LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

On the ferry ride back to Halifax after seeing a play in Dartmouth, a man I recognized from the audience approached me to ask if I had enjoyed the production. "Yes," I replied, trying to be both enthusiastic and polite, "very much so." The man expressed an enthusiastic regret for having bothered to see it at all. His criticism hinged on the fact that the play was too realistic: "A play isn't a play if it's just real life," he said.

In the previous issue, I wrote that "there is a simple beauty in that mystery, in the search for accurate expression in the small, natural symmetry of the every day; in its completion, dailiness finds itself neither simple nor small. It's more like a beginning." I've been thinking more about this idea, of the beauty in dailiness and how it's the beginning of – of something. When infused with something extra, the ordinary shifts – it becomes paranormal, sur-real (sur meaning "over, above, at the top of"), as if there were some pale gauze-like layering over-top of the commonplace. Surrealism is defined as "automatism by which one proposes to express, either verbally, in writing, or by any other manner, the real functioning of thought."

I'm not trying to suggest that the play I saw was Surrealist, but since this man on the ferry was so quick to dismiss something that I had enjoyed for its attempt to illustrate "the real functioning of thought" – the beautifully ordinary details of dailiness – I had to reconsider my reaction.

David Foster Wallace believed that art, like philosophy, was a way of ordering life. In many of his works he tried to delineate and represent a certain process of thought. Wallace differed from other modernists and postmodernists, however, because the thoughts he wanted to explore were those of boredom: "lethargie...melancholy, saturninia, otiositas, tristitia; that is, to be confused with sloth and torpor and lassitude and eremia and vexation and distemper and attributed to spleen." Further into the story "Wiggle Room," excerpted from his unfinished manuscript and published in the March 9th New Yorker, Wallace's narrator notes that "'interesting' first appears just two years after 'bore.' 1768. Mark this, two years after. Can this be so?"

Many of the works in this issue exhibit detritus and details from the every day – found hair elastics, a plastic bag caught in a tree, crumpled paper, a headache – but, because of their presence in this issue, they are presented as art. The line is fine: things like this accrue meaning when we give them meaning, and the real can become more than real when considered under some such gauze-like layer.

Harriet Alida Lye

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"Fiction that isn't exploring what it means to be human today isn't art."
- David Foster Wallace

So You've Got a Little Bit of Money and Some Pizza Coupons

Your Train Has Broken Down

Melanie Colosimo

My Headache
by Andrew James Weatherhead

I have a headache,

(why would Andrew have

a headache?)

the earth's conspiring against me,

he thinks.

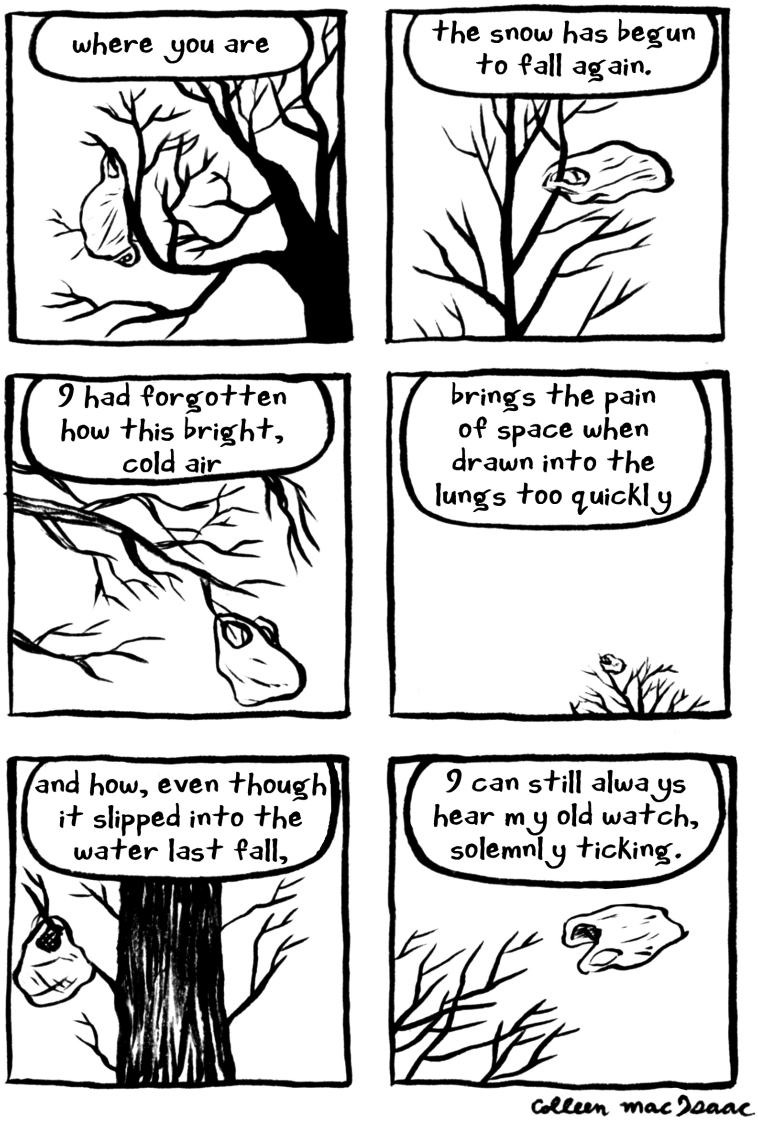
1) A ripple in Tokyo is

a tidal wave in _____?

no that's not right,

that can't be right

Ben Stephenson



The Rafiki Troupe
by Ben Stephenson

part two

My fifth Tuesday in the Rafiki Troupe was the day of the annual field trip. It was always the zoo. I lived relatively close, so I just walked to the zoo and met them there. I beat them, and watched them all file off the bus together. Allison got off last.

Everyone seemed to be in high spirits, especially The Mom, who was wearing the most flowery flowered shirt I have ever seen. Allison started handing out zoo bracelets to the troupe like a mother at a birthday party. Then she noticed me, and almost jumped.

"I really didn't think you'd be here," she handed me a bracelet.

"I had to come."

Presumably mistaking my acceptance for enthusiasm, she smiled.

"Sorry about last week," I said.

She put her own bracelet on carefully.

"Let's go see some monkeys," she said.

The path was wide enough for families of ten to walk side-by-side, holding hands. It snaked past dusty wooden pens, shining steel cages, and cold glass tanks, which contained dozens of living objects for the public to enjoy. On the far side of the property was an entire compound dedicated to primates. We headed that way gradually, crunching the gravel pathway and spending time looking at all the other non-monkey animals on the way. A peacock opened up and showed off for us, bored. The father lion gave a gigantic yawn, just in case we were wondering what kind of a day he was having. The rhinoceros lingered in a corner, trying to think of something to do. The giraffes paced and recalled the good old days in Africa, when vultures were the only hungry things staring at them. On the other hand, the otters splashed around, swimming in endless circles. They were the only animals that I thought actually looked like they loved living in the zoo.

A boy no younger than sixteen but who looked not a day past eleven was wearing a navy blue zoo uniform and showing a tortoise to some kids on a mulched spot on the side of the path. His part-time job consisted of watching the tortoise limp towards freedom, and whenever he nearly got away, to pick him up and turn him a hundred and eighty degrees. He'd tell the kids the creature's gender, weight, and name, tell them he was a tortoise, not a turtle, and spin him around and around.

The troupe hung together, loosely. I mostly stuck with Allison and Derek. When we made it to the big concrete monkey house, there was a subtle but noticeable feeling of group unity. I couldn't decide whether I felt like I was part of something, or that I was observing something. The primates were pretty cool.

Allison loved the spider monkeys, how they ran with incredible agility along the branches in their cage, across ropes, and over top of each other. Derek and I caught ourselves "aww"ing at the pygmy marmosets. Their perma-sad faces really were too cute. A few of the members made notes or studies in their sketchbooks, but mostly, we all just enjoyed watching monkeys.

We eventually ended up at the gigantic gorilla pen. It was essentially a big hole dug out and then shoved full of 'gorilla home.' The grass inside the pen was tall and deep green, and various trees and rocks had seemingly been tossed around the place. Their placement was entirely unnatural – to make things less climbable, I figured. The area smelled sweetly of feces and heat. A thirty-foot concrete wall bordered the grassy gully on one side; on top of the wall sat thick metal railings lining the asphalt, on top of that were bleachers, and on top of those sat the Rafiki Troupe. We rested and watched the gorillas laze around and scratch themselves. It was just us, one other family of three, and a very pretty girl. She seemed to be there alone.

A zoo sign posted nearby told us the dominant male in a group of gorillas was called a 'silverback,' and his group was called a 'troop.' That might have been the first time I was convinced that a sign was shouting specifically at me. I almost laughed out loud. It was easy to spot the silverback; he sat alone on a throne of a rock above all the others, who hung out in small groups of two or three, scattered around the enclosure.

Looking into the silverback's eyes was like watching an endangered species commercial on television. He looked unbelievably tragic. His big, black irises loped around the whites of his eyes, his pupils slid from person to person. I got up and went to the railing to get closer. In a few of the corners, it looked like he could have scaled the concrete and escaped. He must not have been able to though, or else I figured he would have.

But then, maybe he actually didn't want to get out. If he was born in the zoo, he might know nothing better. He had a place to live, food to eat, the potential for reproduction, and everything else he needed. He even had other gorillas around to befriend, if he chose. But, a jungle-born gorilla captured and fenced in would undoubtedly want to escape his holdings. Were the fences to keep him from liberating himself, or merely from wandering aimlessly?

It was easiest for me to believe that either way, there was something deep in his inherited genes that told him he was not where he belonged. Easiest to believe

that someday, the fences would be a necessity. I wondered how long an animal would struggle unsuccessfully to get free, before giving in and making the best of it. I thought about the boy with the tortoise, and wondered if he'd ever be out of a job.

The silverback's gaze made its way towards me and we shared a moment of eye contact. In that second – likely only half a second, really – it was impossible for me to think of him in the same way as the other animals, even the other monkeys. He glanced through me and, for a moment, was human.

There was a tap on my shoulder. It was Derek.

"Can I speak with you for a sec?" he said.

I followed him twenty feet or so away from the gorillas and the humans.

"Remember when you said, 'why monkeys?'" he asked.

"Yeah, actually I think I might have just figured it out."

"Oh –" he coughed. "Well I think, for me anyway, it's like, 'why not?'"

"Why not?"

"Like, it almost doesn't matter. Monkeys, or anything else. The troupe is, just something I do – cough – something we do."

I nodded, so he'd continue, but he was really putting a damper on the silverback.

"I mean, I have always been a monkey –" he coughed, "– a monkey fan, sure, but I think when it comes down to it, it's just something to do."

Derek was someone who I quickly ran out of things to say to. So I nodded, walked back to the group, and he followed.

"Alright, ready?" Allison said, to no one in particular. Everyone stood up; it was time to go home. The zoo was closing soon.

I sat down instead, as they walked away. Allison, of course, came back for me.

"Are you staying?"

"Yeah, I think so. I like it here."

"Ok, well, see you next week?"

"Yeah, most likely."

"Alright. Bye!"

"Allison?"

She turned around. "Hmm?"

"I'll be the liaison."

"What?"

"I want to be the representative, the liaison, or whatever."

Allison looked sideways with bright eyes and worked her lips into a smile.

"I'll make you a new nametag," she said.

I stayed there a while thinking about council meetings and votes and speeches and how fate was such a funny-guy. What had I gotten myself into? My mother had better be proud.

That very pretty girl was still there too, which was uncomfortable, because everyone else had left. She had long brown hair and a black cardigan and black tights. She was taking pictures with a digital SLR, leaning against the railing. She moved with a quickness that somehow told me she knew how pretty she was, but that it wasn't a big deal, and that she didn't care if anyone cared. She looked like she was concentrating really hard on the photo she wanted.

I went to the railing again to get one last look at the silverback. He howled, then got up and strutted suavely over to the rest of his fellow gorillas. His feet had strange thumbs which stuck out at right angles, far from the rest of his toes. Did he really need to use his hands to walk as well?

Something was in front of my face. The girl was showing me a photo on the screen of her camera.

"Wait," she said.

She zoomed in, and showed me the face of the silverback. She had gotten the eyes perfectly.

"Wow." I said. I didn't know what else to say.

Standing beside her, I realized how out of place she was there, in the zoo, alone. She wasn't a mom with her three daughters and one son, or a fifth grader on a school trip. She wasn't a retired couple with nothing better to do.

"What are you doing here?" I said. It was a stupid thing to say.

She laughed. "Just looking at the animals like everyone else, I suppose. What are you doing here?"

"I was on an annual field trip with a cult of wannabe art students who have practically taken vows of silence, and they only paint monkeys."

Her eyebrows went up and she laughed. I didn't laugh, so her eyebrows came back down.

"You're serious? They only paint monkeys?"

"We only paint monkeys, I guess." It felt strange to say.

"Wow," she said, because she probably didn't know what to say, either.

"I wanna come." she said.

"What? No, you don't –"

"Yeah, I wanna come! Of course I do."

"You have no idea what you're getting into," I said.

A man in a neon orange uniform walked down the path towards us, carrying a garden hose.

"Time's up," he said, "zoo's closed."

We walked back through the zoo towards the bus-stop, talking. She was great at making conversation. I promised myself I'd write to my mom as soon as I got home.

The Lawn Mower / Dance Move #1

Melanie Colosimo

Dedications

by Terry Andrew Craven

On First Sitting (in the works of Egon Schiele)

In the streets, ditch-brown and drought-green,
he took her walking, where finally she posed
nude for him in the peasants house
he sublets her it now for such
and before the others arrived, she'd
sit, the scenery set a constant autumn,
washing on the nothinged shoreline. She'd glimpse
mirrors through the windows of locked rooms,
hear the murmurs of friends, sometimes,
sat in the weather-sodden houses of this,
his stroke by stroke uncovering of
an empty hamlet. Circled in black.
Inscribed only with scattered hieroglyphs, his name,
Egon Schiele.

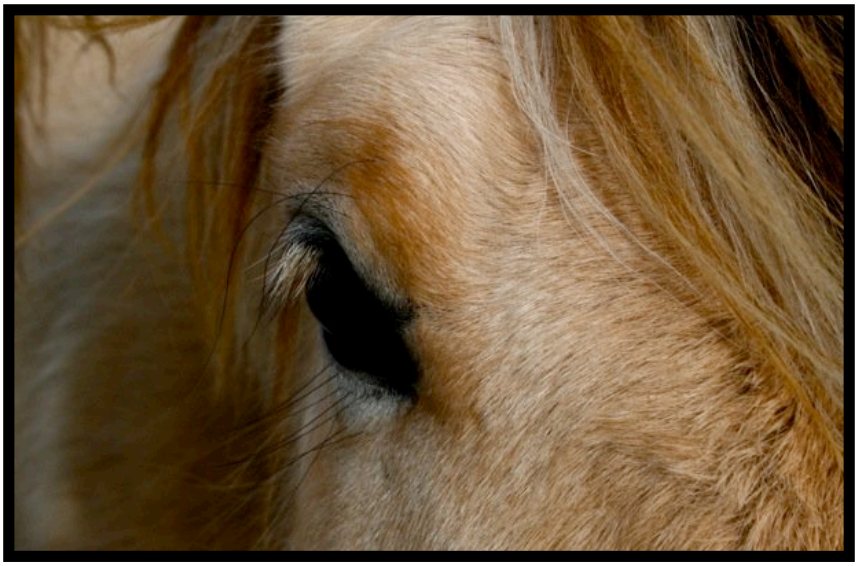
Frank O'Hara (Leeds)

Eat apple crumble,
feel (in the low cut
ingot sun) international.

Look French a touch
and don't want to buy
anything ever
again. Though need

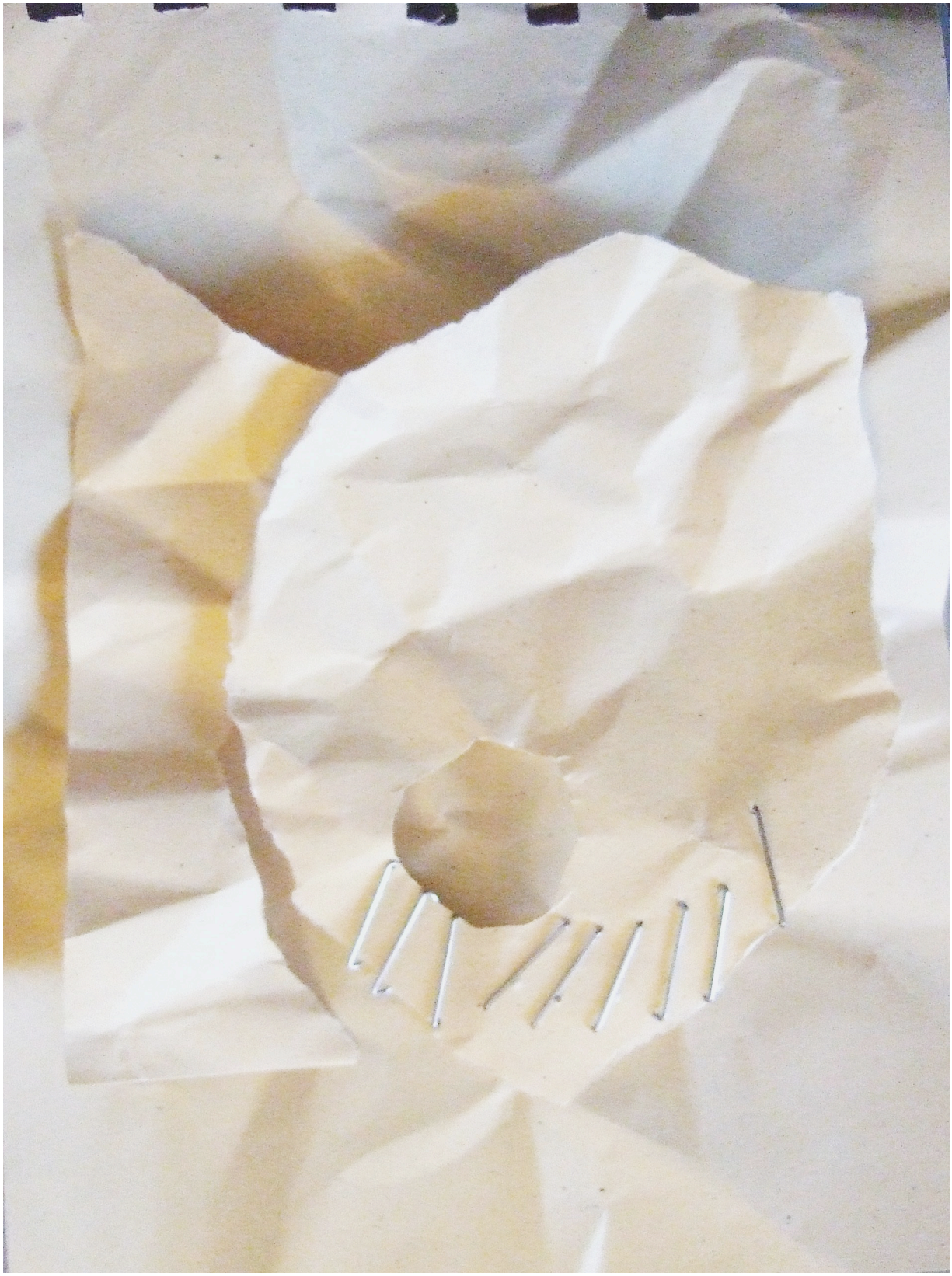
10 – 12 apples
and some icebags. Smile
at things, reading too
much Frank O'Hara.

Justine Kerr



Arrow, Echo

Meredith Lewis



on violence
by Nanci Lee

tissue wings
singed
to stilted flail

yet

that instant
unwavering
return.

The only things he knows about the girl (other than that he loves her)
by Harriet Lye

1. Walking Northwards on Windsor, she carries a box.
2. The April sun, a halo behind her head.
3. The box is full of white sheets.

Olive Oyl

Krista Comeau

Parade

Matt Allamon

Nota Bene

by Andy Verboom

The following fragment was discovered in part in the margin of an early twentieth-century edition of your Shakespeare's sonnets. I present it here in hopes that readers may make of its truancy some satisfactory gravity. The titularity, locution of the first line is uncertain; the tilt, gash of its frenetic scrawl curses, there are hints of accusation, perhaps it is mere the beginning. It is the hand-sure wholeness of graffiti, brutal intimacy of Judased disciplines. It should also be noted that a seventh marginal signature, coursing blue as a wrist vein disappears when looked at directly appears to have been coolly half-erased, perhaps apocryphal; perhaps it has not yet come, but haunts, a cipher waiting to be caressed.

Propaganda

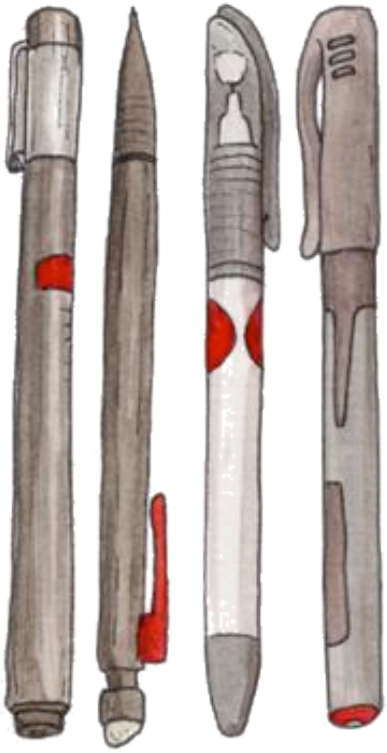
Haw can a lava yaa

Hiw cin i livi yii

How con o lovo yoo

Hew cen e leve yee

Huw cun u luvu yuu



Colleen MacIsaac

Laura Dawe

Learning to Spell
by Harriet Lye

That was the October I turned seventeen, fell in love, and started taking birth control. I could hardly walk I was moving so much. I was insatiable.
I picked him from a small series of admirers for no real reason. He was a little younger than the rest of them – he was in grade ten, and I was in grade eleven – and I found him curious and small and afraid. His hands were shy. He read a lot. He had Windexy-blue eyes. The first thing he told me was that he'd never "been with a woman before." He was intriguing but fundamentally uninteresting.

There was a stone memorial tower about the size of four people stacked on top of each other that stood on top of the by the big hill, right on Portland street. It was in a small green "park" just off the sidewalk, sort of hidden by a few stubby oak trees. We would go there, to the foot of the tower, after school to just lay there and talk about the things we thought were important. When I was with him, I always felt like I was putting on a show, like he was observing me, remembering and preserving everything I said to keep for later.

We would walk to the sidewalk and put our hands flat on top of the dark pink city at the bottom of the hill, at the bottom of the long wide road, straight like the parting of his flat yellow hair in his third-grade school-portrait that sat on top of the television. We pretended like we were bigger than the city on the other side of the arm, correspondingly stubby as our own town but somehow entirely different. We acted like everything over there was small and unimportant compared to where we were, but really, though we didn't say it, we knew it to be the opposite. The miniature set of glassy spikes and the vague puddle of russet haze that stuck to the skyline was where we imagined ourselves strutting around some day, wearing pretty and expensive clothes, smoking cigarettes and taking taxi-cabs whenever we wanted. We didn't go into Halifax much.

Maybe he was thinking something different. I don't know. I could feel him looking at me, though, at the side of my face. I pretended not to notice.

We walked across the street to the diner which was floating in the middle of a parking lot. We smoked a cigarette underneath the neon tubing in the window, shaped to spell OPEN. The red hung on his face in a way so beautiful and transient – Hold still, I said, Hold still – and I took the camera from my bag and sat on his lap, holding the camera right up to his face to try and capture the redness, the glow that clung to his baby-skin.

The food took too long to come. She was impatient. She had a small appetite but was always hungry. Whenever she had an idea, she got terribly hungry, too. She had an idea then. She got up and started walking around the empty diner. She went up to the neon letters spelling N-E-P-O in the window as if to see where the red came from; she touched the O and withdrew, making the sound and shape of an O as she wove around the round tables, adjusting the mustard dishes with their little silver spoons sticking out like tongues. She didn't look over to me, though it would be wrong to say that she was uncurious. She was confident, insouciant, petulant. She was always hungry and never filled up.

I wanted to tell her something, something probably terribly important, but I couldn't. I grabbed her shoulder as she passed me, weaving, adjusting. She shrugged, turned around and took me in with her low laugh, ominous and arbitrary. She turned and walked back to the window, lifted the glass of milk she'd left there and held it in her hands, still, white on white. "A list of things that the sea does" she quoted, "is not what the sea is." It ticked off her tongue like a lesson that someone had once written on a blackboard, somewhere. Sometimes I would watch her from this window as she left – sometimes I would even follow her outside and walk behind her until the corner, sometimes further – and think of the fine nature of those beautiful wing-like shoulder-blades that always shrugged me off.

South shore cycle

by David Stones

1. Go East

Go east, my love implored
please east, with a whispering sigh.

But my ancient, slobbering lover's tongue
so wise and harnessed by splendour
knew best
went south
and drove my heaving, breathless angel
to the very brink of heaven

Later, in my arms
her body turned to smoke
she said that was the last time
she would ever offer me directions.

And then I combed
the soft and golden round
of her sleeping head
and all her dreams came out
in a drifting, easy bruise
of broken stars.

2. The Lilt And Bend Of Shapes

This Macallan 18 commands worship of a higher enterprise. I have boarded an abandoned streetcar of embrace and goodbye. But I like it here and the waitress is beginning to sound like bells. Outside the fog has taken the air away. Birds drip and sag on the wet wires. The harbour surrenders to the lilt and bend of shapes. This place is empty now save the couple by the window, toiling in the vast embroidery of love. On the table she places her small, white hands. And for too long they lie there, frightened and alone against the dark wood. Then over them he places his own, captures in his own the small, white, frightened loaves of her hands and raises them to his lips. And she watches his face and she says yes, yes, this is what I wanted, yes. Such are the small mercies enacted in Port Mouton before the dripping robins. Our lady of the bells visits and asks well what do we know today? And this is when I write this down, my lifetime of accumulated knowledge tempered by Mr. Macallan and all the poems that have leaked out of me for almost sixty years. That love retreats from sorrow and sorrow from the rags of love. That the line upon the page is the only truth, though words can result in darkness. And it is too often the human heart that fails against the grey folds of rain.

Sweet Potato Pound Cake
with brown butter icing

In the middle of beating the mashed sweet potatoes into the flour mixture, I got The Fear: that fear when everything is lumpy when it should be smooth, when you're in the middle of cutting someone's hair and it all looks fuzzy and jagged, when your drawing looks nothing like the one on the paint-by-numbers box, or when you're mashing sweet potatoes into a cake and wondering "what am I thinking, sweet potato cake?" You know, The Fear.

The Fear was uncalled for, in this case: the cake was so good that my room-mates and I ate it straight from the tin.

Though this recipe called for a bundt tin, I was not so equipped: luckily, it worked fine in a large loaf-pan.

The warmth of the cinnamon and nutmeg gently complement the taste of the sweet potatoes that is as subtle as a properly punctuated letter.

INGREDIENTS

cake

3 ¼ cups all-purpose flour, 2 tsp. baking powder, ½ tsp. baking soda, ½ tsp. freshly ground nutmeg, ½ tsp. salt, ½ cup milk, 1 tsp. vanilla extract, 8 oz unsalted butter, room temp., 1 cup sugar, 1 cup light brown sugar, 4 large eggs, 2 cups mashed cooked sweet potatoes

Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease and flour a 10-inch tube or Bundt pan.
Combine dry ingredients and whisk together. Combine the milk and vanilla in smaller bowl. In another large bowl, beat the butter, and both sugars until fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each one. Add sweet potatoes; mix until the batter is combined. (It may look awful. Struggle through; you will make it.) With the mixer on low speed, add half the flour mixture, then half the milk mixture; continue to beat until well blended. Add the remaining flour, followed by the remaining milk, and beat on low until the batter is thick and smooth.
Bake for 60 to 75 minutes.

glaze

It was at this point that I lost the recipe: I made this recipe up on the fly and it turned out well. It's butter and sugar – of course it turned out well. The amounts are general ratios. Drizzle over the cake once it's cooled.

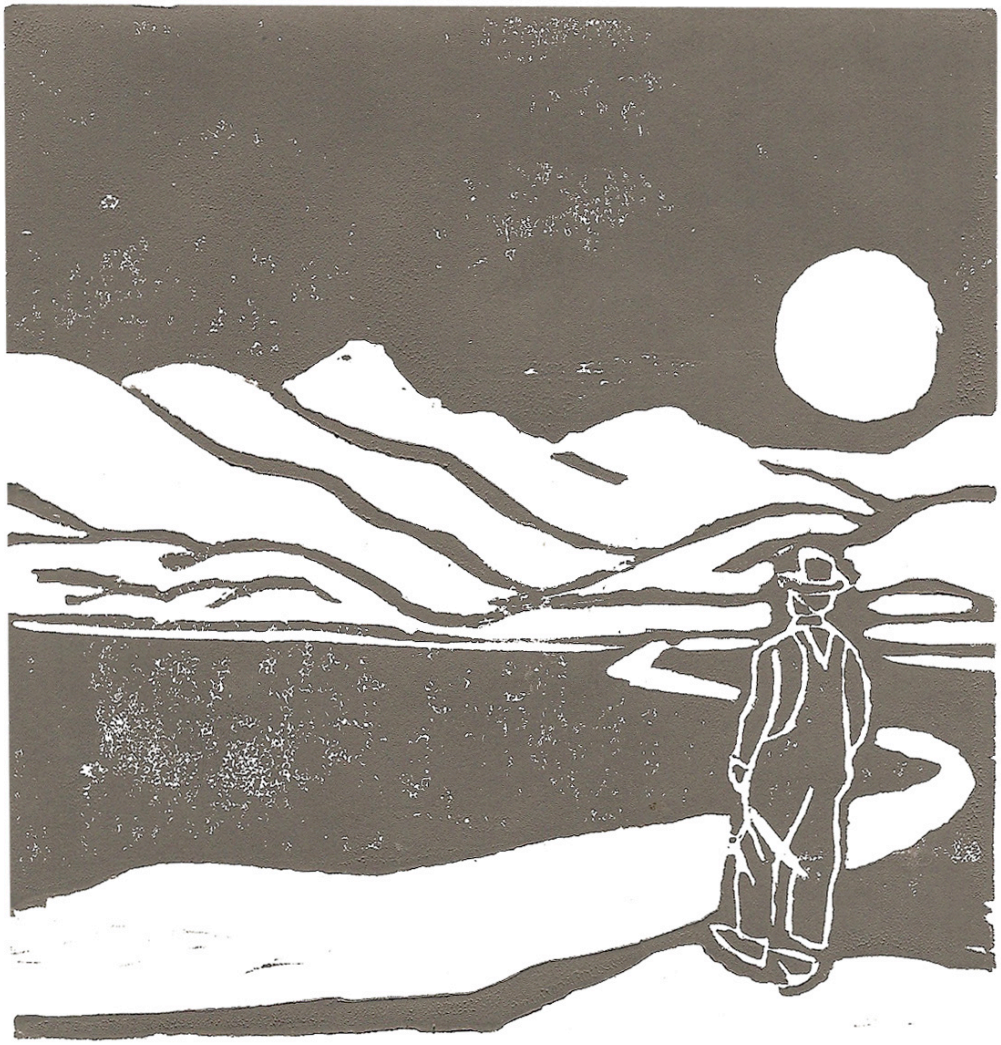
¼ cup icing sugar, ¼ cup milk, ¼ cup brown sugar, 1 tsp cinnamon, ¼ cup butter, dash vanilla.

Living upside down
by Darcy McClare

All of a sudden he felt his feet melt into the concrete beneath. Never before had he experienced anything like it. Both he and the sidewalk seemed to be transforming into a liquid state. The sensation of melting and flowing into the thicker liquid below filled him with emptiness. While this was happening he saw his own transformation as if from the perspective of the lamp post beside him. After a few dazzled moments he began to fear dissolving into his surroundings. He started to struggle, already having liquefied and sunken to the waist. Moving what once were his legs only added to his troubles.

Everything around him was foggy – really though: it was foggy. Fog so thick you could walk on it. And it seemed to be getting thicker to the point of pushing him deeper into a sea of things that used to be solid till he was just a few drops away from merging with the rest of a molten world. Then, in an incredible act of daring – something not entirely uncommon for David, our hero – he plunged himself completely into the liquid sidewalk and miraculously spun himself away from the weighty fog above. He emerged in an instant. On the other side everything appeared strange, though strangely the same.

Ever since, David has been living basically the same life as he had before, only he is a bit more sceptical and suspicious. And though he never quite feels at home he has developed a peculiar affection for lamp posts.



The City, The Road, The Country

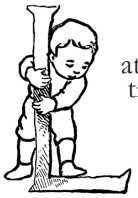
Mark Lamovsek

Alice

Colleen MacIsaac

Diane

by James Gregor



Late in the evenings when I returned from work, I'd look up at the steel métro tracks that run over Boulevard de la Chapelle and picture myself standing at the edge of a rail as white-belted pompiers scurried about on the street below with a trampoline, shouting "Ne sautez pas Monsieur!" Even in that messy and smelly neighbourhood – the urine which hugged the walls, the clouds of exhaust – to be young and unhappy and living in Paris had the tint of glamour to it. My sadness was periodically broken, or lessened, when the wind passed through the tidily-arranged trees in the Jardin du Luxembourg. The boulevards with their frenzy of blown newspapers were a comfort, and so were the Mercedes Benzes weaving around the statues and monuments, carrying their passengers towards cavernous but cozy apartments in Saint-Germain or the Sixteenth.

I think I have a tremendous gift for unhappiness, perhaps not along the lines of a Mozart or a Dante, but certainly a Salieri, or a Dante Gabriel Rossetti, or even one of the Bach children. My despair was not unattractive. I spread it over old cemeteries and fashionable neighbourhoods. Early mornings in Père Lachaise, I sat cross-legged on the cobblestones near Colette's grave. In the windows of the boutiques on St.-Honoré my reflection slid over the patent-leather handbags and the long silk dresses. The doormen in their calfskin shoes glared at me sceptically, as if to warn me off coming inside. On the gravel of the Tuileries I was jostled by happy droves of tourists, waddle-armed women in loose tops and men with shoulder bags that slapped at their fleshy hips.

I shared an apartment with a German and an American near Barbès. Men sold cigarettes in front of the building. As I lay in bed, I could hear their repetitive voices coming through the sooty window. I was ill much of the time and my nose ran constantly. I would sometimes spend the day in bed, watching bad French television and building an unappealing pile of tissues on the side table. The apartment was drafty and bare, heated with portable radiators. Benjamin, my American roommate, a tall, broad Dartmouth graduate with blond hair, had a subscription to the New York Times. When he finished with it, he would pass it onto me. I read about famines in Africa, the civil war in Sri Lanka, and poisoned rivers in Alberta. As for Günther, my German roommate, I was in love with him. He didn't love me back.

I worked at an English-language bookshop. It was a dusty collision of canonical novels, poetry chapbooks speeding toward oblivion, unhinged expatriates bristling with solitude, backpackers, French drunks and petty thieves. Nails stuck out of the walls, snagging and tearing sweaters. In the evening, a black cat would emerge from a corner and unfold itself on a pile of books. There was an unending flow of tourists and we did good business.

One night I was looking at Notre Dame through the window. The air was frigid and the streets were almost empty. The abysmal temperature seemed to intensify the spectacle. The cathedral was more brilliant than ever, flanked by deserted bridges, lit up against the dark sky, each flying buttress muscling forth into the cold air. I could make out, across the street, a dishevelled, plainly-dressed woman step off the sidewalk and weave through the idling cars. She smiled at each of the drivers as she passed. As she came towards the shop I could see that she wore jeans and a jean jacket and none of the gloves or luxuriant, intricately-woven scarves that wrapped most Parisian necks. The door opened and she went to the radiator in the corner. It seemed she knew the place. I turned and went back to the desk.

"Il fait froid ce soir," she said.

I nodded in reply. She switched to English, mistaking my indifference for incomprehension.

"My name is Diane," she said, warming her hands over the radiator. She spoke in accented English, though the accent wasn't French. I nodded again. Her hands were poised above the radiator, ring-less fingers fully extended.

She looked at me.

"When were you born?" she asked.

I looked up, startled.

"Uh, 1981."

She smiled and nodded, somehow satisfied. She lifted her hands from the radiator and straightened up, adopting a casual but assured pose.

"I thought so. I've been coming here since before you were born."

I looked at the floor and stared for a moment without blinking. Such comments were common currency at the shop, which had been open for many years and inspired a sort of febrile loyalty in its patrons. She asked if I was American. I told her no, in fact I was Canadian. She apologized and said that she knew what that was like – I supposed she meant having your nationality overlooked – because she had been an expatriate herself for twenty years. Then she asked me how long I'd been working at the shop. I told her I had moved to Paris from Halifax six months previous. As the conversation continued – due principally to her inquiries but helped along by my compulsively-polite replies – her mouth settled into a contented droop, like a sagging rope. For the better part of an hour she extracted my life from me: family members were catalogued, movements outlined, university curriculum delineated. I had the impression she was carefully noting every detail in some kind of photographic memory bank. I had studied languages, which thrilled her. She was particularly excited to know that I spoke Italian and German. She herself could speak Italian and was learning German.

"Ja," I replied. She pulled a yellow grammar book out of her left breast pocket.

"All I do is study," she said. "And play the piano, of course. I'm a composer. I went to music school in Boston."

I nodded vigorously in acknowledgement.

"You should come and see my piano."

"Certainly," I said.

She stood up. I was cautiously relieved. Prematurely, it turned out.

"What's your name?" she asked.

I made a frantic mental search for an alias, but came up only with "chair," the French word for pumpkin, and the first name of the French president's ex-wife. I capitulated.

"Francis."

"Francis," she said. "See you soon, Francis."

Outside in the freezing air she turned and waved, then disappeared. I wondered when she would return to continue the interrogation.

The following night, as it turned out, she entered the shop with a flourish and delivered a brawny 'Guten Abend!' Then, in halting, tortured German, she dispensed her first command of the evening. She explained that each night we would conduct our conversation in a different language. One night German, Italian the next. Wasn't it a marvellous idea?

"Excellent," I said.

I was like a small country bargaining to avoid annexation.

We exchanged a few inanities about the weather and the history of the Latin Quarter. She seemed immensely satisfied. German and its complicated structures seemed to put her in a strange mood. Perhaps it was the effort of concealing frustration, as the tenses, the declensions, the articles, and

everything else slid out from under her like a leg on ice. The frustration pushed her to confront the most Byzantine subjects. She spoke of Einstein's Theory of Relativity, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, and homeopathic medicine. Despite the fact that her knowledge of these subjects was severely limited, the conversation - or rather, the monologue – would last for hours. I wondered why she was doing this to me, why she did not partake of the swift grace and sparkling fluency of a speaker in command of a native tongue (her English was practically native), how she could prefer the slow labour, the jerky, balking strides of the language learner. Surely it had to be painful for her as well? I decided finally that it was cruelty, a kind of sadomasochism, that she relished the mispronunciations, the backtracking, the agonizing pauses as the words were considered, searched out, or lost.

"Imagine," she said in German. "That you are sitting on a clock racing toward the sun." Amputated and mangled versions of this type of phrase would float heavily in the air between us before I could successfully reassemble them in my head.

I would go home exhausted and complain to Benjamin and Günther.

"She's killing me. It's torture!"

Benjamin feigned sympathy by nodding his head behind the New York Times, which he read like a 1950s suburban husband: up high, unfurled in front of his face, in a La-Z Boy recliner (which he claimed to have found at a flea market). Günther, who was a born pessimist and suspicious of other people's suffering, would tire of hearing about it and leave the room, accusing me, in heavily-accented English, of being 'a drama queen.' He said he thought it was inappropriate to use the word 'torture,' considering the present state of the world.

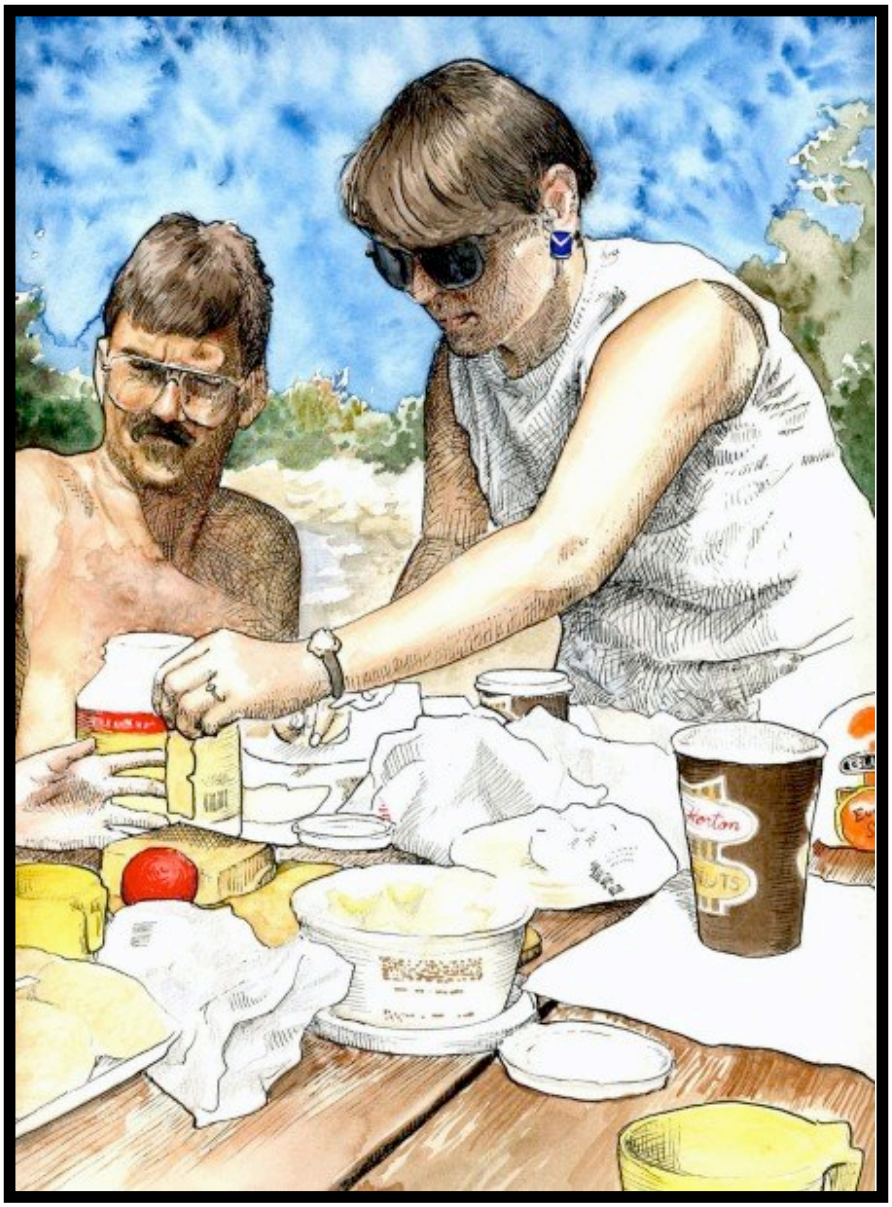
Ever since I had burst into his room one night at four a.m. smelling like a discothèque, and tried to crawl into his bed, he had adopted an air of fatigued condescension and disapproval, as if, by my mere presence, I tipped the scales that weighed the worldly allotment of good and bad, already precarious, decidedly in favour of the bad. He was particularly adept at making this felt without saying anything, being several inches taller than me, broad-shouldered, a doctoral candidate in French history, blue-eyed, deep-voiced and, to add a touch of delicacy to the composition, pale to the point of translucence.

He had discontinued several rituals we shared. On Sundays, despite the prohibitive cost, we would walk together down the rue des Martyrs and eat brunch at the Rose Bakery. I could no longer look forward to the risotto and the jam and his large eyes periodically looking into mine above the plates, or the paralysis that overtook me comparing the dull metal of the utensils against his luring, pale hands. Once or twice I went down and spied him there alone, or with someone I didn't recognize: a tall, severe-looking girl wearing a man's vest, pouring water into foggy glasses. In healthier times I had accompanied him on morning jogs up to the Sacré Coeur, but he began to leave in the morning without waking me up. I told myself it didn't matter anyway, that my declining health did not permit it. I would have done anything for him to love me, or at least to tolerate my presence. Sometimes, when he entered the room – because it was impossible, in such a small apartment, to keep ourselves apart – I would enter into a semblance of anaphylactic shock, an embarrassing psychosomatic eruption (blocked throat, faintness), from which I am sure he drew quiet satisfaction. He was not without vanity.

My unassuaged feelings for Günther made me sensitive to the sufferings of others. Offhandedly one night, while leafing through a recently-arrived biography of Schumann, Diane revealed that she had been unable to compose for several years. I was shocked, though I displayed only mild surprise. I had imagined she passed her days composing, the metronome beating out her labour like a drum major. Now there was a black void where her days should have been. She said her response to music had begun to fade as well, that she could no longer feel the exquisite sadness which used to consume her while listening to Schubert. To be envied were those in their passionate, furious youth who still possessed a sensitive apparatus of feeling. As she spoke, I felt a distinctly unenviable sadness come over me. I imagined myself in her shoes. I saw the broad, flat avenue of my life meandering about, without purpose, through long, lonely, boring days. I hadn't spoken to my family in weeks. I wondered if it was the beginning of a prolonged estrangement. The following day was my birthday. Would anyone even acknowledge it?

"Excuse me," I said, hiding my tears with my hand. I ran upstairs to the bathroom, where I stayed for several minutes stifling sobs and wiping my eyes and spritzing deodorant in the corners to banish a horrible smell. When I returned to the cash register Diane was gone. There was a note lying on my chair.

SEE YOU TOMORROW!



“Who wants cheese?”

Sydney Smith

things to believe in

i.

a firefly.
a bear in a copse
in a forest in some place
you've never been.

ii.

the boy looks at his hands and feels they are too large.
he sees a difference between inside
and outside.

iii.

the colourless flesh
of the inside of blueberries

iv.

you know that mark above your upper lip,
that indent like a fingerprint?
did you know it is the last part of your body
to develop? a zipper, a seal.

v.

ashes and cold water, coffee sludge.
a robin, milky morning light.
there is a simpler way of putting this sequence: it is
first death, then rebirth.

vi.

tell the kid afraid
of getting old: you aren't
growing Up, you're growing
into your Self.

vii.

if there were time, I would tell you of the
many shades of gray that inhabit the streets there:
cobblestone, shale, limestone, concrete, marble;
the clouds, fickle lovers.

viii.

It is morning and it is cold. I put on socks.
It is morning and the old chef is preparing the daily specials in the kitchen in the back.
He comes out to the café bar with a gutted fish – the head & tail remaining on the clean skeleton – and holds it up behind the barista's head, his hands giving life to the dead thing.

ix.

I want to tell you something
but I don't know what you believe in.
If nothing, an un-belief is still a belief,
I want to remind you.

x.

The Spring Thaw.
Rosemary for remembrance. Sweet William, pansies.
A daffodil.

recall her always lustful tongue
licking as the knife would

who is cooking
bitter feet

please stop

Dalhousie Arts & Social Sciences Society