chaotic process wildly outmanoeuvres this primitive compensation. The technology does attract viewers, however, who are exhilarated by the idea.

A Max Headroom who cannot be cancelled.

Grant Mazzy catches his own face in a monitor and moves his chin quickly. When he is satisfied that he is “now,” he stares squarely at his handsome face, frankly assessing his own good looks. His own best critic, Grant judges his appearance harshly. He never solicits a better angle from his image: he expects every angle to be good enough. The technician checks his watch and widens his eyes above the clipboard he holds.

“Five minutes, Grant, then we’re rolling live again.”

“You know, this place gives me the creeps. Everything reminds me of that damn virus and those fuckin’ zombies outside. I don’t know. Where do they go? I mean, when they get worse, where do they go? These ones aren’t that far gone you know.”

“I don’t know, Grant, they say that some really sick ones are making appearances up north. Like gangs of them in North Bay, places like that.”

“I just hope that somebody’s monitoring this situation. I’m not sensing a lot of organized thinking around this problem. Oh, wait, my prompter’s up. Here I go. Shut up. Get lost. Shoo.”

Grant takes one last look at himself in a monitor and then makes his professional gotta-take-a-shit face into the camera.

“The Ontario government has shifted its position on handling the growing cases of AMPS. After losing track of several victims who are in the final violent stages of the disease, and after reports of people disappearing, the government has decided to implement new, tighter methods of regulating the progress of the disease. People with AMPS are registered upon diagnosis and are required by law to report to a designated physician weekly. Emergency facilities are now being prepared for those victims who pass into the dangerous later stages. The government has made failure to comply an imprisonable offence. Meanwhile, some northern communities are showing signs of panic and there are instances of people taking matters into their own hands. Officials would like to send the clear message that this is not only dangerous and illegal, but also, now, unnecessary.”

When the broadcast goes to another feed, Grant looks down at the monitor and watches his mouth blur backwards.

Or forwards. He can’t tell.
Julie is worried about her younger brother and she puts her arm around him in the darkness. They are sitting at the end of a short dock.

“Jimmy, I’m here you know. Mom and Dad aren’t really worried, they just love this shit. It’s like a war or something. They like to take it seriously, at least while it’s happening. Just ignore them.”

Jimmy had stopped speaking three days ago, believing that silence was the only sure way to prevent the disease. *If you don’t use words, it can’t get into them, right?* But he was worried about his father, who argued with the TV, who yelled at appliances and then screamed at his mom. Jimmy watched with horror, seeing this vivid viral highway shooting through the air and slinging infection into his father’s wild mouth. Jimmy sinks the front of his sneaker into the lake. Cold water is sucked inside the shoe when he separates his toes. Julie cocks her ears towards the cottage. She can hear shouting. It’s her mother. The cottage door slams and she shifts uncomfortably, hoping that no one finds them.

“Remember last summer when we saw that musky grab the duckling?”

Jimmy shrugs and lowers his other toe into the water.

“I’m just glad muskies don’t fly!” A June bug clings like a heavy clasp to Julie’s bangs. “Aah! They do! They do! What’s that?”

“Ahhh! Jimmy, can you see it? What is it? Is it a musky? Oh God!”

Jimmy reaches up between his sister’s frantic limbs and plucks the beetle from her hair. He holds it for a second, until its wings clatter against his palm, then releases it. The June bug veers up into the moonlight, flitting through the silver before plunging down into darkness and plopping heavily onto the water’s surface. Jimmy lowers his head, scanning the blackness.

“Let’s see if a fish grabs it. I bet one does.”

Jimmy raises his toes as a fish gulps through the water. Julie mouths “wow” and slaps her brother’s back. The sound of her father’s voice makes her pull the back of Jimmy’s shirt.

“You kids get back up here. Your mother’s worried about you.”

The father weighs a rock in his hand and calculates the intensity of a toss that could knock his son into the water. He mutters under his breath as he drops the rock and turns up the path.

“Little fag.”

At a nearby cottage the Wheelers are in bed reading. They are turned away from each other, hanging books out into the light of their respective lamps. Mr. Wheeler’s head is bobbing into the pillow and for the second it is lowered he manages a single full snore. Mrs. Wheeler notices this, and she closes her book and shimmies her back up the wall, watching him.

“Honey. Honey, I think we should go to sleep now. Don’t you? I think you’ll sleep tonight, dear. Look at you, you can’t even hold your head up.”

Three people are standing in the dark at the base of the stairs leading up to the bedroom. They are silent; that is, they don’t speak. But they jab each other. They’re standing, exchanging sharp punches. Cruel little punches, meant to hurt. More than that, they begin to stab their fingers into each other’s face, until a finger reaches an eye and one goes down on his knees. And when he does, his enucleated eye slipping through his fingers onto the floor, the woman begins strangling him while the other man reaches under, grabs his face, and begins to stretch the skin until it gives way and its contents burst onto the floor. The man falls, wagging his face on the floor, sliding the rubble of his lost features, like eggs broken through a grocery bag, back onto his head. The woman kicks the man’s neck and, after grinding it flat beneath her heel, howls out between her clicking teeth. She can’t even feel the quick, hard blows to her ribs.

Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler are sitting straight up in their bed. They have heard everything, and when the woman stops howling Mrs. Wheeler turns off her light. Mr. Wheeler glares over at her, panicked. Breathless, he says, “What . . . what?”
“Turn off the light, turn off the light. Get under the bed.”

The room is suddenly pitch black, and they both scramble under the bed. It will take an hour and fifteen minutes before a hand reaches for them. Mrs. Wheeler will feel her hair being tugged viciously from her scalp. In the meantime they wait in the dark feeling only the sprinkle of fibres falling onto their cheeks.
In the second stage of the disease victims display symptoms similar to those of aphasics. Their ability to use language erodes. This disease, however, is not an organic one. Nor is it a disorder of the personality. Once infected, the victim produces the virus in the language he or she struggles with. The mature virus is a sort of hard copy of this production. The latter part of the second stage resembles Tourette Syndrome. The victim becomes frantic, rebelling against the onset of the disease by wilfully destroying, ahead of the virus, his or her own normative behaviour. It is a desperate attempt to escape. The victim batters at what is perceived as the horizon of his or her being. And the horizon, now heavy and meaningless, drops like a stone when approached. The victim becomes dangerously aggravated and insensible at this point. The horizon is, then, somehow transferred into the mouths of those not yet afflicted. Stranger’s mouths are the escape route through which the victim attempts to disappear, in a violent and bloody fashion. They often drown on the blood of those they attack or choke to death on the flesh.

Greg turns the page and studies the four panels that illustrate, without text, a cannibal on a throne surrounded by decapitated people. The cannibal holds a head in his upturned hand, his chin covered with blood. The head is upside down, and a little pink fray appears along the rim of the neck, the lipstick on the glass. Greg closes the comic book and checks the number on the top right of the cover before replacing it on the shelf. He leaves quickly, feeling the hostile glare of the man in an undershirt behind the counter.
Grant Mazzy lives, much like everyone else on Earth, in an apartment. In spite of his occupation, he is less vain than you’d expect. When he’s at home he spends no time in front of his reflection; in fact, he keeps only a small shaving mirror, and he has only seen his face at home bent by steam and encircled with moisture.

The face reminds him of work. His reflection makes him think of an alarm going off at 6:30 in the morning.

No, at home Grant kicks back by being facelessly, anonymously good. Grant’s true passion, the reason he keeps living, is to work tirelessly for charity. He sits on the boards of three major charities, lending his name and profile for their benefit. What he loves most, however, is the anonymous time he devotes to lesser known charities. Particularly the anti-crime program that is run in one of the city’s meaner parts of town, Parkdale. Grant volunteers his time as a counsellor on a distress line. This number is publicized in laundromats and bus shelters. Strictly small time, no budget, non-professional, a do-it-yourself, hands-on, community repair kit.

Grant pops open his small humidor and drops the point of his finger along the shaft of a dark cigar, a Monte Christo “A.” He rolls it into the corner and separates a Robusto that lies heavily on a bed of Punch Double Coronas. Grant hangs his hand over the box, rocking the Robusto between his fingers before pulling up the “A.” He rolls a silver bullet into its tip, softly popping out a plug of tobacco. He lights the cigar in big wet sucks. When the phone rings, Grant expertly rolls the cigar to the corner of his mouth with his tongue and slaps the speaker-phone button.

“Hello, my name is Bill, you’ve reached the Parkdale Crisis Hotline, how can I help you?”

Grant rolls his head, twirling the smoke in the air until it hangs evenly across his face; then he sits forward through it, closing one eye and hanging the cigar down loose from his mouth.

“Hello? Anybody there? Hello?”

Grant spreads his fingers above the phone and when the sound flattens he pats his thumb down to disconnect.

When Grant was in university, studying political science, he lived in Parkdale. Back when the Queen Street Mental Health Centre opened its doors to free its residents of their institutional bondage. Once freed, these high-functioning mercenaries swung into action and with strange ability they frightened the proto-Yuppie colony that had just recently moved into the area. A certain segment of Toronto had clearly developed a crush on Parkdale’s depression.

Grant Mazzy was renting a room on Wilson Park from an exiled Polish religious leader whose insane son almost always stood beside a grandfather clock in the hallway. Grant had a serious masturbation habit at the time, and his room was a sort of Jugs and Beaver emporium, smelling of curdled seed. Being unable to afford furniture, Grant was forced to make love on the coveted hardwood floor. The battering of his elbow against this floor drew complaints from the security guard who lived below. A soft, giant man who was orange from head to toe, this security guard worked sixteen hours a day and spoke aloud only once or twice a month. When Grant moved in and commenced his school term with one-handed procrastination, the security guard leapt into action and complained to the landlord daily.

One day the religious leader, a truly fanatical man, decided that with an insane son impersonating a suit of armour in the hallway, and a hot pervert in the attic, he needed an exorcism. When Grant climbed the stairs that day and opened his door he met with a flying Bible, candles, and wild Latin keening. The girlie mags were stuck together with red votive-candle wax in the middle of the floor. The landlord, now moaning loudly through a perfect O in the centre of his beard, was clad — they were visible between black robes that fell open — in white jockey shorts.

Grant wasn’t angry. He was frightened. He turned to go down the stairs, only to see the bearded son lurching up, his face apple red in the candlelight. The son bared his teeth, raised his limbs against their medicated stiffness, and closed his eyes tightly. Safe distances were closing. Grant sat down on the stairs, and he too closed his eyes, waiting for either the madman to pounce on him or the papal dervish to strangle him with a soiled holy thong.

A loud siren from outside distracted the men on the staircase, giving Grant enough time to break for the door. The house across from Grant’s place was spewing black smoke into the sky. Several police cars were pulled up on the lawn and people, mostly in handcuffs, were being led out of the building. Grant learned later that the fire had two sources. A man on the first floor who resembled an overweight General Custer had fallen asleep. A neglected pot of
beans on the stove caught fire. Meanwhile, on the second floor, a struggling art student had ignited his upper body while experimenting with free-basing. The two fires failed to disturb a man who was pressing a pillow down on another’s face on the third floor. And when the killer’s victim was dead, the perpetrator ran down the stairs to help orchestrate the rescue. In the middle of this pandemonium, an older woman mentioned to a fireman that General Custer on the first floor had raped her on several occasions over the past two years. When they dragged him from his bed it took a team of paramedics two hours, not to save his life, but to wake him up.

It was at this moment, the inauguration of Parkdale’s new reputation, that Grant discovered two things. First, that his sanity was a goldmine. And second, that he would do whatever it took to save anyone he could from the dangerous squalor of this part of town.

“Hello, you’ve reached the Parkdale Crisis Hotline.”
Grant held his Robusto out and watched a long grey toe of ash tumble end over end into the ashtray.
“Hello. What’s your name?”
“My name’s Mark, what’s yours?”
“My name’s Bill, Mark. Hey Mark, waddaya want to talk about?”
Grant opened his refrigerator and shrouded the milk in cigar smoke.
“Well, I have a crisis, Bill.”
Grant peeled the plastic wrap off a glass plate and nudged the pickles and cheese that were arranged there. He resealed the plate and flipped open a plastic lid.
“It’s good you called, then, Mark.”
Grant grimaced at a smell that shot out of the container, and he hit back with a spray of smoke, then closed the fridge.
“It’s not gonna sound like a crisis.”
“Doesn’t matter how it sounds, Mark. You tell me it’s a crisis, that makes it one. So shoot, buddy. What’s up?”
Zombies

A long cord stretches out across the lake. Its frayed surface prickles the water. A needle width of blood and bone courses along the interior of this rope with such force and speed that if directed it could easily shave the poles clean off the planet. This is a dreaming AMPS victim. This is what its dream is. The AMP doesn’t fall asleep. Instead, it collapses from exhaustion and, before going under, batters itself to prevent sleep. Most unconscious AMPS put themselves there with a blow to the head which is, in fact, meant to keep them awake. The AMP who is having this dream now is lying on the floor of the Wheelers’ cottage. His throat is crushed and his eyes are draped across open fingers at his side. His spinal column is broken at the neck and a glistening area of spinal fluid laps at his shoulder like a lake teeming with fish. But he lives on, this thing. He sails on for the rest of his natural life striving towards his goals, different now, surely very different, and he’s cut down before he can reach them.

His heart stops and he dies.
Dr. Rauf pulls at his sides as if looking for seat belts. He wiggles his hips in his chair, trying to fit his legs onto them. Eventually he settles. Grant pauses, scanning over Rauf’s cluttered pose, and phrases the question like this:

“Dr. Rauf, the explanations for this disease are very baffling, to say the least. It’s been said over and over again that this is not a physical disease or a mental one. And I suppose, while you’re here, we can clear the air totally. Is this a spiritual plague, as has recently been suggested? Clear that up for us now, could you doctor?”

Rauf rolls his upper lip under his nose, sealing his nostrils with the slick insides of his mouth.

“No. There’s no such thing. A very motivated speculation, indeed.”

Grant smiles. In fact, he is prepared to laugh if any answer turns out to be funny.

“OK. So we hear a lot about what this virus is not. And in fact, once we run through all the negatives, it appears that the thing doesn’t exist at all. So how is it that people are testing positive?”

“Well, one of the first things to understand about this virus is that its existence is incomprehensible because it exists contrary to the way our rational minds comprehend. And because the virus is situated, quite physically, anterior to the process of comprehension itself.”

Grant cannot hide his discomfort and his next question is impatient.

“OK. If you had to answer quickly, what would you say? Where is this virus?”

“Simple. It gestates in the deep structures prior to language. Or, at least, simultaneous with language. In the very primal structure that organizes us as differentiated, discontinuous copies of each other. The virus probably enters, in fact, among paradigmatic arrangements. And then, almost instantly, the virus appears in a concept of itself. This causes all sorts of havoc. A common effect being the sensation that the present moment is a copy of itself. It’s been misnamed déjá vu. Other early symptoms occur when the act of selecting a word becomes jammed. This process finds paradigms attempting to reinvent themselves as syntagma, and this manifests in the patient as fairly common aphasia. The person wants a fork but asks for a table or an oar or a knife. The next stages are more chaotic. As conditions within the personality become ultra-sensitive to their own construction, there is a kind of sped-up production of reality. This is a compensation for, or an escape from, the rending of their once invisible frames. Or horizons. Horizons that are quite literally looming. A frightening and painful type of madness ensues, and some of the incidents that we’re hearing about, cannibalism and whatnot, start to manifest themselves in the later stages of the disease. There are some radical metaphysicians now speculating about the potential for this virus to destroy the constitution of things beyond those physical individuals who have the disease. I would suggest that this, of course, would be suicide for the virus. It has, after all, a vested interest in keeping its host alive. I believe that the host is, in fact, everything beyond the boundaries of infection. Or, more conventionally, the host is the reality constructed to support us, and produce us, and on and on. Reality is an organism to this virus. That is, however irrational it may sound, a serviceable version of what has happened.”

Grant is in the grip of frenzied self-consciousness. He is close to understanding this disease and he can feel a terrible fear gathering in his good looks. He worries that his next question, that any question, or worse, that communication itself, is unsafe.

“OK Dr. Rauf, how are we catching this disease, how is it contagious?”

“Well, that’s a difficult question. One that is now being asked by teams of doctors, semioticians, linguists and anthropologists worldwide. A whole host of disciplines are working together on this one. It seems that people are waking up with it, so dreams seemed the obvious site of entry. It has been suggested that it is more likely that people are catching it as they move into a dream state. The structure of consciousness, identical to that of the unconscious, moves from the more or less illusory conditions of the personality into an automatic concrete version of the self found in dreams. The redistribution of elements may leave a person momentarily vulnerable to the virus, which may have already been there, dormant. Some specialists are suggesting that we use as little connotative language as possible, and to definitely avoid metalanguage. Like, well, like we’re using right now, Grant.”

“What does the virus look like, Dr. Rauf?”

“The immature virus looks a bit like a sunfish, brightly coloured, with spiky fins. And it has two long, pointy
fangs, which it uses to practise scratching at the paradigms it will eventually invade. It’s important to remember, of course, that it is also becoming a tangent, and eventually the mature virus resembles the figure of abjection. The copy is a different matter. The copy is a strange, full and undetectable presence.”

Grant prepares his next question, pushing his finger into pursed lips, but he doesn’t ask it. Instead, he slides the finger into his mouth while making a slashing gesture across his throat with his free hand.
Grant has strong convictions when it comes to counselling the young, and he believes that adolescence is almost entirely a political passage. Young women should be made aware of the plight of their older sisters in shelters before being introduced to the thrill of the blouse. The connection, Grant acknowledges, is a male one, the short length of a long, punitive and controlling chain. He advises girls to seek out women who have enthusiasm, energy, exuberance. He instructs young men to proceed cautiously, to become aware of the complexity of the world, to seek out men who have a wide range of feeling. He cheers on the teenage homosexual, while sadly noting the complicated degrees of acceptance that await him. Grant listens with principled uncertainty, never hearing a wrong note in the broken voices of young men, or an awkwardness in a teenage girl, that isn’t important to the whole world. He gathers young people up and down, along the sides of his soft, kind voice, and asks some of them, with a hand dripping down through a circle of sunlight, if they would like to come and work in a big, beautiful television studio.

“Hello, Parkdale Crisis Hotline. My name is Peter, how can I help you?”

“Hi … uh … Peter. I got a strange question.”

Grant sits up on the couch and scrapes the label wrapped around a cigar. He flicks too forcefully with the back of his thumbnail and tears through the outer layer of tobacco.

“Oh . . . I’ve heard it all. You can’t shock me. Hey, first of all, what’s your name?”

“Uh, Warren.”

“OK, Warren, how old are you?”

“Eleven.”

“Eleven, eleven . . . I spoke to an eleven-year-old girl yesterday morning who wanted a sister so bad that she was pricking holes in her father’s condoms. So, Warren, I know all about you eleven-year-olds.”

The boy laughs and clicks his tongue. Grant can tell that, right now, this troubled little man can’t understand anything that isn’t directly his problem.

“Warren, I want you to take a deep breath and tell me, exactly, what you called to say.”

“Mmm. OK . . . I think I got the dog pregnant.”

Grant presses a finger on the edge of an ashtray, tilting it up off the table.

“Warren . . . that’s not possible.”

“I took the dog down into the crawl space and I poked it between the legs.”

Grant lifts his finger and the ashtray clicks on the glass.

“What do you mean you poked it?”

“I went inside it. You know.”

“OK, Warren. No matter what you did. No matter what happened, you can’t get a dog pregnant. It’s physically impossible.”

The boy breaks in, crying and talking furiously.

“I’m so scared. I keep looking at her. She comes to me at the dinner table. What if she’s pregnant? What if? I don’t want a little dog brother! My parents are going to kill me! Shit! What if she’s pregnant?”

“Whoa boy! Slow down there, Warren. First of all, I wish you’d listen to me. Are you willing to listen for a second?”

“Alright.”

“Are you listening, Warren?”

“Yes.”

“OK. This is big news. This is important. Here it is: you cannot get any animal pregnant. None. Not a dog, not a squirrel, not an ape. Not ever. Never. Are you listening, Warren?”
“Yes.”
“OK. Now that’s fine. That’s definitely not your problem. But. But you still have a problem, don’t you?”
“What? What’s my problem?”
“Well, Warren. What you’ve done has made you feel bad, hasn’t it?”
“Yes.”
“That’s a good thing. It’s right that this makes you worry.”
“It is?”
“Oh, yeah. The important thing here is simple. Simple. Just listen to your feelings, Warren. What are they telling you?”
“Uh … I don’t know.”
“They’re telling you not to do it again.”
“I won’t. I won’t. I promise. I won’t.”
“There you go. No harm done, right Warren?”
“No?”
“No. You have just become a little boy who thinks sex with animals is wrong.”
“If I have?”
“Do you think it’s OK to drag the family dog down into the basement and give it a poke?”
“No.”
“Me neither, Warren. And that makes us both pretty decent guys, don’tcha think?”
“I guess so.”
Grant smiles and tilts the ashtray again. He applies a tricky pressure with his finger, rotating the ashtray on its edge.
“Everything else OK, Warren?”
“I guess so.”
“OK, buddy. I’m gonna go now. You call anytime, OK?”
“OK.”
“Goodbye.”
Grant pulls his hair back and stands up from the couch. He spins two invisible pistols off his hips and says, “Fuck the dog.”
By the time he makes his way across the carpet to the refrigerator a charge of electricity has built up and it snaps between his finger and the handle. He jerks his hand up and blows on the finger, then shakes it out and returns it to the invisible holster.
Behind him the phone rings. An angelfish in a clear bowl sitting beside the couch turns away to face the dark hallway. It raises its hind end slightly and fans its tail, catching the pink glow of choral in the transparent ray of its anal fin. A thin beige spiral swings in the water and the angelfish shudders it free. Grant trips against the coffee table as he grabs the phone. He picks up the receiver and places the phone on the table, careful not to touch anything metal.
“Hello, you’ve reached the Parkdale Crisis Hotline. Who am I speaking to?”
“Hello. My name is Greg.”
“Hi Greg. My name is Grant. What’s on your mind, buddy?”

The Future Bakery at the corner of Tecumseth and Queen is the beehive, the recovering addict’s caffeine spunk house. Men who have spread their knuckles up to their elbows hitting women sip Turkish coffee and design their Higher Powers, informing each other about how to surrender, sharing affirmations in their collective exile. None of them will ever be what is commonly called a good person, but now that they have stopped being so actively bad, they chart together a course to the hereafter. Chosen and marked for this, they hug each other lustily.
When women venture near, sit at an adjacent table or assess them from the line-up, the New Men close off distrustfully. They welcome the amend-making process. They would love to say “I’m sorry” and stand in that unforgiving flak, in the pain of being wrong. But those days are gone. Feeling useless to either gender makes them merely pray. And prayer has made them different, gentler, sure. They really don’t beat women any longer. In each of their imaginations a new place has evolved, a place that loops off the side of their personalities.

Here they picture God.

In between Greg’s pierced ears, and under his pretty curls, lurks a Higher Power. The Higher Power stands near Greg while he jerks off, waiting patiently. He’s a Higher Power who doesn’t look away, but furrows his brow, knowing that sex is when you’re waiting for better behaviour, not guilty, not shameful, just not quite holy. As Greg wipes his semen from his palm, the Higher Power points at the cuff of his pants: you missed some, there, no right there on your pants. And then he smiles slightly as Greg says, “Fuh-huck!” and flips the white dollop into a Kleenex. When he’s shaken out his hair, Greg makes room for his Higher Power on the couch. He sits with his elbows on his knees and says, “Greg, I’m going to let you live forever.”

Greg already knows this, and his Higher Power never seems to tire of saying it; however, it’s supposed to mean something slightly different each time. Greg pinches his moist pant cuff and wonders what exactly it means this time.

Finally Greg says, “Are you saying I should accept that Jojo never liked Hogg?” Hogg is Greg’s recently deceased rat, and Jojo is his recently estranged girlfriend. In truth, the Higher Power thinks it’s a bit amusing that a dead rat and a relationship well-lost are persisting as “issues” in Greg’s recovery. The Higher Power is very aware that his own sense of humour is always inappropriate. He looks across at Greg, straining to keep his poker face, while he nods in a way that looks important. Greg suspects for a second that his Higher Power is mocking him. But he also knows how inappropriate his suspicions are, so he pretends they are not true.

Greg’s Higher Power cannot look him in the eye right now, so he lowers his gaze and spots another dollop of semen on the young man’s socks.
When Jimmy was very young — not that he isn’t now, but a few years ago, when he was seven — an event occurred that would predispose him to silence.

In the backyard of his parents’ house, hanging on a cliff over-looking the high-way, lived Jimmy and his family. This house was peculiar for several reasons. One was its dramatic placement on a cliff at the end of a street in an old suburb of Toronto. At the base of this cliff was a scrappy bit of wilderness that was screwed up tight as a jar, between the house’s backyard and Highway 401.

In this little patch of land, a sort of old smudge at the edge of a new drawing, a doomed population of wildlife was living out its final generation in manic friendlessness. Snakes copulated on the drying scalp of the terrain. A fox scrambled back and forth along an unearthed concrete conduit. A million mites lived on the rust from a single barb of wire. At night their eyes shone and their microscopic faces vibrated with insanity. Migrating birds that had made this a rest spot for hundreds of years now sensed something was terribly wrong. They lit on the backs of barrels in the fat brown river, and when their young looked hungrily at a suicided worm or a grinning minnow, they clicked their beaks, sadly, “No.” At night a faint popping sound could be heard up and down the river, as weak heart valves in the young owl population strained to sustain life until morning.

Jimmy spent a great deal of time here as a naturalist, learning to observe, to read into what animals wrote. And he read very well. When he climbed the hill in the late afternoon he always looked back over his shoulder, because he knew that this little patch of land was teeming with sick, unpredictable minds.

The vivid certainty that button-eyed rats were throwing themselves at his heels as he made his final scramble over the top of the hill made him scream. He ran through the yard to a back door that seemed to be held at an impossible distance. A family photo of the door dangled at the edge of the lawn, without enough dimension to escape through. The snapshot’s border of chemicals, the loss of his mother’s face into the glare of the sun or the flash of a distant bulb, sucked the oxygen from his lungs. He was lucky to complete the dash through his own backyard. Jimmy heard people reading aloud from magazines as he kicked at the ground between himself and this door, reading aloud about the boy who died legless and insane in his own backyard. His screams, these daily screams, were never heard because of another peculiarity about this property.

This house lay directly under the last leg of an airplane highway. Every five minutes, in the late afternoon, a commercial airplane tore up the air, drowning out Jimmy’s screams, dropping its landing gear just this side of the chimney so as to miss it and fall from the sky into Jimmy’s tortured ravine. While these planes landed somewhere else safely, they had also crashed moments before — eating up the ground with their noise; eating up Jimmy’s wailing, and ending the world over and over and over again.

As he lay there, for he always fell down to clutch the ground before he died, Jimmy saw the tiny red-button eyes of ravine rats look up and shatter. These tiny plastic shards flew across him as the belly of the plane lay on the earth to finally, after so many threats, end this. Needless to say, Jimmy was never able to finish his dinner, and when asked what he had been doing, Jimmy felt his young pathology squeezing his brain.

The more conventional fear, that his parents were aliens, was becoming a comfort.

Today is Jimmy’s seventh birthday, and his mother, or rather the alien who looks like her, is baking a cake shaped like a rocketship with a blue Commander Tom profile at the base. Like his mother, the artistic Jimmy is busy creating, and the tiny explosions he makes with his mouth attract her attention. He senses her alien eyes on him, and he looks up in time to catch her wiping the tell-tale green of the icing from her extraterrestrial nose.

“Jimmy, are you drawing those nasty drawings again?”

She slams her powdered hand down on the drawing before Jimmy has a chance to pull it away, and she turns it toward her. The drawing depicts a giant rat covered with buttons that are being sewn onto it by an airplane captain who is stretching from his cockpit to stab a needle into the rat’s eye. Assorted cowboys and Indians and dinosaurs are scattered in pieces around the plane.

“Jimmy, why don’t you ever draw nice things? And whatever you do, don’t let Missus see these. Hide them with the others in your room. Now go out and play in the pool with your sister.”
Missus was the woman who came in and cleaned once a week. She was a Jehovah’s Witness who became confused and angry at even the thought of dinosaurs. Upon seeing one of Jimmy’s drawings she asked to leave immediately; clutching her old heart, she limped home in a state of abjection. Jimmy’s mother watched helplessly from behind the curtains in the kitchen. Missus returned the following week, but she has never entered, nor has she since been asked to enter, the boy’s room.

“Careful out there, your father’s tools are lying all over the place. Take a towel.”

Now there’s the hill, that lost wall, and the weasels are wiping their gums against it. At a distance, somewhere above Jane and Finch, two airplanes are waiting at an intersection. And in the lawn below and to the west is a small rectangle punched into the ground coated with concrete and filled with water.

In this wading pool stands an eight-year-old girl. Beside the pool stands a seven-year-old boy. The boy strolls over to a saw that hangs at an angle in a plank that is stretched between two sawhorses. He rocks the saw until it squawks out of the wood.

There are thoughts going through this child’s head, which is normal. As normal as it is to place thoughts in a head. And they are arriving and departing in the usual custom. That is, as far as it is usual for thoughts to arrive and depart. These thoughts, idle and wandering, are picking up speed, accumulating a motive from the way they are arranged. There is a dangerous belief in the corners they turn.

These thoughts: The saw can enter wood and my father can leave it there. Can it enter my sister and can I leave it there? To the saw, my ruler, my king, my sister is wet inside like wood, and her grain is looser and nearly separated anyway. So where is the difference if I draw the separation out? Make her wood. The same. She is wood. Peaceful and heavy. The little teeth marching across her shoulder. That’s it.

The grim little mouth the saw has made in the plank blows blonde fibres from its lips and gives the word. Jimmy slips into the pool clumsily, dragging the saw behind him.

Behind Julie’s head is the deep blue of the sky. A blue most like that colour is at her shoulders, whitening as it leaves her, travelling upward. On the surface of the sky, microscopic bacteria living in Jimmy’s eyes flow from the sun into Julie, who is smiling. They’re glancing down at her shoulder, inviting the saw there. Jimmy lays it on her shoulder and draws it towards himself. Then he pushes it along a groove that starts easily in the skin. A bright strip of blood highlights the course — down through her body — the saw will take. Julie’s face is calm, at least as calm as Jimmy’s, and she smiles with a full understanding of what is happening.

When their father runs around the pool, as if up a ramp, his mouth is open and through it an airplane comes out of the sky. Julie and Jimmy lean towards each other and kiss in the silence of this moment. Now husband and wife, they kiss each other goodbye forever. When the airplane advances past the sky and their father’s voice starts up in his mouth again, Julie and Jimmy pull apart sheepishly and Julie begins to howl in pain, holding her shoulder. Jimmy sees, for the first time, all the blood in the water.

In every home movie and photograph that their father will take this summer, the girl’s shoulder will have a large pad of gauze taped to it. And Julie and Jimmy will grow apart like brother and sister.

This event also marks Jimmy’s first deliberate silence, a silence that will last three months and will return every three months. Like now, as they make their way up the path in the dark, four cottages away from where people are eating each other alive in a now brightly lit bedroom.
At his desk, Grant Mazzy sits across from the only person at Big Town TV who is willing to spend time with him. Steve is a student volunteer, which means he is something of a slave. He’s young, eighteen or so, with an anachronistic blond pompadour, tight rockabilly pants, and pointy boots. Grant has asked himself whether this look, the way the kid features it, the way it precedes everything else about him, is trendy or disdainful of trends, or trendily disdainful of trends. Is he ultra-hip and ironically retro-quoting another ultra-hip that had hotly retro-quoted another ultra-hip that once, long ago, railed against, what? What? Uh, squares? Grant has decided, in order to get through the day, that the kid is just a bit silly looking. And that is that. Besides, because of the way Steve has followed him around and bumped against him and bobbed his head like a good dog, Grant figures those old squares, as referentially obscure as they have become, have nothing to worry about anymore, anyway.

Steve picks up the second phone on Grant’s desk and gives the “Girlfriend” signal, followed by the “Sorry dude” signal. Grant stares at the kid for a second, watching as his face crumples towards the “No, I’m really sorry, dude” signal. Grant smiles and pulls a Romeo Y Julieta Tubo out of his shirt pocket. He swings it in his fingers and taps it onto his phone to get the orchestra’s attention.

“I’m getting phone calls you wouldn’t believe. Calls from, like, look at this. Here’s an anthropologist. Here’s a linguist.”

Steve’s eyes dart quickly to the side, toward the East Indian weather person who sits quietly surrounded by unused phones.

“Semioticians, doctors, and a feminist lawyer, and, oh, this one’s rich, an art critic, an art critic who now fancies himself a virologist . . . now what was that about . . .”

Steve sits nodding at Grant.

“Here it is. Yeah, art critic, thinks the virus became contagious when Marcel Duchamp got a guy called Steiglits to photograph a urinal in 1919.”

Steve has heard the name before.

“Who?”

“Marcel Duchamp. You know, the urinal. Uh, the bride descended on the bachelor, something. Readymades, that sort of thing. A dadaist.”

Steve remembers him.

“Right. The Nude Descending a Staircase. I know. Yeah, so what does that have to do with the virus?”

“Well, this critic seems to think that Duchamp’s experiments with the fourth dimension, sending a urinal into it, somehow caused a breach of some kind. And when the piss-pot returned, some kind of illuminating gas got in through the nth door type of twilight zone shit. Anyway, in here somewhere pops a virus you catch through conversation. Crazy, eh?”

Steve smiles, “So, like, I guess this is one disease that you can catch off a toilet seat.”

“That’s right, kid, very good. Very good. Now, what am I gonna do here? The only virologist I don’t have is a virologist.”
Greg is not sure what it is that people should know. He thinks that there is certainly something. He sits in Grant’s small office drumming his fingertips against his thighs. Three weeks ago I get a fatal illness, and today I start a new career. Greg is anxious that these two clauses keep a safe distance from each other. Even though he suspects they are dependent on each other, he avoids acknowledging them at the same time.

When Greg thinks of the illness, he does so with a consciousness that is dim and oval, capable of spreading outward, yes, but with borders that he keeps visible at all times. If he thinks of the new career, he does so less in a space than in a direction. His thoughts brush towards something, incapable of wandering or examining or dissolving. He fears these thoughts are actually directionless, so he caps the furthest ones in arrowheads. When he thinks of his illness, his career is simply that unthinkable; and when he thinks of his career, his illness is also that unthinkable.

Now that he is sitting in the office where he’ll be interviewed, Greg has the sinking sensation that his arrows have abandoned him. He sits calmly at the doorway to this softly lit oval: the disease that has never manifested itself. The disease that includes him while the arrows cut him off.

The office is lit only by a long desk lamp that sheds light across surfaces, dropping two hard crescents onto the floor. Greg slides his foot out from under his chair and pushes the toe of his running shoe cozily into the sharp edge of one of the crescents.

Grant enters the office. He looks at everything, the chair, a framed photograph of man at a sink, the fax machine, the ceiling, everything except Greg.

“Hello there. Grant Mazzy.”

A hand goes out, eyes drop to a hand brushing an imagined crumb from his thigh.

“You’re Greg?”

Greg suddenly wishes he was home, sleeping in. “Uh, yes, I’m here for the volunteer.”

“Well, no, you’re here for me. Hah! You are the volunteer, right?”

Greg feels the crescent of light cut open the top of his foot.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Right?”

“Yeah.”

“OK then.”

Grant lifts and drops the tip of a pen in front of his face, following it with his eyebrows, not his eyes, which he widens to introduce Greg to new perspectives.

“I gotta tell ya, Greg. You’re gonna look back one day on this meeting and I guarantee that you’ll say to yourself one of two things: I should have got the fuck out of there as soon as I saw that guy; or, you might say, that was the day that I started livin’ for myself.”

Grant coughs up in the air, like an animal, a seal tossing a ring, a lion throwing its mane.

“OK then.”

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Grant coughs up in the air, like an animal, a seal tossing a ring, a lion throwing its mane.

“OK. If you work out here it’s gonna be because you let two things happen. You’ll let me own you; and you’re gonna fall head over fuckin’ heels in love with me.”

Grant jabs a finger off his chin at Greg. The other hand gives a disgusted shake in the darkness above the lamp.
I'm not a pussy. The world is full of pussies. I dismiss them.

“I’m gonna tell you something now. Later, if you do a few things for me, I’ll show you what I’m talking about, OK?”

Greg feels a little roll of exhilaration. Grant detects it.

“OK. This is it. You know the world you live in? You know the one. Little things going on, urgent things, terrible true tales of human struggle, reasons to go on, reasons not to go on, blah, blah. The world you live in. Well, it’s only one of, say, about fifteen or so. And each one has a serious claim on you, a vested interest in your stupidity. In fact, your world is maintained in a very deliberate way by the fourteen that you’ll never encounter.”

Greg notices that his Higher Power is standing in the corner of the room. He looks frightened.

“You watch the news, right? OK, picture this now. There’s me on the screen saying, oh, I don’t know, ‘a home invasion last night’ — blah, blah. But I’m not saying something, too. I haven’t said: ‘A prostitute was found in a dumpster with her arms severed.’ And I haven’t pointed out that this woman is the twenty-third this year! I’m not going to say that the murders are committed by a serial killer. Why am I not saying this? Can you guess? Because they weren’t. They were killed by an organization. Organized. And if it comes out, a connection is made, maybe somebody says three murders or seven in a row or whatever, then, through me, a very sophisticated solution comes along and dissolves the cell walls of this story. You may read it somewhere, but it won’t live. And it gives rise to a home invasion story — which is just a tiny version of how the other story died. Hmmm. I’m gonna take you to where things are infinitely amusing.”

Greg’s Higher Power looks over, impressed. Grant spreads his hands flat across the desk under the lamp.

“Now we’re going to go downstairs, into the basement. I want you to stand guard for me for a while. We’re going to do something criminal, uh? A little bit. Enough to make the tiny world gag. Ready?”

Greg looks over to his Higher Power, who shrugs and places his hand over his heart.

Greg sits in a chair in the basement leaning back against the wall. His Higher Power is distressed, pacing in front of the door that Grant has disappeared through. The Higher Power puts his ear to the door.

“What do you think he’s doing in there?”

Greg shrugs.

“What a show he puts on. Very dramatic individual. What do you think he was talking about?”

Greg looks up at the tall figure.

“I don’t know, why don’t you open the door and ask him?”

The Higher Power puts his hands under his chin and mouths “No.” Greg shrugs again, this time a little contemptuously. The Higher Power lays a hand on the door behind him and drums lightly with his fingers.

“OK, OK. Let’s find out what we’re getting ourselves into.”

He clicks open the door and as it falls ajar he steps clear. Greg can see Grant’s legs. He’s leaning against a file cabinet. The blond head of a teenage boy is working back and forth between the dangling ends of his undone belt. The long legs of a woman step in front, blocking the view. Her hands gather the back of her skirt, raising it across the bare cheeks of her ass. The Higher Power reaches in and pulls the door closed.

“Oh Christ, that’s all you need.”

Greg is obviously affected by this. His face is flushed, and his breath quickens. The Higher Power, knowing full well what does and doesn’t lie within the bounds of his control, gestures defeatedly to Greg’s hands — which are now descending purposefully into the top of his jeans. Greg leans, bent over in concentration, a gangster clutching his fatal wound. And when he expires, he looks up, his face soaked with sweat. Unable to make eye contact with his Higher Power, he asks, “Nobody came by, did they?”

The Higher Power, looking a little older now, smiles wearily and again mouths a silent “No” while absentmindedly waving a hand up and down the hall.

“I gotta say though Greg, there are people who’d disapprove of this. People you respect.”

The door pops open behind the Higher Power and Grant emerges, his cheeks pink and his eyes glazed. No sign of the other two. He looks up and down the hall, causing the Higher Power to look away quickly, embarrassed, even though he’s invisible. Grant walks towards Greg and leans over, placing his mouth beside his ear.

“There are two other volunteers, like you, that are working down here this morning. They just sucked my dick.
Thought you should know. Thanks for making it possible. Now go in there and see if they need any help with the filing.”
13

No More, Not Me

The church is a three-cornered hat made of newspaper. The hat is lowered by hand into a pool of oily water on the street. The water is refreshed from below by a catch basin. A strongman in red-striped tights with fists against his hips shakes his face, just beneath the surface, just beneath the paper boat. Cold water rattles between his closed eyes and the newsprint hull.

This is the strange little vessel that God made especially for people who have overcome addiction with the help of baby Jesus. They are sitting in the basement of the hat, crowded around card tables and spooky candles. They are trying to isolate a kind of breathing that starts in the left lung and moves up the abdomen like a light hand, teasing in pinches and rolling nipples between knuckles. A flame enters the room and steps around the seated people. Without making eye contact the flame mounts the wick, splashing hot wax on thighs drawn around the candle. Finally, the flame crosses its legs, lights a cigarette, and blows illuminating smoke in a man’s face. The man looks up at the candle and speaks with lips that are made gold by the light.

“My name is Donny, and God knows I’m still an addict.”

A woman to his left frowns for him, and a little bald man to his right looks down thoughtfully at the tight T-shirt he’s wearing. It has risen above where his swollen belly hangs out its starkly public flesh. He pulls at the shirt with his thumb but fails to hide his belly. He folds his hands in front of it and looks up bravely across the table. A thousand hairs weave and wiggle on his bared stomach. He has to concentrate to listen. The room of people becomes silent to dignify his struggle. The man is visibly grateful. He focuses thoughtlessly on Donny. Donny begins explaining something that is constructed like a list. He has bulleted his lists with a light karate-chopping hand on the table edge.

“And if I do these things to the best of my ability, maybe I can live a life free of the fear that I’ve lived with ever since I was a kid. Fear. I’ve always been afraid that I was a geek. And I was willing to trade in anything not to be myself. To become a wiseguy, someone who intimidated you. But now I’m trying to find out who that geek is. Who he was trying to become. I hear the word geek and I realize it’s a word that I use, that I still use, to intimidate myself. Not you. You don’t give a shit. I know that now. I have only ever scared myself. I don’t have to do that today. Keep an open mind.”

A woman is sitting across from Donny. She has taken the lovely breasts that God gave her for feeding babies and frolicking alone in the woods, and surgically redefined them as “huge tits.” She has been staring at the folded hands of the bald man all through Donny’s sharing. She thinks that this little bald man’s bravery is beautiful, and she has been fantasizing about oiling up that taught tummy and riding it like a pony. Donny has lowered his golden face in his own dramatic pause, but he can’t help but look up to see if it’s really the moment he thinks it is. He sees the glazed eyes of the woman across from him and, of course, her sweatered breasts plunge him into a powerful default response. Donny feels his penis jumping in little coughs, and he smiles at the woman, who isn’t looking at him. He thinks before speaking — I’ll never be the geek I wanna be.

“My biggest problem is about eight inches long. That’s the distance between my head and my heart. I can think just fine, thank you very much. That’s what I do best. Taking the world apart and putting it back together exactly the way it should be. I do this so fuckin’ well that when I’m finished I’m in a fuckin’ room full of nutcases who wanna teach me how to pray for God to fix me. But, you know, he does. Really. He does fix me. These are better days, only that lump of shit that lies eight inches south drives me crazy.”

The little bald man has sat forward, resting his face in his hands. His elbows are on the table beside Donny’s hand. It still chops away even though lists no longer govern what he’s saying.

“You know, when I ask people, y’know, what the fuck should I be like now that I’m no longer like myself, you know what they say? They say, ‘Hey Donny, just be yourself!’”

Donny leans forward, drawing his audience over a nastiness he knows they’ll all enjoy.

“Well, well, well. That’s just never gonna be a good fuckin’ idea, is it?”

The bald man smiles against fingertips that hide his mouth.

“I am a person who wants you to die along with him. That’s who I am.”
The woman across from him feels, along with everyone else in the room, all of the possibilities, the little shiver of Donny. She bisects the upholstery of her cleavage with the table edge. Donny gently drops his hand, transforming it from a karate chop into a coin that rolls across the table and lodges securely in the soft slot of her body. The little bald man sits back and his belly flies like a huge fruit bat out from over his belt. He has grown excited and he speaks.

“Thank you Donny. My name is Mike, and I’m an addict.”

Attention is suddenly dispersed around the room and in this chaos everyone feels a refreshed opportunity to have another shot at being a little more dignified.

“Well, you know, no fuckin’ big deal, this. I was in a tight fuckin’ spot. That was my problem. That’s what brought me here. Not the ‘God this, God that.’ I didn’t wanna become a good person. Fuck no. I just wanted to go from ‘A’ to ‘B.’ ‘A’ happened to be a fuckin’ nightmare where I’m holding the barrel of a gun in some guy’s mouth; but, you know, whatever. Keep an open mind. And ‘B,’ I didn’t even have a fuckin’ ‘B.’ So I come here ‘cause all you fuckin’ people are talkin’ about how people like me get out of a jam. So I’m hangin’ around, and the first few months I’m not shootin’ dope. A good thing. But I’m still bringing a piece to meetings. And I’m keepin’ my distance, with my hand on the piece, thinking, if one of you fuckin’ fags tries to hug me I’ll blow your fuckin’ nuts off, right? But soon I leave the gun at home. I don’t even know why. I guess it just doesn’t seem to matter anymore. I can’t really see myself using it, so I leave it at home.”

Greg is bored. He’s heard Mike talk about bringing a gun to meetings a thousand times. He knows it’s important that Mike is being honest about this, but, Greg thinks, how come he’s honest about the same thing all the time?

“So I start listening to what you were talking about, and I thought how fuckin’ weird it is that the gun I was packin’ was packin’ up my fuckin’ ears. Y’know what I’m sayin’?”

Several people laugh. Greg looks around irritated, they always laugh at the same shit.

“I get rid of the piece. I start thinking: alright, alright, for fuck’s sake, I suppose I gotta get a fuckin’ job now and . . . and … I do! And I say alright, I guess I gotta call up the old lady and tell her that, no, I’m not gonna blow her fuckin’ brains out. She’s safe, and she don’t even have to believe me,like you said, it’s just true. She’ll figure it out. Dee-dee this and dee-dee that, and pretty soon I notice, I don’t understand it, but I see that I go towards ‘B’ by being this nice fuckin’ guy. And I say Holy Fuck! How did I become this person worthy of my son’s respect? This stand-up guy. Jesus Christ! And you tell me to be grateful and I say: fuckin’ right, I’m grateful, I’m grateful all to fuckin’ hell. And you say be grateful to God. Be grateful to God?”

Greg notices his Higher Power sitting in a swivel chair just outside the circle. The Higher Power nods toward Mike for Greg’s benefit, then he flips his hands, giving up, making a psychological face that Greg finds insulting. Greg watches Mike’s mouth open and close around the word fuck and he remembers his boss earlier that day: his face flushed, not with embarrassment, but with the bracing clarity that comes from blowing your load down a volunteer’s throat. Greg fantasizes about being on both ends of the arrangement. He finds that they are touching the same ice cube, equally cold and satisfying. The two men are exchanged by the act, no longer thinking about each other, or sucking each other, but laughing, now, because they are not each other. Greg thanks Mike in mumbled unison with every one else.

Donny, who has been the chairperson, takes the pause after Mike as an opportunity to close the meeting. Mike accepts this, and stretches in his chair before standing and patting himself down. His belly, which continues to win every battle it wages, governs him physically as he stands. Others follow, pushing empty chairs towards the centre of an enclosure that they begin to make with arms tossed around each other’s back. The woman across from Donny pulls her hands down and hops away from the circle.

“Oh. Oh, one last thing — um — oh, yeah. April — addict. The women’s retreat up at the Elora Gorge has been cancelled due to the restrictions that were just announced. Re: the AMPS problem up north. So if you have paid already, contact your Group Service Representative for a refund. That’s me at this group. If you don’t know who your GSR is ask any member. Thanks.”

Greg feels a whimper run across his chest. His feelings about the disease he has have been making ever-tightening circles around him. Not yet inside, but preventing anything from leaving. Greg lowers his head for the serenity prayer, which he pronounces sub-sonically as: “Gaw gra ma tha savannah tee ta set ah ha ah kenna shay, ah tha crash ta shay ah they aka ah tha wistah ta oh the dimffimff.”

The people who have left the meeting are gathering at the rear door of the church, smoking cigarettes and arranging groups that will leave separately and arrive together at a cafe on Queen Street. Greg is standing alone, feeling self-conscious of the fact that his Higher Power is the only one who’ll stand with him. And even then, this
visible being, dressed in black, appears to want to mingle.

On the other side of a tall hotel lobby ashtray that tilts at the edge of the asphalt, Mike is lighting April’s cigarette. April reaches across to hug him, keeping her hips back to accommodate Mike’s leading stomach. He in turn bows his back out between his shoulders to create a cave in his chest where April can store her giant breasts for the duration of the hug. They part smiling, embarrassed and thrilled by the comfort of their touching.

“How long have you been the GSR?”

“About eight months. What’s your home group?”

“Oh, I don’t have one right now, but I’m thinking of joining this one.”

“Great. Let’s go put your name in the ledger.”

“OK.”

April leads Mike back into the building and down the stairs. When they return, everyone will have left, and not wanting to go straight home on a Friday night they’ll go off together to a cafe three blocks west of where the rest of the group has already convened.

April, who has created a safer world for herself, has a test that a man must pass before she’ll spend any time with him. This test is based entirely on the spiritual principles of the program she’s adopted. Honesty. Open-mindedness. Willingness. Tolerance. Acceptance. He must also be able to care for himself completely. She is watching Mike for this now.

Mike carries himself like a gallant caricature of kindness. He makes amends to women whenever God will let him, swooping open doors and laying out well-defined compliments. He listens carefully and smiles apologetically at his own compulsion to solve their problems. He might be the kind of Mr. Right that April has been looking for.

When April and Mike move in together she will teach him the real thrill of lifelong romance, its enduring pyjama party of dirty thoughts. The delicate gift, the body as an object. But first he must prove that he can be, and not be, her sister.

Greg is standing alone near the top of an alley that runs behind a highrise apartment. Alone. Alone except for a Higher Power who stands under a streetlight, impatient now for his young charge to surrender his increasingly bizarre will. The Higher Power knows that this is a dangerous time for Greg. He has a strange new disease and nobody knows for sure how or when it will manifest itself. The Higher Power leans into the dark and, covering his mouth, shout-whispers: “Greg! Greg! Come on, let’s go have a coffee! Greg!”

But Greg disappears into the dark of the alley. He’s heard something and he’s going to investigate. The noise, coming from behind a dumpster at the far end of the garbage-strewn alley, is human in origin. A crying growl, a scraping sound. Greg stops halfway. Behind him three cars pass noisily by the entranceway and their warm triple swoosh pulls Greg cautiously back a couple of steps. He is frightened by the slurps and rustles he hears coming out from under the dumpster.

“Greg! Greg! Come on! Get out of there! Greg!”

The Higher Power feels a little slighted in being ignored. I shouldn’t have to try so hard. He lowers his head and sighs before straightening his back and arms. He steps into the alley and swaggers for courage as he walks to its dark end.

Greg is standing pinned against the wall, facing the back of the dumpster. The Higher Power is prepared to be forceful. To launch him toward the street by his collar. He reaches out, holding two fingers over Greg’s shoulder, and he looks over his back. He blinks once at what he sees, freezes for a second and then bolts up the alley and turns the corner at full tilt.

“A face is a marvellous thing for those who possess it. It is really the only thing that distinguishes us. Not quite enough to recommend us, just a trickster feature of our anatomy that makes everyone appear famous. But still, the face is beautiful. A sensitive sign of obscure integration. And every once in a while that integration is challenged.

Like now, behind the dumpster. A man is lying back against the garbage bags piled there. His face is mask-like sad, with worried eyes and eyebrows angled in an anxious incline. His mouth is pursed in a whistle, sucking saliva noisily as if through a straw. In fact, he has been sucking through straws. He has made straws out of the left cheek and upper lip of a woman who is lying across him, her head cradled in the crook of his arm, protected gently from falling loose on its broken neck. The flesh of her face is raised in turrets, sucked into bloody spouts that are white and new at their tips. Like infant mouths, blind and despairing, they open and close on her frail, dying exhalations. When the man looks up, registering Greg with tiny flecks of light across his black eyes, he gathers the straws in his
hand and folds them over, sealing the woman’s mouth. She bucks once, kicking an old coat at her feet, and dies.
Julie pulls the hair off her brother’s face. Jimmy squirms a little trying to get comfortable against her thigh. Julie reaches around his front and puts her hand on the glass he holds while he moves around on the floor between her splayed knees. She squeezes her eyes while he puts a little too much weight on an elbow that is pushing just below her hip. Once settled, Julie removes her hand from the glass and Jimmy slurps hard once, clearing the purple ice of colour. They have been sitting on this floor in a tiny clubhouse in the backyard, built by their father, for three days. Their unusually warm spring break had been restricted to the activities of penitentiary inmates seventy-two hours ago when a gang had invaded the Wheelers’ cottage. And on this day their parents had joined Jimmy in his silence, making Julie feel isolated by her willingness to talk. She exercised this willingness by telling Jimmy stories that lasted six or seven hours.

While she speaks Jimmy listens; but he also watches. He watches for germs squishing at the corners of her mouth, or viral clouds near her cheeks. He doesn’t exactly know what he’s looking for, except he thinks with certainty that at some level these tiny invaders must wear pointy leather shoes. White pumps. They’ll have dozens of fat, scrambly legs encased in thick white nylons. He keeps his fingers caged around the straw that he seals tightly with his lips.

Julie is thinking about where she left off. The story is about the Wheelers in the afterlife. Over the course of many hours they have been the rulers of the world. They are the first married superheroes, driving through space in a flying monster truck. They have been reincarnated as fish, teachers, metal detectors and horseflies.

Most recently Julie has, out of boredom, brought them back to Earth as giants who enact a terrible revenge on the living.

“Mrs. Wheeler’s huge head is as big as a truck and her arms are like trees. She stamps on the ground, squashing people. She holds them under her giant shoes, leaning against their heads until they pop like those plastic bubbles of air used in packing crates. She finds this addictive and heads toward the city centre, growing agitated because the population is finite. She finds a main intersection and, grabbing handfuls of waiting commuters, begins to snap open their tiny craniums with her thumb. She moans small satisfactions to herself. Mr. Wheeler, whose hands are as big as horses, is trying to dig the biggest hole in the world. Each scoop of dirt that he drags out of the earth could fill ten dump trucks, and when he tosses them over his shoulder they pass in the sky over people’s heads like giant black clouds. After a full day of digging, Mr. Wheeler is standing in a hole that reaches up to his chest. Around him are tall, tall mountains. Since his day is about a thousand of our years long, people have moved from the dangerous cities away from the maniac head squasher and have begun to live in caves in the side of the mountain. As night approaches, Mrs. Wheeler returns from the city, wiping her jammy fingers on the front of her dress. She crouches down against the mountain to help her husband out of his hole. In the process they cause a landslide that kills all the people. They decide that it’s time to get some dinner and they wander off. They find a country near the equator that is composed entirely of ruffage and they start grabbing giant handfuls and stuffing their mouths. The salad contains tiny stalks that get caught between their teeth, and they discover that if they clench them hundreds of monkeys, frantic to escape, push the trapped food free. They smile at each other, their lips streaming a dark green juice that carries the bodies of squiggling monkeys off their chins.”

Julie looks up. A car is approaching the cottage. She stretches her neck so that she can see above the window sill to where the road appears between the trees. The car is going very fast and it sprays stones as it brakes dramatically at the foot of her parents’ driveway. Julie slips out from under Jim. He drops his elbows against the wood floor. Unable to speak, he rolls his glass angrily across to the wall.

“Shhh. There’s somebody coming to see Mom and Dad. Come on.”

Julie grabs her brother’s hand and they sneak out of the clubhouse. Jim resists her. He’s frightened of his parents, more than usual.

He thinks that they’re sick, and he’s right.

The children crouch behind a large green wheel of hose that hangs on the side of the cottage. They hear a door open and a man emerges. Very serious. Mud on his clothes. Is that mud? Julie pushes her brother down and she covers his back with crossed forearms. Listen. She hears an animal, a bird maybe. Something crying across the lake. No. Not across the lake. Nearer. Julie turns her head, her face an inch from the side of the cottage. From in there?
The sound becomes shrill. Louder. *It is in there.* Julie drags her brother into the bushes across the path. The front door opens and Julie can hear a man yelling. Pursued. She keeps her eyes trained on a small patch of the front yard that she can see through the leaves. The man running. Mom. Dad. *After him.* She leaps from the bushes to the edge of the cottage. Mom and Dad are chasing him into the lake. The man dives in from the shore and Mom and Dad fall on each other, howling. Slapping each other. Biting each other.

Mom has a piece of Dad’s cheek between her teeth, and when he turns from the lake she doesn’t let go. Suddenly they stop. *They see me.* Dad punches Mom under the chin, knocking her teeth from his face. She trips her tongue under the piece of flesh and snaps her mouth forward, catching and swallowing in one movement. With his eyes steadily on Julie her father pushes his wife to the ground and steps toward her. His cheek has a hole where her mom bit him. His eyes are huge and black. Mom springs from the ground, knocking his limp arm out of her way as she breaks into screaming flight. Julie grabs Jim by the arm and they run down a path that goes behind the clubhouse.

Where is that tree? *Where?* Here. She pushes Jim up first on a ladder of tilting sticks nailed to the trunk, and she follows him, trying to force the rungs out with her heel as she climbs.

Something crashes against the side of the clubhouse. A grunt. Growl. It pushes back and something else falls through a bush. Julie covers her brother’s mouth. Her mother steps out of the bushes near the base of the tree. She doesn’t look up. Her husband follows, in a stupor, walking very poorly. He approaches his wife, tries to lean against her, and falls. He lies on his back almost directly under where Julie and Jim are holding each other on the branch of a tree. One of his eyes has been pricked by a twig and the other blinks. His lips slap against the violent, soundless air that he’s forcing through them. He reaches up to point at Julie, but his hand fails, and he grabs his wife’s wrist, yanking her down on top of him. She hunches her shoulders down to his face, and with a single snap breaks both of their necks.

Julie can feel her brother shaking. In fact, she can see it in the leaves around them. *Weapon. I need a weapon.* She reaches to a small leafless branch and pulls it back. The branch splinters but doesn’t break. Mom rises from her husband. Listening. She turns to find the noise, and her head flops on its broken neck. Julie yanks once, hard, but the branch holds. Mom twirls to face the tree. She lifts her head off her chest and holds it, controlling it in her hands like a remote device. She spots her children. Julie freezes in the monster’s glare.

The mother tries to make a word with the torn skin of her mouth and falls to her knees. She lowers her head in her hands and little sobs pump in the broken pipes of her neck. Julie looks down at the matted leaves clinging to the back of her mother’s bathrobe. She feels a sudden compulsion to reach out.

“Mom? Mom? What’s going on, Mom?”

The sound of her voice, the identification of this savage creature as mother, opens a flood of pain. Julie suddenly feels a panic of responsibility. She leans her brother against the branch and hovers her foot down to a rung. She scrambles to where she can begin lowering herself. One leg. Another. A hiss. A hand snatches her ankle.

“Mom?”

She feels something hot and wet slide across the soul of her foot.

“Mom!”


“Jimmy!”

A form falls past her. Jimmy drops from the branch onto his mother’s head. Julie springs off the ladder to the ground and lands in a confusion of bodies. Jimmy is sitting on his mother’s chest and, with his eyes closed, he slaps wildly at her face. The woman drags her dark angel wings through the leaves, frantically touching the ground beneath her.

Julie drives in the stake. It rides a groove of tongue and drips to a point through the base of Mom’s skull. Like a canoe gliding onto sand it rests in the fresh opening behind her, followed by a wake of lake blood. The woman shudders softly under her children and closes her perspiring body with an invisible sheen of pearls. Dead.

The woods around Lake Scugog are not a jungle. Dragons do not stalk deer up and down black hillsides. Siberian tigers do not sulk over the torn body of a villager. There are no monsoons, no undiscovered species of spider, no diamond mines. There is a snake, however, hanging, quite contrary to its known behavior, high in the top of a tree. This snake, a common garter snake about twenty-six inches long, has coiled the length of its body around the thin, bending tip of a Birch. The snake holds its strong neck and powerful jaws out away from the tree. Its tongue
oscillates in the sun like a skipping rope. At a dizzy distance of fifty-five feet below is the body of a woman nailed to the ground through her mouth. Beside her is her husband: still alive, though insensible. His only movement is in his hands. They repeat a broken tap at the ground beneath him. A ceaseless investigation that will go on for days. The snake, whose eyesight is poor, cannot see these minute twitches; its tongue, however, touches a picture so complex that something closer to the future than the present shimmers on its fork. Two children run into the woods along separate tapered paths and, when the tongue slips back to refresh itself against the cool bones of the snake’s mouth, they disappear.
Greg can see Grant at his desk. Steve and his girlfriend are standing on either side of him. To Greg they look like a family. Grant flips the tip of a pen at the girl. She looks across to Steve, who shrugs. She looks back and nods seriously. Grant writes in a pad, tears off the sheet, and hands it to Steve without taking his eyes off the girl. Steve folds the paper and tucks it in his shirt pocket. He reaches across and takes his girlfriend’s hand. She exhales visibly and follows Steve around Grant’s desk. They walk directly toward Greg. Greg jumps. I’ve been watching you. Uh oh. Steve doesn’t look up as he passes. His girlfriend looks directly at Greg. He can see fear in her clapped-open eyes. She passes him and he thinks: Those eyes have seen something. Something horrible? No. No, those eyes are hiding something. Greg turns, and she has hesitated at the office door. Hiding something she wants to show me. What? Why me? Greg feels his skin lift in scales around his neck. She hasn’t told anybody yet. She’s sick. Like me. Like the guy in the alley.

“Greg?”

Greg jumps a second time. Grant is touching his elbow, drawing him through the brightly lit office to his desk.

“You alright there, buddy?”

Greg is momentarily confused by the word buddy. He senses the fraudulence first, then something a little deeper, something true.

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m OK.”

Grant sits Greg down and leans against the edge of an adjacent desk.

“OK. OK. Good. I’ve got a lot of things for us to cover over the next couple of days. But I gotta ask you something first.”

Greg touches his forehead. I’m sweating. He drops his hand without wiping it off. He nods quickly to Grant, feeling a tiny bead race along his jaw.

“OK. I wanna know, Greg, if anything that’s happened here since you started is, uh, freaking you out.”

Grant coughs into a fist and looks away before answering.

“Gay? Uh, you mean because of yesterday?”

Greg feels a curl bounce off his cheek as he nods. He leaves it there to appear innocent, adorable.

“Good. Good. OK. Before we go on do you have anything you want to ask me?”

Greg feels a light ice cover his perspiring face as an air-conditioned draft passes over him. Question. He suddenly remembers that he does have a question.

“Yeah. Are you gay?”

Grant looks at a tall blonde woman striding across to the desk of a familiar sportscaster who is busy clipping a microphone to his lapel.

“Yeah. Are you gay?”

Grant glides down into his chair and huddles under a desk lamp.

“In fact, I think fuckin’ a fella is sometimes about the most heterosexual thing a young man can do.”

Grant smiles and raises his eyebrows, surprised and impressed by what he’s just said.

“Right?”

Greg shrugs agreeably.

“Eh? Really, I think so.”

“I guess.”

“Right?”

“Right.”
“Oh yes, I think so.”

Grant waves his hand, closing the discussion. He flicks on a tiny television beside his pencil holder. He twists a noisy dial, stopping occasionally, until turning the set off. He raps the top of the television.

“This is the bullshit we’re facing, Greg. The whole goddamn province turning into fuckin’ cannibals. Oh boy.”

Greg feels a now familiar twitch of shame scurry into his heart. It dims the light around Grant’s face.

“We are living in strange times, I guess. A lot of people are going to die before this is over. Steve thinks it’s modern art. Ha. I think it’s evolution. Anyway, we’ll kill them. We always do.”

Greg suddenly wonders if he has less than a month to live. Maybe even a week. A minute.

“I wanna go for a drive, Greg. Out to the country. Check out some of this stuff firsthand.”

“Now?”

Grant reaches over and slaps Greg’s face playfully.

“Yeah, right now, sport.”

The virus that thrives in the brackish pools fed by its own leaking is becoming hot. Until now they have been rubbing each other’s tummy in the words that Greg uses, happy to wait and play in the limited give and take he so rarely opens up onto other people. As Greg lowers himself into the passenger seat, the viruses gather in all the things he might say next, braiding the wheels and filling their cheeks with venom. The car pulls out of the parking lot, and a lone figure, dressed entirely in black, wanders among the empty vehicles. He bends to examine the interior of a Saab. Throwing his hands up into the air when Grant screeches his wheels at the exit, the figure slams a fist into his palm.
The woods around Lake Scugog are a dense, spinach green. The people who drive past its pseudo island on Number Seven look leisurely at its peculiar shoreline. Scugog is different, unlike most lakes in the region. Angrier, maybe. Self-illuminating.

The green that pulls the highway down is interior to black, a green that has yet to distinguish itself as a colour. A nightmare of green. People who drive through its suction are often bored, tired of scenery; and they say, in order to squeeze excitement out of the last leg of their trip, “I bet if you walked in there you’d never come back.” The driver never looks, but nods in agreement, swallowing a backwash of rejected coffee, disappointed that a good argument couldn’t be made. And, finally thrilled by the bristle of invisible hostility, he or she surprises the passenger by speeding up across the bridge. The passenger’s comments aren’t entirely banal. Lake Scugog is different.

Lakes in Ontario were formed by glaciers. They were fed like babies by englacial streams, and when they grew old, shuffling permeable and impermeable stones in their stomachs, soon unable to crush the animals that were invading them, they became what they are today: blue.

Scugog, however, is a mirror. Sometime on or about the date you were born, Scugog was a lowland field, teeming with scabby foxes and country mice. Then one day an artesian well was uncorked, or maybe a ditch was diverted, and the land was drowned. The foxes lay on their backs kicking little paws into the water that covered them. Their scabs flattened into scales and their sun-bit ears shot underwater sparks as they became gills. Soon the fox-fish began to hunt eel and rat-fish.

The surface of the water, like a playing card turned face down, became indistinguishable from other lakes: it too became blue. Beneath this surface, a surface nearly vertical if the passenger were to look closely, there are monsters. Not werewolves or vampires — not the kinds of monsters designed to frighten people — but things monstrous because they live too long. Sunk up to their eyeballs in fish parts, they twist in the dark, lining the shores with a gasket of white vomit.

And around this lake, now, a growing herd of zombies is passing through the underbrush. Cutting across their path in the permanent night are two children who have found each other.

Julie leads her brother by the hand. He stumbles behind her, mute and traumatized. His feet leave the ground as he is pulled along by his stronger sister. They fall farther and farther into forest, stretching out under its slip covers, to where night is held close to the ground, underneath trees, never leaving. Soon boulders begin to glow, caught by an afternoon moon hanging beneath the lowest bower of a distant tree that peeks through a slice ahead of them. Stars hang in funnels from branches, no longer up there, but down here. Julie brushes her shoulder against these wedding veils as she passes, diving into the bottom. She slips her arms into the sleeves of rivers and draws her breath from precisely where Ontario loses its consciousness. When they stop, out of breath, the stars and moons have settled on their skin like pyjamas. They sit apart, hanging their heads between their knees, panting and sniffing at the wetness on their faces.

“I’m hungry.”

Jimmy looks up at his sister. Her eyes are racked with grief. She wipes them with the backs of both her hands. There are a thousand ways to start crying and her face is wiggling to suppress them all.

“I’m sorry, Jimmy, but I am. I’m hungry. Aren’t you?”

Jimmy finds the stone with his heel and depresses it into the soft ground. Julie reaches over and lays her hand on the back of his neck. Jimmy shuffles toward her, curling against her chest and in her protecting arms.

“It’s OK, little man. It’s OK. We’re gonna have to be alone now, I think. We will have to look after each other. I think it’s what we’re supposed to do.”

Julie drops her hand and slips off her brother’s shoe. She cradles the bare foot in her hand, lightly pumping it with her fingers.
“Nothing new, right?”

Jimmy nods slowly, rubbing the top of his head under his sister’s chin.

Except they aren’t exactly alone. Thirty feet south of where they sit a zombie that has been lost in the woods for almost a week is lying face down on a long bed of ferns. It is still breathing, though barely. When Julie and Jimmy fall asleep in each other’s arms, this creature uses up its last tiny breath and passes, imperceptibly, from living thing to dead thing.

The next morning the children stir under the same night sky that they had fallen asleep under. They begin to silently make their way to Pontypool. Around noon they sit on the black sponge of a fallen tree, and they both begin to cry with hunger.

“What can we eat? What? Leaves? Stones?”

Julie scoops out a spoonful of wood from the log. She turns her finger on her knee, leaving a lump of pulp there. It leaks a cold drool down her leg.

“I don’t know. I’ll eat anything. Anything.”

Jimmy stands up and walks over to where a diffuse shaft of light has penetrated from above, lifting an area at the base of a large birch tree. He crouches at the edge of the lighted patch of tiny shoots and reaches across it. He touches something hidden on the far side. Julie watches his hand disappear. She waits to see what he has, expecting a little snake or a plump slug. Either way she has decided to bite off a piece of whatever he retrieves. He’s only making the decision that she’s putting off. Julie imagines the frantic muscle of a living thing push against the roof of her mouth.

“What is it?”

Jimmy goes down on his knees in order to reach with both arms. He pulls them back, hiding what he has in pregnant, praying hands.

“What is it, Jimmy?”

Jimmy looks back at his sister and smiles. Then he looks down at his hands and lifts his eyebrows.

“What? Jimmy, what have you got?”

His hands open and the light falls between them.

“Raspberries! Are those raspberries?”

Julie leaps to her feet and joins her brother. She picks a raspberry out of his palm and squishes the cold fruit against her teeth. A bright sugar buzzes to life in her mouth. She bites down, cracking the tiny pits. Jimmy reaches across and bends a large bush into the light. The bush is heavily jewelled with clusters of fat red berries. Julie looks at her brother with wide eyes as he pops his handful into his open mouth. Within an hour they have devoured a good portion of the bush, and with digging, adventurous fingers they uncover a patch of tiny onions. They crunch the bulbs, dyeing the cells pink, before lustily swallowing a raspberry-onion stew.

“We can live here, Jimmy.”

Jimmy is lying on his back. His lips are swollen, in reaction to the onion, and slicked bright crimson from crushed berries. Julie looks over, past the shoots of poison ivy that ring her face.

“Maybe not here, exactly. I’m thirsty now. We have to find water.”

Jimmy rolls over onto his stomach. He feels a jolt in the base of his abdomen. He curls his toes and closes his eyes until it passes.

“Jimmy? We need water. Let’s go find some.”

Julie sits up and, patting her brother’s backside, stands. Jimmy finds his shoe and lets his sister brush him off while he ties the laces. She lifts him up with her powerful arm. They step away from the little hole of light on the ground, back down into the stars and moons, along a path lined with black sand. Julie keeps an arm across her face, dividing branches with her elbow. She leads Jimmy; he keeps his face down behind her, in the protection of his sister’s back.

Forty metres ahead of them, moving in the same direction, at exactly the same pace, are three cannibals. They are lost, and their diet, the tongues and teeth of living people, is somewhat more limited than the children’s. They are facing a rather depressing destiny. In their weakened condition the zombies have long given up the conversations that have consisted mainly of hooking fingers into vulnerable flesh. They lope along quietly, recoiling in irritation at
anything that touches them. As night falls, too far above to be noticed, one of them collapses on his face. The other
two, sad women with heavy masks, part ways, heading off in different directions. They do this not so much because
they have lost a third but out of a failure to notice the loss of that person.

Julie spots him first. His back, lying low up ahead. Initially she thinks it’s torn paper. Then as they get closer a
hand flips up in the green dust at the man’s side. Julie squeezes her brother’s forearm, stopping him behind her.
They stand frozen, watching the body. After a few minutes the other hand performs the same flip, sending a twig up
onto his white shirt. Then stillness. Julie steps closer, leaving her brother behind. She studies the back to see if it
rises, if it’s breathing. Perfectly still. She turns and, covering her mouth, whispers, “I think it’s dying. I think it may
be dead.”

She waves her hand backward, indicating to Jimmy that he should walk past in a wide circle. Jimmy is craning his
neck up and around, trying to get a view beyond where his sister stands.

“How! Go!”

Jimmy steps backward and, without losing sight of his sister, moves ahead of her through the forest. Julie steps
closer. The body isn’t breathing. It doesn’t appear to be. Julie stoops to a knee and reaches down blindly to find a
stone. She lobs the pebble into the air and it hits the zombie on the head, rapping his skull like a drum. Julie grabs her
mouth and turns to run. She stops. The man must be dead.

“Wait there, Jimmy! I’m coming! Wait there!”

Julie runs as fast as she can. She leaps directly through a young maple tree growing a metre away from the still
hand of the body. She catches up with Jimmy and holds him, panting heavily, out of breath. Jimmy reaches up and
lays his closed fists against her back.

“OK. It’s OK. Let’s just keep going, OK?”

Jimmy pushes harder against her back, tightening his fists until they really hurt.

Suddenly a sharp roar from behind sends them squealing through the prickly forest.

When they’ve gone, the zombie, who has sat up, dies; his hands have fallen like birds at the sides of his feet.
A hurricane is visible as a spiralling structure of cirrus clouds. Torn from the far corners of the sky and gathered, these clouds ravel like cotton candy around a paper cone. The eye of the hurricane, famously calm, looks down the cone, its view descending and dry, onto a farmer’s field. Four cows and a calf gnaw at the ground in this pasture and near them a light has found its way under sea-fed walls, illuminating the animals from below. The pupil above them, darkened in a child’s pink fist, dilates to absorb this tiny remote light. It locks perfectly, developing an image of the circular patch. Five figures are visible, standing across from each other on the points of a pentagram. They are held here, less by the geometric pattern visible to the eye than by a series of physical arguments that have suspended them at equal distances from each other. A combination of these arguments acts as an attracting hub and they stand, in a quiet rage, facing this hub, unable to move or speak. The strongest zombie, a tall blond man in jean overalls, takes advantage of a momentary imbalance caused by an interfering calf and leaps growling on the upper body of a teenage girl to his left. Their argument began sometime earlier, when she bit down, weeping, against the back of his armpit. Now she is under him, shaking her sharp teeth up into his throat. He throws his head back to howl and releases a glaze of blood onto her face. The other zombies, spinning off their points on the pentagram, collapse toward the battling couple and fall. They strike back angrily, with swinging fists, at the invisible world that sucks at them. The zombies stop in a pile and lie still. The blood escaping from the large man they’ve fallen on wicks up through their clothing, darkening the flannel. The calf flees in quick light hops until it encounters the eye-wall, which rotates at one hundred and eighty-five miles per hour. The young animal is driven under the descending hurricane. It scores a circle in the ground before being tossed off a boulder into a chaotic cross-current trip, up into the corner of the eye. The eye blinks on the irritant long enough to clear the sky, and the calf falls from a height of nine miles through a perfectly clear blue afternoon. It lands, like a drop of wax, splashing at three o’clock in the circle its body had previously tore open.

Grant pulls the car over beside the field near Pontypool. He reaches into the back seat, sliding an open briefcase onto the floor. He fishes a pair of binoculars out from between two sacks full of fresh corn.

“Right over there. Holy Christ! Those are goddamn cannibals! I can’t believe it.”

Grant reaches down and pops open the trunk from the dash.

“Get the equipment out of the trunk, Greg. Let’s shoot some of this stuff.”

Grant opens the car door without removing the binoculars from his eyes. They bump against the door frame as he rises from his seat.

“I don’t know, buddy. This just might freak me out. Look at those bastards. Real-life wackos. Zombies. Killers. I’m a bit freaked out. Hey! Where’s the camera?”

Greg walks around the car, scanning the farmer’s field. He can see four cows in a far corner. And about halfway back from them, near an overgrown pile of collected stones, there’s a dark shape. He can’t quite make it out. Then he sees what is clearly an arm lift up and fall against the side of the mound.

“Woo-hoo! Holy shit! Those suckers are alive! Greg! Greg! Did you see that?”

Greg opens the trunk and lifts out the camera case. His hand hovers over a plastic gas container. He touches the handle, lifting an oily film onto his fingertips. He slides his thumb across the ends of his fingers. He feels sound between the surfaces. Sound? He leaves the trunk open, just in case, and hauls the equipment around the car, placing it in the tall grass that grows along a ditch where Grant is standing, still looking through the binoculars, his mouth hanging open. He looks out briefly to locate Greg and the camera. He speaks in a whisper.

“OK. OK. Let’s keep our voices down. Those suckers are alive out there. I don’t know how safe we are. These are predators. Hmmmm. I’ve never seen . . . Jesus . . . let’s . . . uh . . . let’s get back in the car.”

Grant reaches behind and flips open the car door. He lowers himself, slowly, still looking through the binoculars. He lifts his legs, carefully, one at a time, up off the shoulder of the road.

“Put the . . . uh . . . equipment in the back seat and get in the car, Greg. I don’t wanna do anything stupid.”

Greg follows the order, running his hands uncertainly across the surfaces of things before he moves them. He walks to the back of the car. The trunk is open and he looks at it, feeling a momentary confusion at the fact that he
can’t open it. Open it. When it’s open. It’s open for him to open it. He lays his hand on the trunk. The weight brings it down. Greg looks self-consciously through the rear window and closes the lid. When it clicks he has to pull his hand off with force. He feels the effort as a kind of pain. He has the powerful sensation that he has had to do this, to lift his hand from the closed trunk, in contradiction to some obvious sign. As he walks up the passenger side of the car his face flushes. He feels that he has acted perversely. He pictures, as narrowly as possible, the series of actions that will return him to the passenger seat.

“I don’t get it. These freaks aren’t doing anything. What the hell are they doing?”

Grant reaches down to a panel beside him and flips a switch that locks all the doors with four simultaneous plunks.

“Maybe they’re playing dead. I can see you, you bastards. I know you’re not dead. So, c’mon, let’s see some action. Do something. Maybe it’s a trap.”

Greg looks up across the road and squints his eyes. He’s afraid. He feels the need to comprehend something complex. Anything. He tries to picture a car on the highway. Its four tires. They rotate. The weight of the car bearing down. The weight that doesn’t stop it. Of course, it doesn’t stop. The wind rises up over the windshield. The air pressure above the hood of the car is higher than at its sides. Greg feels a rush of relief. Something is coming back to him. He tries to picture the driver. An easy one. Someone he knew in high school. Dead now. Heart failure. I’m remembering him.

“Maybe we should’ve brought a gun. Damn! Look at these fools. These sacks of shit are harmless. What the hell are they doing? Havin’ a siesta?”

Greg’s relief is short lived. He feels his heart rate speed up with questions: What was that? What’s happening to me? I may not be able to even ask these things in five minutes, what the hell do I do? His heart begins to bang in his throat. This is the disease. I’m finally getting sick. Do I tell Grant?

“Awright, Christ, let’s move on. Maybe we can find some zombies with a little more life, eh?”

The car starts and eases up a hill, slowing and stopping at the top. Grant hands Greg the binoculars.

“Here, buddy, you keep an eye out with these. Let me know if you see anything.”

Greg takes the binoculars and rolls down his window. He raises the binoculars to his face and holds his breath. A light orange fuzz hovers in two connected egg shapes. In the left egg shape a tilting oblong of white floats in the orange. He moves so that both egg shapes share the oblong and he adjusts the focus. A tiny pattern of red diamonds rises sharply and disappears into a field of tall corn. The oblong is a house, back off the road at the edge of a heavy forest. A dog — a German shepherd — is jumping and barking, straining against a tether. Beside it is a fuel drum mounted on a concrete platform. On the small lawn, at the front of the house, are four silhouetted figures. They all have pipes stuck in their mouths. Wisemen? Dwarfs?

The view through the binoculars is cool. The lemon-coloured leaves on the undersides of branches are crisp. The sky is fixed through the trees in an ice-blue lattice. A refrigerator. Greg shivers.

Greg turns the wheel between his eyes and loses the field. It blurs and he lowers the binoculars.

“Hey, you know where we are?”

Greg’s left arm is swollen from the sun and he tries to brush the heat off with a cool palm.

“Well, I’ll tell ya. I’ll tell ya. This is Pontypool comin’ up.”

Grant lowers his forehead toward the windshield.

“There is something in Pontypool that I can show you. I shouldn’t, but I’m gonna anyway.”

“Uh, what is it?”

“What is it? What is it? OK, I’m gonna show you one of the little hiding spots that puts a shape to every fuckin’ thing you know. What do you think of that?”

Greg lifts the binoculars again and his vision sprays across the road. The white sky drives its tines through the hood of the car.

“I gotta remind you of one thing first, and I don’t want you to take it the wrong way.”

Grant pulls the car over beside an overgrown road that disappears down a dark green throat in the woods.

“You are already an accomplice to a major crime. Do you know what I mean?”

Greg hears himself respond from somewhere other than his mouth, somewhere other than his head. His left
shoulder knots.

“OK. OK. I just want to point that out, because that’s your licence to see what I’m gonna show ya. Got it?”

Greg feels the whisks of a broom shaking at his insides. The disease is emptying me out; is that what’s happening?

“OK. I’m gonna rock your world now, little buddy.”

Grant turns the wheel and releases the brake, allowing the car to fall down the weeded ramp. He ducks his head, as if the low branches are in the car. The sunlight dries in dark streaks across the windshield.

“Pontypool. Now, Pontypool changes everything.”

A yellow field opens up to the left and Grant pulls up onto a flattened patch of gold. The field is broken here and there by sand dunes that crest through the grass. A picnic table sits just outside the shade of a birch tree at the field’s southern border. Grant takes the binoculars from Greg’s hands.

“We leave everything in the car. C’mon, let’s go.”

The picnic table is cracked and yellow, with tufts of moss capping its saw-cut ends. Grant sits facing away from the tabletop and he slaps the bench beside him. Greg sits down.

“See that bit of ground right there?”

The corner of a small grey shack is visible beyond the birch tree. Along its side is a large rectangle of sod. The grass is cut and maintained, though the strips of green are all different. Some strips newer. Some slightly yellow.

“Know what’s in there?”

Grant hovers his hand out in the direction of the quilted lawn and rolls his fingers in a trill.

“Dead people.”

Greg presses his thumbs hard against the wood. A button to press. I need a Higher Power. He presses the button again.

“Murdered people, Greg.”

Grant is whispering, not so much to avoid being heard as to keep respectful of this place. Greg feels confusion in the pew of the bench. A church? A funeral?

“You know the headline? House of Horrors. Well, that’s one right there.”

Greg looks at the corner of the shack. A white stone foundation. Weathered boards, cupped by the sun, meeting in rough gaps at the edges. Not good. Not good for people. I’m scared.

“In fact, you’ll probably read about this one sometime in the fall. In the meantime, it’s a bit of a wholesale outlet. People are brought here, not by the guy who lives here, but by people who need to do a little intimidating. It’s used by several organizations who don’t even know each other. Who leave, not knowing where they’ve come to. A lot of big business. You want to make sure something goes your way, you just give the right person a tour of the shack and, man, things start going exactly the way you want them to. Some organized crime, of course. Some government. Not always Canadian, either. Some military. This little shack is very busy.”

Grant plucks a shoot from the wet sleeve that holds it in the ground. He sucks on the juice leaking from its slender trunk.

“Yessir. And when it gets a little too crazy, somebody sends in the cops. And, ta-da, they arrest some demented little individual in a House of Horrors. Everything is accounted for. No leftovers. The simple answers. The world needs a little something extra to keep it eager. Something that nobody would ever believe.”

Grant gets up and walks toward the graves. He steps up on the lawn and turns, with his hands on his hips, to face Greg. Greg closes his eyes. Out of the darkness a pair of snapping teeth rush toward him. He opens his eyes and lays his hands on his pounding chest.

“Your buddy Steve and his girlfriend are in there right now. You can’t hear them. It’s soundproof. But I betcha it’s godawful noisy in there right now.”

A blackbird with tiny crimson shoulders falls from a tree and swoops into the light around Grant. He steps away from the shack. He huddles his back and rises to the tips of his toes. He crosses his lips with a finger and holds out an upraised hand to Greg.

Greg hears himself through a broken staccato of words. I’m thinking this is a lie. Grant stops halfway to the picnic table.
“Hey, you alright? You don’t look so good.”

Intimidation. He wants something from me. Why doesn’t he just ask?
As Fluids Go, This One’s . . .

On the wall are four long filleting knives. Three of them are as shiny and clean as the corner of an eye. The fourth hasn’t been cleaned at all and has a crust of blood along its blade, concluding at the tip in a tiny black ball. Fingers have splashed up to grab these knives over and over again, leaving a heavy encaustic of blood on the wall behind their handles. A spotted bare lightbulb is suspended over the bench below the knives. Strips of newspaper are permanently plastered to the wood surface, dozens of bright corners crossed by black angles. Most of what has been done here has been done quickly and sloppily. Some of what has been done here has been carefully executed, caught before it rolled to the floor and wrapped. To the left of the bench along a back wall sits a long white freezer. Its top edge is browned by a dragging apron and the knuckles of a large man, like faint hinges, have stained the seal.

Jimmy is sitting in a corner behind the door on an overturned bucket. He has been staring directly at the lightbulb, trying to blind himself. The light has long stopped hurting his eyes. The brightness eating at the centre of his vision is no longer white. Long green wires whip and shrivel across its surface. Patterns of black zeros rise to the top and blot out the light in a throbbing back to burn off. Jimmy hears a scrape on the floor beside him. He looks down and his vision is as solid as a jelly bean. He thinks it must be an animal.

What kind? Rat?

The door opens, and he turns his head to face it. A dark green tower leans off the shattering scales of a gold river coming through the door. Towards him. Jimmy looks down, blinking. No light. Darkness.

“Jimmy? Are you OK?”

Julie walks over to the bench and drops a bucket of raspberries on the corner. She swings a hatchet up to rest between the two nails that hold its neck to the wall. Jimmy blinks in a frenzy, trying to find his feet on the floor. The scales that exploded through the room when Julie entered have now fallen to the ground. They lie around him in a carpet of dull orange. Jimmy extends the toe of his running shoe, pushing the scales. A large fly lands in the pile like a fat bomb and vibrates against Jimmy’s foot. Its energy tickles the undersides of his toes. Jimmy presses down, killing the fly.

“It smells in here, Jimmy. Ugh. Fish guts.”

She looks at her brother. Behind him on the wall hangs a wooden board with the prices of fresh fish written in felt pen. Jimmy has an empty space in his saucer-sized pupils. Julie walks over to him and squeezes his little shoulders against her side.

“We can clean this place up. There’s a stove, a freezer. Everything we need, Jimmy. I don’t even care if you never talk again. What’s there to say anyway?”

Jimmy hangs a fistful of shirt off his sister. Colours are returning to the room.

Over the next few days the children are busy, sweeping fish scales from the floor, soaping down the dried blood and creating a pantry of wild foods on shelves over the freezer. They self-consciously copy their parents, and Julie occasionally calls her brother by his father’s name — “Good morning, George.” Even Jimmy’s silence begins to resemble his father’s. His blunt jerks of the head — “No,” “Yes.” They become a way of telling his wife that Yes, I am my father. And by the end of the week they have created a veritable homestead out of the fish-cleaning hut.

One thing, however, is beginning to pose a serious threat to their survival. Their diet is lacking certain food groups, and because of this they are growing weak. By the fifth day Jimmy returns to his bucket. He no longer responds to his sister. A hungry fear has made her frantic. She has begun to hear things and has taken to running outside every five minutes, only to return, asking: “George, did you hear that?”

A few days later, in the afternoon, Julie rose from the floor beside Jimmy and dashed to the door for the sixth time. It opened on a man who had been listening.

Grant Mazzy stood, surprised, looking down at the girl with the burnt, skinny face. He opened his mouth to call out for Greg, when a hatchet whacked his knee, cleaving the cap into free halves. He reached up into the air as the cap halves rolled under skin to meet at the back of his leg. A second whack of the hatchet released a sandwich-sized pair of intestinal loops. He reached down, gloving his hand inside the base of his abdomen. A deep and desperate flex of muscle, still clinging, bent his fingers back. A third whack cleared the hand from his arm, dropping it, like a coin tossed from a balcony, deep into his torso. The hand turned backward off the bottom of his heart and sprang
back up from a mattress of lung, landing, finally, to rest, partially clenched, in a rack of ribs. These ribs lay across the threshold at the front of the hut. The ribs were protecting the hand as best they could as blows reigned down from above, but soon they too collapsed under the silver eye of the hatchet.

Jimmy looks through the fingers that cage his face. Julie’s body is dripping with the blood of the now nearly liquid intruder.

“C’mon, George, gimme a hand here.”

Soon the bottom of the freezer is lined with heavy oblong objects neatly bundled in newspaper. Each bundle is clearly labelled in felt-tip marker: shoulder, calf, upper arm, lower back, tongue. In the days that follow, the children lay out elaborate meals on the picnic table in the evening shade of a birch tree behind their home.

At night they go to sleep on the floor as husband and wife, rocking their tiny hips together in sexual intercourse. During the third week of their residence a tiny sperm cell turns on a fatal dime, throws open the front door of a very modern egg, and strolls down the hall where his wife is busy mixing martinis. They kiss and tug at each other’s clothes until they, too, are fucking like happy children.
Greg is certain he’s going insane. He is sitting at the picnic table waiting for Grant, who went around the back of the shack some time ago, to return. His thinking has become deformed in repetition and crude rhymes. He notices his thoughts tear off in directions he cannot control. So he doesn’t control them, including himself instead in an audience that has crammed the stands overlooking a racetrack. Greg allows others to watch the progress of monsters toward the finish line. He discovers that he can survive in this crowd: anonymous, wordless, and undetected. He flicks a seedling from the table and it spins in the air on helicopter wings that carry it to the edge of the fresh graves beside the shack.

I am never going to become an adult. A film running backwards streaks its tail around the track. I don’t even think there is such a thing. I don’t think there are any adults anyway. I might as well be dead. Greg hears his name being called out from behind. He turns toward the road that leads away.

His Higher Power is standing in the half-light. His clothes, usually so crisp and black, are white with dust. His face is streaked with sweat and his hair is hanging in white tips across his forehead. He raises his hands and gestures for Greg to come to him. Greg pushes up from the table and sees a tear fall from his face and drop into wood. It is quickly absorbed, darkening the dry pores only briefly. I don’t want to die.

“I know.”

The Higher Power is sitting in the middle of the path and Greg is lying with his head in his arms. Dust from the Higher Power’s palm clings to Greg’s cheek and a single tear is held by it.

“You are going to die, Greg. You’re disintegrating. And soon you won’t exist.”

The Higher Power smiles and wipes his wet hand on Greg’s shirt. Greg looks down and pulls the fabric from his chest to look at the smear. He releases the shirt, sighing, and holds his hand over the wrist that rests across his neck.

“And I’m going to stay with you. Right here. We’ll wait here until you die. OK?”

Greg looks down to where the shade ends and the sun blazes down on the picnic table. A white moth leaps up from the grass and curves between the seat and the tabletop, disappearing momentarily before reappearing on the other side, where it drops again, almost heavy, into the lawn.

“OK.”

They sit in silence and watch a girl walking through the forest on the far side of the shack. She drops down occasionally, pulling at something in the ground. The Higher Power points to her, and Greg looks up to him, smiling.

The Higher Power squeezes Greg’s hand and it collapses limply.
The new summer sky is beginning to screw its harder caps of white down onto the forest. Jimmy is sitting at the picnic table looking down, cross-eyed, at the breath he exhales. Julie is tying a knot in a thick rope that lies across her knee. She stands, leaning against a tree, with one leg raised on a wide stump. Julie has devised a way of catching zombies. She lays a noose in the grass at the base of a tree and slings the rope up, across a branch and down along the tops of short shrubs. She stands with her brother as bait in the doorway. She has listened to the zombies at night, wandering lost, falling on branches and splashing through the stream. She has listened carefully to the quick, skipping syllables of their cry. She imitates this in the doorway with one hand around the rope and the other hand tightly around her brother’s wrist. Usually, within an hour, the children can hear the zombie approaching noisily, frantically, its cry now a panicky series of squeaks. If it steps into the circle, Julie and Jimmy run with the rope to the back of the shed, hurling with all their weight. They pull, battling to keep its balance foiled, until the zombie gives up. In that moment the children give a final tug, yanking its leg tight to the trunk of the tree. The cannibal is safely trapped, shaking its shoulders against the ground.

If the zombie doesn’t step into the circle, perhaps surprising the children by bursting around the corner of the shack, Julie drops the rope and slams the door. The children wait inside, taking dangerous peeks outside, until the zombie, skulking and unable to leave, eventually steps into the trap.

Once it’s safely incapacitated, the children leap through the door and disable the zombie with hatchet whacks to its shins and stunning blows to its head. The rope is secured to its ankle and it’s given a length to move with at the base of the tree. Living, a zombie can be kept for weeks like this, until its meat is needed. There are four zombies tied to trees at edges of the surrounding forest. One of them should be harvested this morning. Julie is trying to figure out which it will be.

The zombie nearest her is a short, plump woman of about fifty years. She is wearing a pale-blue cotton dress, speckled with tiny yellow flowers. Her hair is dyed yellow and gathers, like a stiff nest, around a black matte above her temple. Her legs are thick and dirty. She is sitting on the ankle of a flat, dead foot. The foot had throbbed and burnt painfully at the end of her battered leg, so she ground it under her buttocks. Her shinbone has broken through the skin. She holds it firmly in her fist. She holds her leg still. The only pain now comes from a bright band of infection advancing up her thigh, a tingling light that marks the living flesh from the dead. She notices Julie watching her and lowers her head to scowl. The effort makes her throw up in her lap. Julie looks away. Not for dinner.

The next zombie is in better shape. A little more appetizing. A teenage boy. A tiny, fresh body. He had been easy to pull up the tree. There is very little damage and he appears to have recovered. He stands on both legs, alert, with hands slapping at his flat white stomach. When Julie approaches he throws himself onto his back and jerks around the ground in a seizure. Maybe a little too lively. Julie stops just beyond his reach. The teenage zombie stops bouncing. He looks up at her. His face is twisted in the affectation of the deranged, and he makes a pleading flinch with his eyebrows.

“Jimmy, can you give me a hand here for a second?”

Jimmy is crouching beside the picnic table around the corner of the shack. He’s balancing a brown-and-white rib cage with the top of his head, onto the black stump of spine. He is tying the joint frantically with binder twine. He moves his head forward carefully, until the ribs rest against the table edge. He brushes his hand across glossy maggot heads that poke out of the back of the cadaver. A complete human being.

He runs around the corner, drops to a crouch, and slides his hands in the grass to clean them.

“Look out!”

Jimmy has crouched within the circle of the first zombie, the woman Julie had just passed by. The zombie springs like a crab from the sand. She folds her arms around Jimmy’s upper body.

“Jimmy! Jimmy!”

Julie skids into the gravel and picks up the hatchet leaning against the wall. The woman has pinned Jimmy to the
ground under her. Her twisted leg flaps once against her back, spinning her foot away. It smacks loudly against the shack. Julie raises the hatchet over the back of the grunting disc that’s trying to devour her brother. She brings her weapon down, cleaving, halving the spine between the shoulders. The zombie’s limbs stop moving, but, against Jimmy’s clasped hands, its head continues sliding and shaking. He punches upward, knocking the zombie off him.

“Oh God! Oh God! Jimmy! Jimmy! Are you OK?”

Jimmy sits up, spitting between his knees. He waves his hand, Yes.

“That one is no good at all. I’m gonna get rid of it.”

Jimmy touches his sister’s leg, leaving a dash of pink zombie vomit.

“What? What do you want?”

Jimmy stands between his sister and the zombie. He points to the picnic table.

“Oh … really? You want this thing at the table?”

Jimmy smiles, a little embarrassed.

“OK, OK, but let me kill it first.”

Jimmy shakes his head vigorously.

“No? No? You want it alive?”

Jimmy nods. His eyes sparkle. A dream come true.

“OK, you little freak. Let me give you a hand. Be careful. It can probably still bite.”

The children prop the zombie up on the seat across from Jimmy’s skeleton in progress. Jimmy adjusts her broken body so that she is staring directly at the skull. Her face has been frozen in a scream with purple cheeks. Her tiny arrow of a tongue sits squatting in her open mouth, deep in her fat throat, preventing the scream from breaking out. Jimmy notices this and thinks that she might choke. He slaps her hard across the eyes. Her tongue unplugs her lungs. With a blast of breath she sprays the skull across from her with bile. Maggots in the crisp black corners of shorn tendons wriggle and turn away, vomit stinging in their mouths. A look of surprise lights up the zombie’s face when she breathes in. As she breathes out, through buzzing wet lips, she tilts her head to the side. Curious. Jimmy begins tapping the frame of the skeleton, catching the maggots that drop in an orange Tupperware bowl. He slides the half-full bowl under the table and tips it against the woman’s ragged leg.

Julie approaches the teenage zombie again. This time quickly, relying on his confusion to give her an opportunity. She strides directly up to him and whacks the blade of the hatchet through his forehead, burying it in his zombie brain. She releases the hatchet and lets the boy fall. He lies still at her feet, the weapon hanging off his head like a festive hat. Julie pushes down on his cranium with her foot, and with a yank that squawks the bone she removes the hatchet.

By the time the sun sets on their garden the children are safely indoors. They take turns bathing in the large sink, towelling each other’s little body with soft, careful bats. They slip into the light summer dresses that they have pulled carefully over the heads of dead women and scrubbed clean. Jimmy wears a short violet frock with wide straps and a tiny white pocket. Julie wears a long, black cotton dress to bed. She lies on her back while her brother traces the outline of a stranger’s hand on her belly. There is, in fact, a hand inside her, cooked and crumbling. He smiles at her. She is his one and only. She closes her eyes and feels the stranger’s hand turn over in digestive juices, fingering the tight aperture at the base of her stomach.

Through a window near the ceiling, Jimmy can see the starry sky and milky light of nightfall. He lifts his hand off Julie’s belly and slips two fingers through the strap that’s fallen down his arm and draws it up his smooth shoulder. He drops his hands on his knees and sits crouched beside his sister on the bed. He watches and listens. Quiet. A rope groans in the dark. Silence. A moth lands. A grey owl rotates its head toward the moon reflected in the window. The room is so quiet that Jimmy can hear the floor lying still in the dark. A wolf howls, across the river and far up the hill. Jimmy listens. The room swings once, turning wildly in the pitch black, and catches itself high in the bones of the small boy’s ear.
Damn Winter

The only thing as universal as the experience of power is the experience of hunger. The empty stomach, like an orange lantern, casts light off its panels onto the dripping walls of a cave. Illuminated there are directions, instructions and recipes, carved and smudged in the stone, potato and potato habitat. The empty stomach turns its fierce light and obscure chemicals into a camera, developing maps in its juices, even going as far as to slip a photograph into the artist’s hand. At the cave entrance the painter stands, rubbing his or her tummy with the map, saying, “Hey, I know where that is.”

When Greg arches his back, his Higher Power shimmies the man’s body up tighter between the fork of his legs and squeezes tightly to secure the gain. The HP stifles the liquid in Greg’s throat with a hand cupped over his mouth. Greg’s body relaxes and the HP presses his lips in the soft hollow of his neck. Greg feels the warmth of the lips and they stimulate a sizzle of digestive juices at the bottom of his heart. The two men lie this way, like a long caduceus, on the driveway, writhing occasionally to feel more directly the consolation of each other’s body.

Greg tries to open his eyes but finds a lid pinned shut by a thumb. With his one eye, a tall blue cone that skates across a giant white planet, he observes the trees and sky above him, eager to see changes, signs of encouragement. A birch tree flies upward to his left. Its white trunk is scored with lesions where the wet rubble of its interior has burst through. Its trunk blackens further up and branches straighten into slick spears. At this height, the furthest that Greg can focus, bright green lights wrap the air around the deadly tree. Beyond, the leaves checker the sky, filling in the squares in a grid, sharing their presence evenly with ice blue. Greg can see in each distant screen, clear and livid with detail, little blue manic dramas. A blue policeman falls off a cliff, a child wiping his nose, a woman in a chair, a wrestler snaps his shoulder straps, a picture of Jesus so cold he freezes, a pimple squeezes, hair is teased, a sneeze is sneezed, a breeze leaves, the easy … eases … keezes … cheezes … breezes …

The HP lifts his lips away from Greg’s neck and breathes through his mouth. The hot breath chills a patch of saliva and makes Greg shiver. He feels the breath like steam tickling the short hairs at the base of his neck. The HP slips a finger into Greg’s mouth and the taste of salt fills it with saliva. Greg sucks the finger hard, flicking his tongue on the crease that marks the first digit. He probes the crease until he raises taste buds across the finger pad. He tries to turn his body, to find something more, but the HP tightens his grip. In this small struggle Greg feels his cock suddenly pump against his jeans, filling his crotch with hot fluid. The pleasure spreads down his legs and past him. Greg opens his mouth and pants quick breaths around the finger, cooling it so that when he closes his mouth the finger is icy.

There are seven valves articulating Greg’s digestive system and they throb and spit along the empty string that connects them. He is starving to death. But mostly he is dehydrating. The skin on his body sits up stiffly where the HP has held it. There is too much friction against the drying fibres of muscle for the skin to slide back into place. Systems of thin, grey wrinkles show where Greg’s Higher Power has tugged and prodded him, instilling peace and courage against the coming death: body insulating body.

Greg’s vision has become strange to him, the mucous membranes have retreated into dry puckers, pulling his eyeballs back deep into their sockets. The act of focusing is becoming impaired by pain and what he cannot see with his eyes is compensated for by the drying pelt of his brain. The scenes of his addiction are being played out by leather dolls in a six-inch by six-inch shooting gallery. He turns a doll over and inspects a seam. His own hair, now stiff blond, bristles out between the stitches. He replaces the doll and shrugs, “I’m dying. It’s so odd. I’m so strange.”

Time is passing quickly, frosting its boots in the night. In the morning an icy dew stings its cracked lips. At a height of four hundred feet, three turkey vultures hang off an immense updraft and float downward in a wide circle.

Over the next few days the two men lie in the gravel and weeds. They hold each other, and occasionally one of them has episodes of anguish that cause him to twist in the arms of the other. The episodes subside under the soothing hands and calm whispers of the Higher Power.

In time Greg does die. His Higher Power kneels at his side and crosses the teenager’s arms, lifting the hair from his young, pale face. He stands and looks down at the body that is ruined and vacant and he mouths a short prayer. He walks away from the body without looking back and climbs, in clothes now filthy and tattered, toward the
highway. At the side of the road he puts out his thumb. He expects a chariot to descend from a cloud to pick him up. He’s surprised when an old red pick-up truck turns the corner and comes to a dusty stop on the shoulder just ahead of him.
It isn’t possible to grow tired of a stream. A stream is a permanently exciting medium. Stones jiggle in its bed and roots laugh at its edges. The sun shoots Popsicles at a stream. The clouds lay soft, damp towels on its banks. And animals return from the stream shivering with a hundred rainbows weaving in their wet fur.

And the fish.

The fish are different. The fish are always different. In this stream the fish were introduced as minnows through the mouths of metal tubes that dipped below the surface. As adults they return to the precise place of their birth to spawn. They battle like charioteers through the cold water, peeling back their pretty bodies, grimacing with the effort so that their faces look like bullets. And when they arrive home they impale themselves on the sharp metal tips of pipes. By the hundreds they drive their bodies straight onto these stakes, packing the hollow with the bruised flesh of their throats and the frozen bridges of their noses. Throughout the summer aggressive water beetles curve over the openings in military anger. They extract the fibres of meat with barbed toes, feeding it up into their little nightmare faces. The following spring a glistening black chain mail lines the stream, darkening the bottom, where exhausted trout climb along, blind and proud.

By the fall Julie’s belly has begun to bell outward and Jimmy’s body is springing in frog-like leaps over one pubic hurdle after another. By November his hand is huge and he splays it over Julie’s swollen abdomen, marvelling at its strength.

After five weeks the embryo looks like an ear, or a deflated crab claw, or an oyster. It presses its face against the meat of the uterine wall, blinking its eyes, surprised that the embryo is in the process of looking like anything at all. This cognitive reality, that it always appears as something else, will dog the little omelette all its life.

At a party in the suburbs a teenage boy lifts his lips from a flaming bong, and when the smoke clears he pulls back a blond bang from his eyes and says: “The stages of a fetus are exactly the same as the stages of evolution. First it’s, like, a single cell, right? Like an amoeba. Then it’s a fish, then an amphibian. Then it, like, crawls up onto the land and grows little prehistoric kangaroo legs. And then its tail disappears and it’s like a tiny monkey.” He seals off the glass pipe again and draws in loudly through bubbling water. The girl is amazed by this.

During the fifth month the fetus is listening. It shudders happily in an enclosed world fed by maternal blood. In Julie’s case the maternal blood has a high concentration of protein. From human flesh: the chewy muscles of zombies that she has ambushed near her front door.

The boy exhales a dripping cloud of smoke across the girl’s chest: “No way, man, if, like, a brother and sister conceive a baby, then it’s usually weak and can’t fight off childhood diseases and, it’s like the worst for the species. So it’s, uh, like part of our genetic make-up that we don’t have sex with our siblings.” The girl reaches for the bong. “Yeah, not without a condom anyway.”

Jimmy lifts a pelvic bone to his face and lines up his eyes in the hollow scoops that form a natural mask. Two wide blades of dry bone curve over his head like a tall decorative helmet. He wiggles his tongue lewdly and crosses his eyes. Julie laughs and flicks wet raspberry from the rim of a bowl in her lap onto her brother. He slaps the berry as it strikes his chest and he squeezes the juice through his fingers. He gives out a birdlike cry of anguish. She admires his handsome face as he pretends to die, still holding the tall mask to his closed eyes.

While the girl sucks deeply, filling the glass tube with thick white smoke, the boy pushes down on his crotch with the heel of his hand: “And it’s also bad to eat people. Because, well, you know, aside from being sick and everything, it weakens us if we do it, ‘cause it crushes the immune system. And anyway, it’s genetic that we don’t, ‘cause if we could we would’ve long ago when we were starving through the winter. And the only survivor would be some fat pig, and we would have died off that first year!” The girl feels a light-headed swirl of connection leading her to some conclusion or other.

After the first snowfall the pregnant couple stay inside most of the time. They conserve their energy and focus on the coming of their child. This is also the beginning of a season-long food shortage. Besides a scarcity of fruits and vegetables, fewer zombies come wandering near their home. So they mete out carefully the food that they do have, carefully rationing out the zombie flesh.
As his sister becomes less mobile Jimmy begins to forage out in the newly fallen snow for easily visible and trackable wildlife. An abundance of rabbits crisscross their property, and Jimmy spends hours falling in the snow behind them, throwing rocks at them, and spraining his ankles in their doorways. He returns late in the morning to Julie, empty handed and surly. As the weeks progress and they begin to hate the sight of each other, Jimmy pretends he’s going hunting and sits out of view at the picnic table, shivering in the cold just to keep away from his sister’s icy glare. Julie sits at the stove, wearing a zombie’s trenchcoat, craving another human being, anyone who speaks, who isn’t mute and stupid.

They survive the winter this way, occasionally patching together an understanding that their mutual hostility is born of their hard life together. On some winter nights, in the deep silence of the deep snow that surrounds them, they hold each other and accept each other with hands that stroke kindly, remembering. The spring will bring them back. The spring will bring new life.

And it does. With the first thaw Jimmy manages to kill his first rabbit. He stands in the doorway swinging it proudly by the ears as Julie applauds with her tired arms. He reaches for a knife above the bench to skin their dinner. Julie feels a strange clench yank at her body from below.

Every version of the birth of a child is always lacking something. Neither a satisfactory miracle nor a base torment, childbirth is only one of the thousands of aggressive events that never actually occur in people’s lives. It is enough of something, however, to put everyone on alert. And Julie and Jimmy are no exception.

Julie is sitting on the zombie trenchcoat that stretches open across the floor. As the coat soaks up the fluid that has crashed out from between her legs, Jimmy frantically lights candles along the dirty edge of the freezer. He crouches down at a distance in front of her and, having no instruction as to any role he might play in the birth, he assumes a position natural to the expectation that an object under pressure will need to be caught, maybe in mid-flight. Julie is receiving more primal instruction, and she follows each muscular cue with a howling face.

The top of the baby’s head appears and Jimmy falls backward off his haunches. The baby flies to the floor, as if shot from a gun. She lies still in a broken case of transparent veins. Jimmy sits up, looks over his sister’s body, looking for her face, but her head is thrown back and turned toward the wall.

Suddenly the baby springs to its feet and runs toward Jimmy. She turns on her umbilical cord and slams her back into his chest. Julie looks up in horror to see her baby daughter facing her. The baby snatches the cable in her tiny hand and twists it into her mouth. With tough gums on soft flesh, she clamps down, crunching the cells. Jimmy jerks back from his daughter. She runs toward the door and with a tug on the cord she snaps her mother’s hips off the ground, breaking the bond. In the doorway she makes a threatening star shape with her arms and legs, and darts her eyes back and forth from parent to parent. She screams — “Fuck you!” — emptying the contents of her lungs down her front before disappearing.

Julie and Jimmy remain on the floor, their eyes uncomprehending and their mouths flung open. Julie attempts to rise first, but she can only slide onto her knees before falling over. She waves frantically at Jimmy, who stands, trying to overcome his fear of his daughter. He is terrified of her. He is scared for his life. Julie falls toward him and swipes at his hip, sending him running to the door.

Outside the shack a pile of wood is stacked waist high on one side of the door; on the other there is a cage of ribs. Jimmy turns the corner. Sitting at the picnic table are the three complete skeletons that he assembled for company. Now that spring has thawed away their snow-sculpted features Jimmy no longer recognizes them and jumps back. He runs in the other direction, looking for a daughter who has run away from home. He takes off in a circle around the shack, frightening a large raven that claps at him before swooping over to the picnic table, where it attempts to land on a fragile black collar bone. The raven crashes through wet ribs, clattering the brittle cage off the table and into the melting snow, releasing a sweet gas through the air. Jimmy clutches the front of his mouth and gags. His sister appears, leaning on a stick and trailing a long red rope on the ground behind her.

About one hundred metres south of where they stand staring at each other are two men in hunting caps. They’re crouched down in a path that leads up to a picnic area from deep in the woods.

“What the hell was that? What the Jesus was that?”

The larger hunter looks out from under a red flannel visor. He swallows and winces for his partner to be quiet. He whispers.

“Mother of God! I don’t know. Some kind of little freak baby! Some kind of little fuckin’ zombie spawn. I swear to fuckin’ God!”

His partner shivers and, with a hand resting on his friend’s shoulder, whispers into his ear.
“Are you telling me that those zombie bastards are breeding? Out here?”
The large man draws a rifle off his thighs and brings it up his side.
“Oh yes, that’s exactly what I’m sayin’. They’re hidin’ out up here making a race of killer fuckin’ rat babies.”
The smaller man tosses his breached weapon closed with a fitted clunk.
“That thing was doin’ ninety up the path for crissakes. What the hell? Are they super-zombies or what?”
“If that little SOB ever grows up Jesus. I think we got a goddamn Sasquatch situation here.”
“Shhh. There’s something up ahead. Get ready.”

The larger hunter rises to stand and brings the rifle up to his shoulder. He squints down the sites, pointing the gun at the direction from where he can hear something coming towards them. A head and shoulders appear to the left of the path ahead and he squeezes the trigger.

The figure is struck in the chest. It falls backward, collapsing in the bush. The two men move forward and discover the body flat on its back, already dead. They continue toward the clearing and when the raven lifts off the table with a vertebra stuck in its talon the smaller man erases it from the air with a shotgun blast. Before the flurry of black feathers falls to the ground he fires his cannon again, this time hurling a young girl’s body back into the walls of a shack.

The two men listen to the echoes of thegunshots that travel outward. When the silence returns and the first fresh smell of gunpowder burns off the air, they turn to each other and, dropping their rifles, embrace in a tight hug, grateful to God to be alive.

At a distance of nearly a kilometre the baby continues to race west through the underbrush, hopping over logs on her powerful little legs and swinging off lower branches on strong, pliant limbs. She is making her way to Lake Scugog, where she will dive to the bottom with frog-like kicks to snatch the body of Les Reardon’s baby.

These two babies, made strong by the circumstances of their birth, will live together on the frigid bottom, near the lake’s frozen bowel, blind as sea bats and icy as eels, in a tingling rage that will last forever.
The Bruce Peninsula is an astonishing garden. Wildlife that has fled north from the cities is squeezed cheek by jowl on its pristine shores. The dazzling peregrine falcon, great loping herons, and hummingbirds meet in mid-air. Rattlesnakes, spiky hogs, and tiny alligators wrestle for egg-laying territory on remote Sauble Beach. There are even llama that can be ridden for a price. A lone bison roams like a shaggy mountain, dragging its dread-locked chin through cow shit. And off the tip of the Bruce is an island famous for its tall, attic-shaped rock towers rising up out of the shallows. This is Flower Pot Island.

At dawn, when the sun buries the lake in fire, the “flower pots” cast their shadows up onto the flat white shore. This shadow is where night hides, shifting its position, cautiously opposing the sun, remaining sharp and wicked. This shape is identical to the shape of Ontario. Go there, you’ll see. The pots hide a little bit of night behind them as they face the sun. They look at each other throughout the morning and communicate in a sentinel’s code: we know exactly where they are from here.

In the cities there are greater confusions. As fall approaches several things are contributing to a late-autumn military mania. The disappearance of Toronto’s most popular anchorperson, Grant Mazzy; the undeniable presence of cannibals much further south than anyone had wanted to accept. Although a plethora of laws exist that might deal with a new breed of violent crime that is highly contagious, and in spite of the horrific acts being committed by Ontarians everywhere, none, not a single person, can be held accountable.

There are no arrests. No convictions.

On September 7 strange new edicts are passed in the Ontario legislature with more hand-washing than wringing. And by late afternoon the instructions are handed over to heavily armed teams. They are directed to exercise maximum force immediately. To combat contagion all form of communication is banned. Speaking, listening, reading, even sign language are punishable at the brute discretion of Ontario’s own licensed assassins. Citizens are instructed to stay at home and communicate only through nods or shakes of the head.

Besides an armed and helmeted military, the only other active organization is the hugely augmented social services, now responsible for the welfare of every living person. Among the ranks of the army any personnel who stammers, struggles for the right words, or otherwise exhibits any difficulty communicating is instantly quarantined. The only words spoken aloud in Ontario through the winter are militarese, punctuated with a sharply barked “Sir!”

The alleys of the city and the forests of the north ring with the shaking chains of constant automatic weapon fire as every one of the many thousand disoriented is gunned down.

American helicopters dangle in the sky like a Chinese New Year, strafing the fields and farmlands.

Small Zodiacs buzz across remote lakes coordinating a sweep with armed troops firing their way through the woods on cross-country skis.

In front of Big Town TV a crowd of thirty-eight people, their heads bobbing to a New York dance diva, are cut to ribbons.

A man with his hands clasped behind his neck kneels in a barn in Pontypool. One of two men standing behind him steps forward and fires a handgun through the back of his head.

At the top of Main Street in Bolton, three zombies climb up through an open manhole together and get stuck. A man on a bicycle swerves out from behind a parked car and tumbles over them. The zombies hold him in the air with their strong jaws until a truck hits them, knocking the man thirty metres down the road, where he lies bleeding to death through three bit-sized holes.

A helicopter swings out of a cloud and slams into the Royal Bank tower.

A runaway train hurls through the wilderness along the eastern shore of Lake Superior. It tumbles sideways across White River, pulling the tallest thermometer in the world behind it as it disappears up the million paths that lead to Ontario’s train-eating wolves.

A baby in Niagara Falls tips forward in its highchair, swinging a rope of saliva from its bottom lip. The suspended drool is teeming with influenza; but before the infant can slurp it back up, the baby is pulled headlong down a flight of stairs.
A grandmother in Oshawa lays the last of twenty pictures, depicting her twenty-three grandchildren, on a coffee table. The twenty-first grandchild twists the woman’s head backward and bites down on her forehead, blinding her with blood.

A tiny fish-hook is dropped into the lettuce at a salad bar by a madman and swallowed by a dieting accountant.

A child in Bobcageon tosses a full can of beans at a bear cub, causing it to bark out in pain. The mother bear lifts the child by her leg and breaks her head open against a tree.

A public poll is taken about the confidence people have in Emergency Task Forces; however, most of the respondents are zombies, and half of the pollsters are killed on front porches.

A rubber bullet fired at a school bus on Highway 6 bounces off an aluminum window frame back across a field through a kitchen window, hitting the Frappé button on a blender. A sleeping man falls off the couch.

A woman in Mississauga stands in front of her mirror kneading her breasts while a man urinates loudly in the toilet beside her. He glances over, and his growing erection interrupts the stream of urine, and he sprays the roll of bathroom tissue. He leans forward to flush the toilet and surreptitiously rotates the roll.

A stripper in the process of performing an illegal lap dance in a bar on Yonge Street is disoriented. She stops and puts her finger across the patron’s lips and says, “I’ll be right back.” She wanders out among the crates and towels on the floor and stands palming the full cheeks of her buttocks. The entire room has her attention: she fails to notice and says, “Hello? Hello?” In the corner a zombie, who has quietly murdered a dancer in the dark, hisses, “Hello … hello.”

A man with a bright-grey beard and rust-brown toupee kisses his walleyed daughter. The thirty-six-year-old woman licks him once quickly under his tongue and pulls back. She brushes her bangs with a saluting hand. Her father wants to guarantee that they are not just anybody. He says to her, as they cross a busy Saturday-afternoon intersection in Collingwood, “All I need to do is touch you with one finger and I’m electrified.”

A woman in Wawa lays six chicken breasts in a shallow pan and covers them with mushroom soup. She slides the pan onto the rack and closes the oven, preheated to 325 degrees. Two children sit on the couch in the other room. No one is happy. A man is coming down the stairs. An invisible trail of salmonella bacteria grows in strange places. On the back of a chair leg. On a fly’s wing. Strong inside the anti-bacterial dishwashing fluid.

A family is cross-country skiing out on the snowfields of Caledon. They stop and look to the north. They see four people in brightly coloured parkas climbing down a cliff face. One falls and lands with a bone-breaking snap on a large boulder. The family topple off their skis in an attempt to run toward the fallen climber. By the time they are standing again, on skis directed toward the cliff, the three remaining climbers have reached the ground. They run at the skiers with wild eyes and bloody ski masks.

A gathering of farmers, assembled in protest on the lawn of Queen’s Park, is blown to bits from the front steps.

A businessman at King and Yonge reaches for his pager and is fired upon. Eighteen hollow-point bullets perforate him, and he falls in pieces.

Three teenagers prying open a garage door down an alley at Landsdowne and Bloor are surprised from behind by two men with baseball bats who club them to their knees.

At the edge of Grenadier pond sixteen people lying beside fishing lines are stabbed by as many knives and rolled into the water.

A theatre in the woods, back up in the trees of High Park, is a coordinating centre for military personnel. Volunteers in T-shirts are ordered to stack weapons and then kneel beside them. They are shot in anger by officers with handguns.

In the Sky Dome three women are ambushed by gunfire from beneath a van. They topple over on feetless legs and are dragged between tires and strangled.

The entire Don Valley, deemed to be a hotbed of cannibal activity, is sprayed with a molten plastic.

The Toronto Islands, which have reported only rare cases of the disease, are carpet bombed.

In Hockley Vailey, one hundred and twenty cannibals are rounded up. Soldiers discover that if a bullet is grazed across the tops of zombie heads, they dance in seizure while squirting blood into the air. Informal contests are held to see how many zombies can be made to dance at once.

Just outside Sudbury, troops succeed in getting sixty-three zombies to die jigging. The same is attempted on the bridge over Owen Sound Harbour and it backfires. Eight soldiers are dragged to their deaths beneath the hull of the
docked *Chi Chi Man.* Two more soldiers are killed by friendly fire as bullets ricochet at the waterline of the ship.

A helicopter descending on Ceasarea by Lake Scugog encounters over a thousand zombies in a cannibal frenzy. They have discovered an enclave of healthy citizens hiding in the post office. The helicopter circles until its panicking pilot, his face streaked purple with anger, dives his aircraft into the centre of the orgy.

A lighthouse in Gravenhurst catches fire. A nurse is hiding four elderly people in its lookout. She crosses herself and makes praying hands as the smell of burning gauze stings her nose.

In Barrie a defiant population takes to the streets to embrace their cannibal brothers and sisters. An emotion-choked voice blares from a megaphone, pleading for people to return home. The snapping of compassionate necks can be heard clicking through the town and army personnel descend with guns blazing under tear-streaked faces.

A convoy of heavily laden trucks snakes along Highway 7 toward the Elora Gorge, where bodies are dumped by the thousands from a great height into blood-oily water.

A hidden coyote population joins with packs of agitated wolves to roam through ditches snapping at hands and feet.

An arsonist in Orangeville kills his family in their sleep and slicks himself down with gasoline.

A throng of looters in Scarborough greets the new day smiling and empty-handed. They are all shot through the head.

A couple who have been holed up in a cottage on Rice Lake light a fire in their front yard to attract the attention of rescuers. They are shoved backwards onto flames by the giant hands of haunted people.

In a farmhouse near Orillia a widow sneaks out at night and drags corpses through her front door. The scene is lit eerily from within by a flashlight held in its place on the table by a sugar dispenser.

A zombie in Havelock leaps onto the back of a cow and looks up laughing as a farmer drives a pitchfork into its back.

In Angus a group of men lash a suspected pedophile to a raft, then send him off down the freezing Nottawasaga river. A helicopter is dispatched to save him. As it swings along a river in the sky, men shake their fists from below.

A schoolteacher hides his Grade Twos in a grain silo, only to become a predator himself by midnight.

Four people stand under the Dufferin Gates, remove their clothes, and pass a straight razor back and forth on unspeakable dares.

A prisoner in the Kingston penitentiary slams his back up against the bars in a sexual passion that will end in the death of the man he has loved for six years.

A garage mechanic in Sarnia is shot by a stranger as he pulls down the rattling bay door.

Three yachts set sail from Port Credit Harbour and are sunk by a coast guard vessel that has, up to this point, been firing on the seagull population. A young captain holds up his head, like a bust of Beethoven, in the pocket of air inside the ship’s bow.

A four-year-old girl in Brampton runs screaming to her parents’ bedroom. They sit up to greet their crying daughter with faces that are unmistakably afflicted.

The population of Norwood is zero.

Guelph, three hundred. Maybe.

St. Catharines, eight hundred.

Hamilton is particularly disastrous. Pockets of homicide flare up with crazy unpredictability, confounding a military strategy that flexes itself, finally, in an anguished genocidal nightmare.

Hamilton: population definitely zero.

The QEW, stretching down around the corner of Lake Ontario to Buffalo, is host to a marathon of mad runners who are ignored by the Ontario military. They fall into a blinding wall of American weapons.

A serial killer sits in silent obedience at home in North York, surrounded by four uncommunicative guests.

By January the population of Ontario is only two-thirds of what it was, and there are no zombies left alive. By the first thaw an enormous clean-up is under way. By spring all killing has virtually stopped, except for the occasional murder committed by hunters who rush into the deep woods in the hope of bagging a real-life monster.
If everything that ever brought a person to their knees, head bowed, hands clutching at thin air, had to be characterized somehow, several hands would shoot up immediately. Some of us are eager to tell others how this happens. You are born with what will bring you to your knees, and it patiently acquaints itself with you over long decades until, one day, with a blinding finger, it reaches up …

No, that’s not true. Not really.

Other hands go up. No one is called upon to answer. The look from the person at the front of the room, a left hand caging a left eye, communicates that it’s already too late, that we are already sitting in positions strange to this endeavour. We quiet down, fold our hands in our laps, respectful. The instruction is that forgiveness should be sought in the most forgiving space in the world: a little lounge music, an unregenerate appetite for heroin, a peaceful hand touches the corner of a chin, and a scratching fingernail is dragged up and down a forearm. A forearm as long as a country laneway. Someone leans over a neighbour’s crossed legs and says, “It’s good to be here anyway.” As a chosen member is carved open at the throat, hands knocking a lamp, a box of pencils, several people moan — “mmmmm” and “ahhhhh”— so we lower the lights.

Greg’s Higher Power reaches out beside his bed and traps a lamp switch between his fingers. The turquoise adjustable work lamp is clamped not to a table but to a short plank of wood held in place on the floor by a brick. When he pushes the switch on the crown of the metal shade the bulb is inadvertently directed towards his face. He redirects it with a swat. He turns to face the wall and waits for Harley who is sleeping in the upper bunk, to hit the snooze button. The beep persists and seems to get louder, more obnoxious. Greg’s Higher Power raises a leg from the bed, pulling it through the coarse grey blanket, which slides off, grating the smooth leg he extends into the bottom of the mattress above him.

“Yeah. Mmm-hmm. Ten minutes.”

The Higher Power sits up on the mattress and leans his face into his hands, breathing deeply through his nose. He smells the dampness of the mattress on his fingers. The lamp faces out across the cellar floor. Along space heater sits on three old issues of the Hamilton Spectator. The front pages of the papers are browned by the heating element and their bottoms are cold and wet against the concrete floor. Like a closet of props the cellar is crammed with neglected junk. Two old televisions, a collection of broken hoes, a saddle, canoe paddles, a stack of rough scaffold planks, a mouldy array of old coats, a rusted-out stove, a soft, black cardboard box full of engine parts, a rack of clothes bundled under plastic and tied with binder twine, a plywood reindeer with a red bulb hanging from its nose. Under the charred pipes of a giant furnace is a bunk bed. Greg’s Higher Power has lived here throughout the winter in the orange glow of the space heater, waiting for his grief to settle, for Greg to be less with him, for spring to come. For summer to follow.

He was picked up at the side of the road by a farmer named Jackson several months ago, and by the end of the trip, which took them down to Markham and back again, to a farm just outside Pontypool, the farmer had taken on his grim-looking passenger as a hand. Jackson led the lifeless man into the cellar, where his son Harley slept, and left him there to wait out the winter months in bed until the first haying in August. And now, after an interminable season spent with the conjugating clicks of a furnace and the hug-me glow of a battered space heater, the Higher Power is woken by Harley’s alarm on the first day of haying season.

Halfway up the stairs the Higher Power smells bacon, and by the time he opens the door, heavy with winter coats, onto a large kitchen, the mould on the back of his tongue suddenly tastes of toast, fried tomatoes and pancakes. Dolly, the farmer’s wife, turns to him from an electric skillet full of bacon sitting on a dishwasher and smiles, gesturing with a greasy spatula for him to sit. The table has been extended with a mismatched leaf to accommodate a vast array of hot food. Three tall stacks of light-brown pancakes, a huge peppery bowl of steaming tomatoes, a long plate, heavy with bright-green-and-red-flecked omelettes oozing cheese. An entire corner of the table is devoted to a small city of jams and preserves. A tray of still-sizzling steaks sits between two fat glass pitchers of freshly squeezed orange juice. Jackson is seated at the head of the table, and though he’s a reserved man by nature the Higher Power senses an excitement in him today. He is wearing cleaned and pressed work clothes with a bright orange cap on his head. He is staring thoughtfully at his plate, chewing, taking care, it seems to the HP, that his long grey sideburns, trimmed and combed, stay clear of the huge forklifts of food he brings up between them.
Jackson acknowledges the HP’s presence at the table by anxiously breathing once and pausing his hands over his plate. When the HP has settled, Jackson continues eating, hurrying now for everyone else’s sake. A leader should lead, and Jackson looks up frequently through the curtains of the window above the sink, picturing himself out there already, frowning at a series of disasters that always marks the first day of haying. Dolly is watching him above her thick glasses and the HP notices how striking this is, this looking, the peculiar distance in her eyes. Dolly knows Jackson will not return her gaze. A shy man, even around his own wife. Jackson looks back at his plate, frowning, breathing in anxiously again. He doesn’t look at her, but he knows that she’s watching him and he says, “Ah-yeh, ah-yeh.” Dolly wipes her hands on her recently ironed apron and looks out the window to where her husband has pictured himself. She leans over the dishwasher and looks out further to the acres of cut and fallen hay.

Hope it’s dry enough, Jackson.”

Jackson doesn’t look up, and the scowl he makes is nearly a smile. Dolly steps over to the doorway that leads to the cellar and flicks on a light behind a hanging coat. Jackson attempts to look up after her but winces at the effort, “Ah-yeh. Ah-yeh.”

Dolly looks back, smiling briefly at the HP.

“Harley!”

A nearly orange dog moves off the living room carpet and clicks its toes across the yellow linoleum of the kitchen. Dolly follows the dog to the end of the counter and leans ahead of it, stretching her arm to open the door in the dog’s path.

Harley appears, stripped to the waist, his blond hair towelled up. While directing his appeal to Jackson, he accepts a light admonishment from his mother’s eyes.

Jackson shuffles to rise, with his hands circling an empty plate, and waits for Harley to sit down. The Higher Power watches Harley’s long arms reaching for syrup, butter, salt, pepper. The young man surrounds his plate with condiments before sliding clean fingers under the fifth pancake in the pile halfway up the table. When Jackson has left, Dolly turns to the HP.

“Do you need more toast?”

The HP pushes his chair back. Tossing a napkin from his lap, he reaches for a toothpick. He turns it in the air towards Dolly before dropping it on his tongue, rolling it into the corner of his mouth. All winter the HP has had a fantasy that come haying season he will say “Thank ya kindly, ma’am” often, and he considers this a dry run. As he leaves the table Dolly lays a hand on his back and places a large plastic jug of water in his hands. He moves his shoulder blade under her hand so that she can feel him. He nods, satisfied that one of the reasons he feels so fine this morning is the fact that he feels no compulsion to disclose his good mood to anyone in particular. But Dolly can tell that her guest is happy, that given half the chance he might just get past that terrible state he was in when he arrived those many dark months ago.

“He’s comin’. Aren’t ya, Harley?”

Dolly directs this comment to the HP, who feels a status is bestowed on him by her. The HP takes it as a way of positioning him in the chain of command. Not just a hand, maybe the second man. He senses that one need only be a man here; it doesn’t matter that your demons once got the better of you. You’re a man. And just by being here, assuming a place on haying day, you are ultimately tougher than those demons. Dolly looks at her son as if he’s a man too young to have demons, someone who, like Dolly, follows after those who do. The HP winks and clicks his tongue, thanking the little lady with a deferential nod. He steps out into the backyard, looking over the field on the first haying day.

The farm is relatively small, three twenty-five-acre fields that begin at the base of a slope off the backyard stretch out to the highway. To the south stands a large grey barn and a fenced-in field. The HP notices twenty odd cows gathered in a distant corner. They sit and stand in what must be an uncomfortable fit of bodies, as self-conscious as a family posing for a formal portrait. They turn their heads in unison away from the HP, in response to some invisible stimulus.

The work done on these farms is performed in the old way; unlike government-run farms, these are businesses that have hung close to ruin for generations. These farms are not about preparing animals for slaughter but about preparing families to live with what they inherit. One of the things all the farming families spread across this difficult land inherit is a deep and elaborate stock of stories about each other. Each piece of land is the public log of a private struggle, and for this reason a great deal of animosity is exchanged through the windshields of cars passing each other on rural roads. Most of the stories begin as ammunition stored and distributed against specific hostilities
between neighbours. Beneath each story is a forgotten dispute, and above them are cast the loose lines of future feuds. Any given farmer’s day-to-day struggle to survive is interpreted by his neighbours as perverse. Grotesque. Unresolved. Unsuccessful. Story laden.

These stories are also the mark of membership in this community. In haying season all the farms join in a communal pool of machinery and labour. One farmer will cut several fields of hay, and another will bale them, and yet another will come along with a crew and a convoy of wide, flat trailers to haul the bales up onto conveyors that roll them off into the black, dusty mows. This summer ritual binds the community. It is the counterpart to winter’s bitter collection of tales. The deep-blue ice of dependency and imagination give way to back slaps and bright forgetting in sunshine. All is forgiven. The good families are rising above.

The HP can see a man sitting in a tractor that drags a threshing machine behind its brand new combine. This man lost his combine back in ’67 after dishing out huge sums of money to lawyers. It seems that his son had come down with meningitis, and the man had the bright idea that he’d treat him at home with massive injections from the same needle and medicine that he uses on newborn calves. He has kept his son at home ever since, locked in a room that has to be boarded against his freakish strength and mindless outbursts. His wife, who died in ’73, was supposed to have been torn limb from limb by her son one Christmas morning. No one can completely recall this terrible secret, and when the weather’s clear for a stretch in early August they slap their friend gratefully on the back as he mounts his tractor in their fields.

The engine clanks off and the man dismounts his tiny metal seat. In the quiet the HP hears another motor start up inside the barn. Jackson appears on top of a green tractor followed by the balers. They head toward a field that has already been cut. The HP runs toward Jackson, swinging his bottle of water and holding his cap down with his free hand. He has to sprint to catch up with the back of the baler. After two attempts he manages to clear the three heavy bars that drag on the ground. He steps onto the platform that also drags, bumpily, held by chains to the baling chute. The HP barely has time to pull the crisp leather of his gloves over his hands before the first bale rises shaking in the chute. The HP reaches down, forcing his fingers under the twine, and tests the integrity of the bale with a sharp pull. Too sharp. The bale springs into the air. He uses this momentum to assist in tossing the surprisingly heavy bale behind him, into position between the first and second bars. He succeeds in getting the bale in place but can’t recover his centre of gravity and flies headlong over the long block of hay onto the ground behind it.

He shakes the dullness from his face and leaps to his feet. The second bale is already wagging at the sky and getting further away. It falls free of the chute and tumbles sideways. The ground grabs at it, pulling it off the platform. By the time the third bale appears the HP is standing behind it, reaching back again to the first twine. But this time he gives it only a respectful yank to encourage it along in the machine that, he knows now, is fully capable of doing most of the work. He slams the bale down beside the first, shifting his own position twice in order to preserve balance. He looks back at the second bale, now a hundred metres away, and knows that come the end of the day it will look lost and wasted in a field of neatly spaced, perfectly stacked triangles. The next bale is even less of a struggle. With these three forming the foundation of the structure, the HP slaps his full biceps optimistically and reaches over to swing out the fourth bale and begin the critical second tier. It falls on its heavy edge in the v-shape of the bales turned toward each other beneath it. The weight of the compressed hay binds their faces, pulling them towards each other, strengthening the structure. The HP heaves the last yellow obelisk into its slot. This forms an apex from which fall, on either side, the perfect sheer walls of a triangle. The last heavy bale makes the other tiers powerful. The HP kicks a heavy drop-forged pedal at the front of the platform, dropping the bars into the ground. The three edges at the base grip the earth, floating the A-frame off into the field behind the baler.

An optical effect is emerging. An illusion, one whose fidelity grows on the HP, as he creates second and third arrowheads. The field begins to flow outward in waves from the suddenly motionless platform, carrying buoys on waves that roll back from the distance. A hollow sky pulls at this figure, as he leans, in his fantasy, against the bailing chute. He raises the gloved fingers of his hand and traces an imagined coastline, as far away as the white morning moon, now a perfect pressure, light against his palm. The HP feels that he may die for seeing the field this way, and he very nearly cries. There is consciousness breaking in the soil, other people’s consciousness. A curl falling across Greg’s cheek appears in a quick spindrift of dust coming off a stone in the mud. As long as I can see the moment everything changes. As long as the HP can see the moment when everything changes, then everything in its vying is as good as home. And eventually, in an infinite cross-current of sadness and longing, every weak, blinking kindness is restored. And then, seconds later, lost. The HP feels for the first time in his short life, the millions of years it takes to produce a single, brief moment of passion.

At noon the tractor drops into neutral and Jackson jumps down. He turns off the baler and the HP realizes that in some way he has been sustained all morning by its roar. His arms throb, and his abdomen twitches. He looks down
to make sure his body isn’t as huge as it feels. He feels like a perfect giant, gleaming and hard, with fingers too strong to move. Jackson stands beside the platform and removes his cap. He squats and presses a palm through the short grass.

“Ah-yeah. Don’t want it wet.”

The table is laid out with oversized plates and bowls steaming with multiple helpings of a variety of foods. A dozen steaks are bleeding down on each other beside a serving tray of ribs so tender that meat falls from the bones when the HP pulls back his chair. He fills his plate with slick, hot carrots and ice-cold beets. Harley, who has been cleaning the mow all morning, is watching television with his sister. Jackson stands, straddling the metal strip dividing the kitchen from the living room, watching the small black-and-white set. A young woman is holding a microphone under the chin of a man in a naval uniform.

“Ah-yeah. Ah-yeah. Don’t want rain.”

After lunch Harley helps Jackson on the baler and the HP is sent to the mow to wait for them to return from the field with the first load of hay. A neighbour was busy stacking bales on the truck while they ate lunch. The HP watches Harley trailing after Jackson across the field. He feels a drain of energy caused by the task of digestion. The HP walks slowly toward the barn. The younger man is picking up stones that his father kicks from the ground. He sails them through the air to bounce off an island of rocks in the middle of the field. The HP can see Jackson’s shyness even from this distance: his resignation and defiance. He’s a tightly packed, complex man who frowns when people laugh and seems never to have exhaled in his life.

The barn is dark inside, with shafts of white sunlight turning orange on the floor. The HP climbs a ladder of planks nailed across six-by-twelve uprights. At the top he has to jump across an opening of a metre and a half onto a loft. A window at the peak of the roof opens out onto the field where Jackson and Harley are working. The black rubber of a conveyor belt obscures the view. The HP sits on a bale of hay and waits. The mow is a trap of nearly unbreathable air, where waves of heat rise, cooking the atmosphere through stale hay into a gas that holds the oxygen near the roof in a dark poison. The HP is having difficulty breathing, and when the conveyor rattles to life it takes him three attempts before he can stand without support. He can see the first bale climbing towards him, and he lays his shaking hands on the edge of the conveyor belt, taking its vibrations up his arms.

He believes that this bale will fall against him and drive him to the floor. He knows that they vary in weight, from about forty to seventy pounds, and that the range represents what is possible and what is now, in this strength-sapping fire, clearly impossible. The bale teeters at the top on a brief fulcrum and falls against the HP, driving him to the floor. He kicks his legs across the sliding chaff and rolls the bale, end for end, to a corner of the mow. The first tier can go like this. The second has to be lifted. So does the third. The fourth has to be heaved. The fifth has to be built by arms that push upward, straining and, hopefully, the HP thinks, numb. At least I’m alone up here, no one can see me struggle.

Within an hour he has completed the first wall. He has begun to cough the cough that he’s been warned about. His lungs are skipping uncontrollably on a tripwire of chaff that is pulled taut inside them. He sputters up a gluey fluid, speckled yellow, and he wipes his burning lips in the black acid that coats his forearms. The second wall seems to go quicker and he feels a muscle in his back break free to dominate his dying arms. The new muscle is a bright and powerful sensation, equal to the ruin it compensates for, and when he straightens he feels it push against him, tripping a series of recoiling muscles, retrieving his arms to his sides and cracking his thighs.

As he steps over the foundation of his third wall the HP notices the light in the mow shift from orange flame to purple. The conveyor stops suddenly and squeaks backward horribly before settling. He feels the silence as he did this morning, as a barrier against sensation dropping, and gravity returns to his limbs, pulling him down towards the floor. Above his head the rattle of rain stones up off the aluminum roof. This sound, cool and falling from far away, intensifies the heat and deafness in the mow.

From within the barn below him: “Ah-right!”

The HP makes the jump across to the ladder, floating almost as he climbs down. He feels the rungs in his hands as empty spaces, their surfaces held from his palms by bruises.

The haying isn’t finished, and the rain means they won’t resume for several days. A barn full of wet hay will eventually explode.

The dinner table is twice as laden and the HP finds himself eating smaller portions. He eats alone. Harley has showered and sped off in the car towards town to drink, and Jackson is having a beer himself, sitting in a reclining chair. His daughter is colouring in a book on the floor in front of the television. Dolly is standing by the dishwasher.
with a long wooden spoon in her hand. She is looking through the house. It seems to the HP that she’s calculating. First, she looks to Jackson, then to the dog’s dish, then over to a fly banging against the window screen. She taps the spoon three times quickly and jumps visibly when she notices the HP looking at her. She recovers by smiling and tilts a bowl of greens toward him.

He returns the smile and says, “No, thank ya kindly, ma’am.”

She continues smiling and looks to her husband, who has now fallen asleep in the reclining chair.

That night the HP cannot sleep. He lies on the lower bunk, staring up into the dark. There is no space heater’s glow and the room is only present in its strong smells. He is picturing the people he shares the house with. Quiet, strong and beautiful. Jackson’s shyness and his intimate game with the sky. Harley’s coltish grin and addiction to showers. And Dolly. Dolly’s strange sight. She confers something with it. She sees. What?

The Higher Power decides he’ll get up and wander through the house a bit. Listening. He gets to the upper floor and finds himself tiptoeing down the hall.

I shouldn’t be. I shouldn’t.

He stands in front of the master bedroom door and listens. The toy tractor of Jackson’s snore purrs. The HP turns and notices a soft light beneath the daughter’s door.

He presses his hand against it, and the door falls open.

She is sitting on the edge of the bed facing the wall. In a voice like a snapping twig she says, “Now what?”
AFTERWORD

When we began to look at putting out a new edition of this book, my editor and friend Michael Holmes asked me if I wanted to change anything. It hadn’t occurred to me that that would be part of the deal. Change it. I dug through some bookshelves to find a copy and cracked it open. Would I change anything? Really? As I read through the first few pages I realized that, no, I wouldn’t change anything — I’d change everything. It is not the book I would write today. I’m not the person who wrote this book. I remember him. He had just graduated with a degree in semiotics, which is to say he was insufferably preoccupied with literary malformations. He didn’t actually expect anyone to read it and he held this to be the book’s best virtue. He wanted to magnify the least recognizable parts of his thoughts and feelings. Not just a sketch book, but something far, far less. He wanted to write an “instead,” or an “in case.” “Instead” of a first novel. “In case” one day there might be something to say. “In case” I ever decide to write a book. It’s a place where a book might have been written. And so, and this is the aggravation of the book, and, indeed, the arrogance of the damn thing, it didn’t have to ever be a good one. When I read it and think, oh no, you shouldn’t have done that, and this part can’t work like that, I have to remember, it never really guarded itself against “bad” or “wrong” choices. And so, now that I have been asked to write this afterword, I realize it has to be an apology, not for the book, which can’t be helped, but for that fact that I was unfaithful to its first virtue: I have asked you to read it, and now, sitting here at the end, I am telling you that it might be a mistake that you did.

The process of turning this into a film, which is the impatient opposite of everything the book thinks it is, brings me closer, alas, to the writer I am today. In the ten or so years leading up to the script Bruce would finally shoot, I wrote, sometimes alone and sometimes with others, dozens of scripts. In fact, now that it is done, I am still writing sequels. The irony of Pontypool, for me, is that it isn’t the thing I wrote in case I wrote; it’s the only thing I ever write. The film bears little resemblance to the novel. How could it? There is a long line of former producers to the project who argued against my involvement, but, though I often suspected they were right, I think in the end I was the right person, because no one had a lower regard for this infuriating book than myself. I felt great energy in tossing the book aside. I wanted something new. Something that worked. Something like work.

The first day of shooting was completely harrowing for me. I had been re-writing for years and had grown quite used to the luxury of always getting another shot. I think after years of Guided by Voices addiction I had developed Bob Pollard syndrome: if you don’t like this one, I got four thousand more in a suitcase under my bed. Sketches, loose wet pages and photos. The lake. Plenty more where they come from. But when Stephen McHattie and Lisa Houle stood there, heads full of memorized lines and feet firmly on their marks, I knew that, marvelously and terribly, sometimes things are finished. In the mornings I would go over the day’s lines and grow frantic that they were awful — because of course they were. Every line is always awful. And then I’d trip and bounce around the set, all the busy people who didn’t know how badly the script was failing them, and find Bruce, who I could never tell this to. I’d seek out Stephen and Lisa who were enjoying the script far too much to be of any use. The producers on the other hand were so superstitious of uncertainty that I think they avoided me with cat-like sense. And then Bruce would call “action” and it was too late, and silence fell and everyone started to focus. Focus! Focus is the last thing we need. We need blurry and unknown and unfinished. We need palimpsest and stick figures and many, many more meetings. I stood there, clammy and guilty and waiting for someone, anyone, to realize how desperately we needed a re-write. Then the scene began, a kind of unassuming feeling to the dialogue. It seemed natural and I watched as these two people began their day. Pouring coffee. A little chit-chat. And this was it. By some strange and miraculous process, in spite of the claw marks across the page, these two actors had finished it. It was a thing. It was people on a specific day. People who really had no idea what was coming. This was not what I thought I had written at all — this was actually very good. I relaxed and drew myself up. I was the writer and this was the good movie he had written. Just then one of the PAS walked by me and out of the corner of his mouth he said to the prop person, “They let the writer on the set?” It was meant to be funny, but it’s a cliché I found myself embodying: a destructively self-conscious child in a room of shopworn adults. The shoot went quickly and I did rewrite daily as it turned out; in fact, I rewrote the ending the night before we shot it, perhaps because I was getting comfortable with the idea that no matter what I wrote there was a company of fine people invested in making it work. For a writer that is a massive advantage. Years of fighting and flirting and arguing and despairing had somehow transformed into a giant tent of people co-operating with an idea. A tremendously humbling sensation and, looking back, a striking refutation of that book I wrote back there. The book you just read.

After seeing the film assembled for the first time and feeling great relief that it wasn’t as bad as all that, I leaned over to Lisa Houle, who I was nuts over, and whispered, “Well, thank Christ, now I never have to watch it again.”
Later, at a party for some event, Lisa sought me out. She had been worried, she explained, that I didn’t like the film. I was quite alarmed by this. I did like the film. I loved her in it. In fact — and this is another odd fact about filmmaking — you have these momentary raptures about other people. Stephen McHattie is a shaman to me. Bruce McDonald is a shaman to me. I asked Lisa why she thought this? She reminded me of what I had said to her at the screening. She looked hurt. I smiled. *Actors. Sheesh.*

“Oh darlin’, you should know I never say anything I can’t take back later.”
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