Falling Upward
A Collection of Short Stories

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FALLING UPWARD

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As a collection, *Falling Upward*, negotiates elements of intimacy and distance, exploring the plummet and lift of relationships between lovers, friends and family. Set in Montreal, these stories examine transition and communication. A sense of wistful irony recurs as sex and language both fall short in the characters' struggle to communicate. In the title story, "falling upward" refers to unrequited love. But the contraries of this oxymoron also speak for the collection as a whole: the pull in two different directions at once; being torn between hanging on and letting go, between desire and self-preservation. In this space in between, one finds one's awareness changed. The "dropping lift" of the term also suggests a certain resilience, a measure of hope.

Falling Upward

Lying

Letty started by lying. She lied about her present, past, and future. She said she had lots of waiting experience. She had, for phone calls and buses. She told Fino, the balding owner of the Spanish restaurant, she was settling down in Montreal. She said she spoke great Spanish, *hombre*; she was trilingual. She chattered with bravado to prove it, "*Aí que sí senor, bien oui monsieur.*"

When Fino asked her how many plates she could carry, she said: "Oh lots." She didn't lose her nerve even though she'd heard that one place downtown tested applicants who said they'd waited tables before. The manager got out a tray of glasses and a full pitcher and asked them to fill the glasses and balance the tray at the same time in order to get a job serving swilling McGill students draft beer.

"On your arms. I mean the arms." He patted his forearms like he was lining them with plates. "How many?"

Here she shrugged, making the quick decision to flavour her lies with grains of truth. "Well, I never tried."

"You never use arms in other jobs? How you work?"

"Trays," she improvised. "We use trays." She kept her English in the present tense to match his.

He looked at her as if he could see through to her lying squirming soul but was weighing that against her wholesome appearance. "OK. Tomorrow at five. Wear a nice black *jupe*."

That evening Letty revelled in her delicate blending of fact and fiction. This was the short golden interlude of having found a job before actually having to do it. She felt rich at the idea of income and splurged on a Flamenco Flame lipstick and a Lindt chocolate bar at the drugstore to celebrate her employment at Casa Fino. She wrote a postcard to her mother: "Found work!"

She had only been in Montreal a month, her roommates were friends of friends of friends, a.k.a. strangers, and the money from teaching English at day camps in Spain was running out. Last week she almost burst into tears at the library check-out counter. The librarian said she needed a reference to get a card. Letty knew no one apart from her roommates and the librarian insisted on someone at a different address.

"*Je ne sais pas personne*," she said.

"*Tu ne connais personne*?" the librarian corrected her way of not knowing. "No

person at your work?"

"I don't have a job."

"You'll have to come back when you will have a reference. I'm sorry." The librarian took Letty's books — companionable novels by Anne Tyler and P.D. James — and placed them precisely out of her reach on a cart behind the counter.

Come on, you must know what it's like to have no friends, Letty wanted to say. She felt lonely and desperate and had to go sit down in a booth in the language lab area to cry. There was a Chinese man with headphones on. He was repeating seriously after a tape: "Yes, thank you, I will have a shey, please. Yes, thank you, I will have a shey, please." Sherry? Letty wondered. What a useful phrase. She felt sad for both of them.

On her way home she stopped at the bank to see why her bank card hadn't come in the mail. Giovanna Caruso, Customer Services, sat behind a bare desk with her name plate centred on it. Giovanna had huge hair and cascading gold earrings that brushed her shoulders.

"You said on your form you didn't have a job," she pointed out.

"No. Yes. I don't."

"We don't normally disburse client cards to unemployed people. We've had quite a bit of fraud at this branch."

"That's really thoughtful. You and the library should get together with the Welcome Wagon. What kind of fraud can you commit with a bank card?" Letty didn't get tears in her eyes this time, she felt disenfranchised and angry. She would

crusade for the rights of the friendless and unemployed.

Giovanna looked at her, gauging her potential for fraud, and touched a sparkling earring. "I can process your form today."

"Thanks." Letty took one of Giovanna's business cards so she could use her as a reference at the library.

The library card was more important. As long as she didn't have a job she didn't really need a bank card. Letty went to the bank during office hours and stood in line with the old people who didn't trust the instant tellers. The bank was next to the cavernous white drugstore with wide aisles, and neat, comforting rows of cleansing products and chocolate bars. After her meetings with the librarian and her financial consultant Giovanna, Letty perused the chocolate, looking for the best deal and settled, again, on the triple pack of peanut butter cups for ninety cents. Then she walked down St-Laurent looking in the windows of the falafel shops, the pizza slice places and the restaurants with real plates and glasses. In the late-November afternoon the restaurants simmered, fragrant and warm light next to the dark gaps of the "*à louer*" vacant store fronts. This street was part trendy, part divey, she walked up and down it every day and already recognized faces of others who always seemed to be doing the same. Letty found herself singing maudlin Willie Nelson: "Freedom's just another word for nuthin' left to lose..." That was when she decided to go to *Mesón Fino* and lie.

As she walked into the restaurant the next evening, Letty dreaded the moment when her lie would be revealed for the self-sabotaging booby trap it was.

She was no waitress. She tried to keep from breaking anything right away. The other waiters were all trim men wearing black pants and white shirts. She looked down at her black dress. Too late she remembered that *jupe* meant skirt, not dress. All in black she was already an overt imposter.

Letty studied the menu and remembered food in Spain, plates of tiny fish for crunching down whole, bones and all, the sea-tasting insides of steamed barnacles, chewy tubes of squid. Antonio from El Salvador showed her the cash register keys that corresponded to different *platos*. The register was connected to a printer in the kitchen that reamed out the orders for the cooks. When the dishes were ready, they pressed a button that made a light go on out front. At least this is what she thought Antonio was telling her. She trailed after his voice, trying to sort out the volley of syllables. She said "*Sí sí sí*," very quickly, and imagined all the accidental food that would pile up in the kitchen when she pressed the wrong buttons.

Antonio trotted into the kitchen, yelling "*Sigame, sigame*," for her to follow him.

In contrast to the quiet low-lit dining room, the kitchen was bright and open and hopping with salsa music. Antonio introduced Letty to Piluca, Fino's wife, and Jorge from Chile, who were adding to a wet fleshy mountain of cleaned squid. Their hands were quick with knives, they whipped out little triangles that looked like clear plastic and flung the white flap of body into the pile.

Piluca looked at Letty's dress and asked what she was wearing, was there a funeral or what.

"All my other clothes were stolen from the laundromat," said Letty. This had happened, but in Madrid a year ago and had no bearing on her ensemble today.

"*Leche!*" said Piluca, spitting out the word "milk" as only the Spanish can, as if it meant leeches, or worse. "*Ladrones*. Thieves. Assles!"

Piluca pronounced assholes without the "ho." The strength of her anger at the laundry thieves was stinging. Letty told herself to stop lying already.

"*Ven*," said Antonio and she trotted after him back into the dining room.

He told her to greet diners at the door and seat them. This went fine until a rush of people came in at once and she got confused. "*Buenas soir-bon noches*," she said. "Good evening," she added, to show she had command of one language, anyway. She smiled constantly from then on, to make up for everything else.

She brought people bread baskets as soon as they sat down. Her sense of accomplishment at getting bread to four tables without dropping a bun vanished when Fino whizzed by and said: "No bread. Not until they order. Go take their orders."

The first table asked for detailed information about every item on the Spanish-only menu, in French. Letty was forced to make things up. She said things like: "*La pulpe, très bon*," and waved her arms to imitate an octopus. She knew the word in Spanish was *pulpo*, how different could it be in French? The couple was mystified by her menu charades and what she meant by saying "very good pulp." She could tell by their faces they were wishing they'd just gone Mexican. She flagged down Antonio who smoothed everything over by adding a vowel: "*Poulpe*," he

pronounced. The couple ordered it, along with several other dishes and Letty wrote it all down, word for word.

She spent ten anxious minutes at the cash register, looking for the right buttons. Then Antonio glided by and handed her a corkscrew, the compact kind real waiters use. Letty felt the weight of it in her hand. She asked the bartender for a bottle of Rioja red and brought it to the table. Smiled. She screwed in the corkscrew and hoped for a graceful resolution to this situation. She pulled; the cork wouldn't budge. The couple stared at her expectantly.

"*Momentito,*" she smiled and took the bottle behind the bar, out of view, where she put it between her knees and yanked. The cork flew out and she thumped herself in the nose with her fist. "Ow!"

Luis, the bartender, had materialized behind her. "*Vaya, chica,*" he said, shaking his head.

Letty ignored him and strode away to pour the wine.

After this, she clung to the cash register and looked out at the tables of people out for a nice dinner on a Saturday night, waiting for their food, or chewing, happy to be waited on.

The little light went on. Something was ready. She found garlic shrimp and soup in a shallow bowl waiting on the counter in the kitchen. She cursed her table for ordering soup. The bowl shifted on its plate when she was halfway across the floor. Trying to regain her balance she touched the sizzling pan of shrimp on the plate in her other hand. She could feel her thumb burning but there was no way to

remove it without dropping everything and nowhere to stop and get a grip, all the tables were full. Her table by the window seemed to be receding into the street and her thumb was burning hot as a spotlight as she crossed the stage of the floor.

Letty slid the dishes onto the table sloshing soup and banging the plates into glasses. Her thumb throbbed. "*Excusez-moi,*" she said to the diners, despising them.

Working as a waiter was performance, designed for the lithe actors and dancers of the world. Waiters were the principal dancers, the soloists of the service industry. Walking around in a public place with shallow bowls of *sopa de mariscos*, she felt like she'd conned her way into a job as a ballet dancer without having done a plié in her life. As her burn blister throbbed she resented Fino for not having seen through her lies. Maybe he had and was only letting her work to torture her, to teach her a lesson. She had only ever performed as a second violin in a junior high orchestra and when she lost her place in the music she'd just flail along to keep her bow going in the same direction. It was scary, being lost in a sea of violins, but at least she'd been protected by the awful sawing of the whole section. Here she stood out. Each weaving trip around the dining room was a long solo. Sometimes she still had dreams of having to play the violin in public, an emergency solo violin performance she can't get out of and no one listens when she says, "No, I haven't touched it in years, I can't! I was never any good anyway!" This job was exactly like a nightmare.

The other waiters were nimble Spanish or Latino men. Letty watched them carry five plates at once and tried to imagine one tripping.

She started forgetting to bring the bread at all. She forgot water too, and mixed up orders. She felt the blisters on her thumb, her feet. Her face was sore from servile smiling. When she went into the kitchen to pick up big heavy *paellas*, Piluca and Jorge were dancing in front of the stove. Letty wanted to stay there, plunge her hands into a tub of icy shrimp and forget her plot to amass heaps of tips.

She was amazed to find a tip on the table of the flaming thumb. People were giving her money. She was a slave but it was worth it. When she got a second tip Letty felt a surge of confidence. She imagined making enough money in one night to pay the rent.

Antonio saw her by the bar holding an ice cube against her thumb. "And?" he inquired, in that staccato Spanish beat. "*Y?*"

"And I burnt myself on flaming *gambas*."

"*Al!* It's O.K. *chica*," he said soothingly. "It's your first night and you are a girl. Is hard work for girls." Antonio grinned, wiped grease off her cheek.

"Oh God," said Letty. "Spare me."

At ten o'clock the flamenco dancers swirled in for the show. There was a small wooden stage where they clomped their heels. There were three dancers and a guitarist. They sent bursts of music and colour in waves through the restaurant, distracting everyone from whether food was arriving at their table. This was a gift. The Spaniards in the restaurant started clapping along and thumping the tables. "*Olé!*" they said. Letty had heard this in Spain, too, they really did say it.

She stopped to watch the whirl and stomp and the water bounce in the

glasses.

When the dancers finished, people looked down at their plates of food gone cold. The waiters scurried around lifting dishes out from under them. Other people were just ordering dinner as if they were actually in Spain where dinner starts at ten. The Spanish dancers turned out to be Québécois. They sat at the back and ate for free.

While she was trying to manipulate the corkscrew in front of a table of spectators, half the cork broke into crumbs and the other half stuck in the bottle. Letty excused herself again and went behind the bar to struggle with the bottle, keeping an eye out for Fino. She had it between her knees when Juan-Manuel, one of the lithe waiters stepped behind the bar and placed two fingers on her wrist. The touch arrested her struggle. He took the bottle, slipped the cork out and handed the bottle back to her.

"Thanks," she said.

He folded the corkscrew wordlessly and laid it in her hand slowly, his palm resting for a second on hers.

When Letty poured the wine she was aware of his finger print on her wrist and palm. She apologized for the delay and explained that it was her first night. The man who ordered the blood sausage said, "Oh, does that make you a virgin?"

"I could cut that up for you in little pieces, if you like," she offered, smiling, dangerously exhausted.

Everyone was finally gone by 3:00 a.m. Letty had been there for nine hours.

She felt like she'd been working in the bustle and food for days. No one else seemed any less fresh than they had been at six o'clock. No one was in a rush to leave. Juan-Manuel, who everyone called Juan-Ma, pushed four tables together and Jorge and Piluca brought out plates of food from the kitchen. There was a huge paella and a pile of left-over filet mignon. Letty ate thinking of bed. She had stopped understanding foreign languages and stared silently at her plate.

"*Dices pocas mentiras tú, Letty.*"

"What?" Everyone was laughing.

Fino had to repeat it three times before she understood that he was saying, "You tell few lies."

"He means you no talk much," Antonio told her. "You no talk, no lie."

"Oh. Tired. *Cansada*," Letty said. She was sure Fino was mocking her for lying.

Cashing out she found she was $100 short. She started to babble desperately. "Take it out of my tips, or my pay, whatever, I must have made a mistake. Whatever."

The food had made her even sleepier and she sat at the table uncomprehendingly as they tallied up the tips which they all were supposed to share equally. Everyone was glum because her shortage meant a smaller total.

Juan-Ma looked at her, his eyes touching her face like two fingers and asked if she counted her credit card slips. She reached in the front pocket of her apron and found a crinkled Visa receipt for $120.00 and tossed it on the table.

"*Jope!*" said Antonio.

Everyone got $150 each in tips. This was over half of Letty's rent. It was almost 5:00 in the morning. She felt like a de-boned squid.

Juan-Ma offered to walk her home. She said no thanks and walked the four blocks alone, delirious with fatigue. She knew what his singeing touch was a precursor to. She congratulated herself for doing the right thing. She fell into bed, alone, felt older and wiser for not sleeping with a strange stranger on the first night of a new job.

She fanned her tips out on the floor by her mattress. Twenties, fives, and purple tens the colour of *pulpo*, of *poulpe*. Dreams of loaded plates and sizzling shrimp kept her running uneasily all night.

Letty woke up at noon. The phone was ringing. She stumbled out of bed on sore feet to answer it.

"Is Elizabet? I am Juan-Manuel," he said, in English.

"Yes." Someone calling for her. "Hi."

"I took the liberty of taking your number from the restaurant," he said, now in Spanish.

The way he said it sounded nice. Even after a year in Spain she was susceptible to the dancing cadence of the language.

"Are you going to invite me for coffee?" he asked, as if she were the one who called him.

"No way José!" she said, laughing at her joke. "I'm not awake yet."

"But you are talking. That is the problem. People talk when they are not awake, say things they don't mean." He was intense, she realized, remembering his eyes.

"But you woke me up!"

"I'll come for coffee now then," he said. "What is your address?"

"Forty-seven forty four Jeanne Mance. But-"

"*Hasta pronto.*"

Who does this *hombre* think he is? Letty wondered. She decided not to answer the door.

"Coffee is bad for you," he said as she poured him some.

She didn't answer. She drank hers. It was too strong because she'd been nervous making it under his eyes. She suspected he was impossible, this strange small man at her kitchen table. She noticed his eyes again. His long fingers.

"You are beautiful and strong," he said, putting a warm hand on her neck.

Letty laughed. She flexed her muscles in a front double-biceps body-building pose. "So, how long have you been working at the restaurant?"

"Two months."

"That's all? It looks like you own the place!"

"I own nothing." He said this firmly. "I do not believe in possessions."

Letty knew she could either ask him to leave or put her arms around him

when he leaned over and kissed her hard, reaching her into an embrace in the yellow sunlight of her kitchen. She felt she had time to get older and wiser in the future and they stepped toward her bedroom, shutting the door behind them, in case of roommates.

It was his intensity that made her do this. "Sit. Lie down. Relax," he spoke quietly. She followed instructions. He was as imperative as a cookbook. She absorbed the warmth of his skin. She remembered another Spanish voice saying her name.

"I am going to make love to you like no one has ever made love to you before," he declared.

"Really?" she smiled.

He did not smile. No joking. His hands ran over her body, she was a bottle of wine he knew exactly how to open. He was as smooth and efficient as he was at work. His seriousness made her self-conscious and she laughed nervously. "Waiter, waiter," she said, "could I have another one of those?"

The November days were short and it was already getting dark when Juan-Ma got up to go. He had to work. Letty stayed in bed, glad he had to be somewhere, that this would not turn into one of those forty-eight-hour first dates. Not that it had been a date in the first place.

"You have my number, are you going to give me yours?"

"No."

She blinked. Something had just veered out of control.

"I don't think you're ready for that," he said. He left the room to find his coat. "I have never left a woman," he came back in. "They always leave me because they cannot possess me in the way they want."

She stared at him, unblinkingly now, realizing: Married. Or something. Ick.

"But you, I think you are different. Independent, I can see that. What woman more strong..." he said and kissed her cheekbone. "Here, but I don't think you are ready." He wrote down a number on a matchbook and handed it to her. She held still, waited for him to leave. Letty looked at the number he left. It started the same as hers. He probably lived closeby. People's faces should be identified with exchanges like telephone numbers so you could know right away if they lived in the same district as you, the same neighbourhood of life.

When he had gone, Letty felt a little sick. Who was that? she wondered. She looked at the clock. The past twenty-four hours had been packed like a day of travelling with new people, foreign languages and sex with a stranger. Except she wasn't leaving this town in a matter of days. She felt the white burn blister on her thumb.

She knew she wasn't working tonight and was not sure when, or if, she'd work next. Fino hadn't said. Was she fired? She Shouted the olive oil out of her black dress, dug a white shirt out of the milk crates she used for a dresser and called Fino who said, "Oh, so you want to work again?"

"Isn't there a schedule?" she asked.

He laughed. "Well, come tomorrow. There you go. A schedule."

On Monday, she wiped, spoon by spoon, a bin full of cutlery sprinkled with spot-preventing vinegar. Juan-Ma slipped by carrying five plates of food. "Coffee later?" he asked.

"Coffee is bad for you," she said, jinxing him to stumble and send *paella* flying. He slid the plates onto the table without displacing a grain of rice.

It was quiet, and they finished earlier. There were only three waiters working and by 1:00 they were all done. Letty walked with Juan-Ma to an all-night diner on St-Denis. She ordered coffee and *pudding chomeur*, unemployed pudding. The sweet soggy bread of it was awful, but she liked the name.

She looked out the window at the sparse night traffic when she asked if he lived with someone. If he did, she guessed she should know, she said.

"I live with my two children," he said. "Victor and Ana."

Letty took a sip of coffee and looked at him, the dark jolts of his eyebrows, his angular face. She waited.

"And my wife," he added. "You must come visit, it is a nice atmosphere, you'll see."

Letty felt this was familiar in an uninteresting way. "You should have told me before."

"Before what, woman? I know you only three days, I tell you now."

"Yesterday."

"*El sexo es como comer.* Sex is like eating, we were hungry. You, my friend, were starving. If it meant so much to you, you wouldn't have done it, you don't even

know me."

"That is why people tell each other things. So they can know each other."

"I thought you were stronger than this," he said. "Not such a victim of convention. I have not even told you everything yet. There's more."

"What else, Juan-Ma? Tell me then." She felt a twist of fear and repulsion and the thud in her stomach of wishing she'd never seen this man naked. His intensity didn't strike her funny any more. In her head she yelled: *I am not amused!*

"My girlfriend lives with us, too, and I would like you to come also."

"To live with you, your wife, your kids and your girlfriend? Are you crazy?"

"We are a family, I want to be a tribe."

"I don't want to be part of a harem, thanks." Letty got up and walked out of the diner. She'd seen articles in the paper about polygamous cults in the Laurentians and felt this close to getting sucked in. She jumped right into a cab to get away fast, wishing he didn't know where she lived.

Her roommates were at home and awake, recently arrived from the bar and flopped on the couch.

"Hi," said Cheryl. "How was work? Buckets of tips?"

"Buckets of pits," she said, and instead of retreating to her room she flopped down on the couch with them. "Time to look for a new job."

"Shitty jobs. Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em," Cheryl commiserated. She painted cels at an animation production company and got paid per cel, about four dollars per hour.

"Can't live with 'em, can't live with 'em," said her boyfriend, Ed, who just lost the same job for taking too long per cel.

The next day Letty looked through the thin pages of want-ads in the *Gazette*. Data entry sounded clean and neat. Information-driven, safe, no physical performance required, no bottles, no blisters.

She passed the intelligence test they gave her with flying colours, except for the time and space question about the moment of the sunrise in St-John's in relation to Vancouver. While the manager didn't ask how many plates she could carry, he did say: "*Parlez-vous courrament le français?*"

"*Oui*," she lied.

But actually, she didn't have to *parler* to anyone. Letty spent the days typing in addresses in order of postal code. She learned odd bits of French, headings from the yellow pages; *vrac* for bulk, and *véhicules d'occasion*, which she assumed was the term for custom-made vehicles for special occasions until she found out it meant used cars. The company she worked for sold their lists to junk mailers. She felt guilty about her collusion with this form of pollution.

Fino never called to ask if she was coming back to work. When Juan-Manuel called, she said: "Coffee is bad for you," and hung up.

On the weekend, she went to the library. She had a card now, and planned to read all the English books in the collection. This would be almost possible in Montreal where the limits of English were always visible. She took out eight books

at a time, hard-covers with crinkly jackets.

Through a friend of Cheryl she got another job, part-time, modelling for a seniors' art class two nights a week. She sat there in the small bright room, with a sheet draped around her, or a hat on, as they drew her. It wasn't a life-drawing class so she was never nude. The seniors said things like: "My nose is not working," and they turned out pastels that looked nothing like her. But Letty enjoyed this blameless job. She treated these hours as a kind of yoga; invaluable still points in the careening tilt of her life.

Falling Upward

Your apartment in what used to be a factory has no windows but in the ceiling there are pieces of sky. I watch a cloud twist through the blue rectangle. Then I step out of bed and up the ladder to the open skylight, smelling spring on the wind coming through. I push the window further open and climb out onto the roof, an expanse of fine gravel with some tarred spots and the raised squares of the neighbours' ceiling windows. My eyes adjust to the outside light and when I look back down at you all I can see is the pale blur of sheets. All morning I watched you sleep, memorizing your face. Now, in my bare feet and T-shirt I walk softly across the cold gravel. From here I could step down through a skylight into somebody else's life, into a different bed where I could maybe get some sleep.

When I come to Toronto to see you, after a space of a month or so, there is a gap as you resist merging with the you I've been thinking about. You don't always match up right away, I have to re-shape you. I try to translate what you say into the language you speak in my head. Sometimes it works.

"I'm so psyched," you said when you met my train on Friday. "Things are really exciting right now. I can't stop thinking about going into studio. I feel full of ideas and I've got a ton of energy. You came in the middle of it all."

"Wow," I said. Loosely translated this meant I was part of your excitement and inspiration.

"But it's great to see you," you said.

"But?"

"But what?" You tapped out a rhythm on the seat of the cab.

"You know, I read that Leonard Bernstein said that two people can talk for hours but never communicate as completely as they do through music."

"I'd say that's probably true."

"Oh." To my mind you weren't supposed to agree since I'm no musician. We stopped at a red light. "I also heard a film composer on the radio who said it's his job to talk to directors about their films and translate what they say into the language of music. Maybe we need a translator."

"I'd love to compose for film," you said, tap, tap, tap.

In my script you envelop me in your long arms, dispelling my doubts, saying: *We don't need a translator, we know how to make music. I can make you sing.*

But in this version we sat apart in the cab and then, despite your record contract, we split the fare.

"Too bad you don't have more of a tempo," you said later, watching me falter down the splintery rungs of stairs from your bed loft to the ground floor. They are steep and there is no railing.

"Ow," I said stubbing my toe. You came and kissed it.

Yesterday, when people on the street asked for your autograph, I backed away from their adulation into the traffic and almost caused an accident. Everyone has seen the band's videos and you were signing receipts, cigarette packs, whatever scraps people offered you. "Crystal?" you said, signing a girl's back pack. "That's a nice name."

Even the autograph-seekers experience some resistance to the status they give you. A few of them were almost rude, as if they knew they were giving up something in exchange for a signed scrap of paper. Fans like these have sent you presents: hand-painted T-shirts, friendship beads, multi-coloured guitar picks, long illustrated letters of desire. They want something to hold onto, an autograph or a little piece of anything —*lint!*— out of your pocket. You sat down on some steps to sign things more easily. The crowd of girls bobbed between me on the curb and you on the steps. You used to catch my eye, "This again, bear with me." Now you are getting so used to fans, you always expect to be recognized. Everyone has seen you on TV, so they feel like they know you. I recognize you on screen, in videos that always end the same way. In person you are life-sized and harder to predict.

In a glossy magazine, I read that the most predictable form of unrequited love is falling for someone who is more desirable than oneself because of physical beauty or attributes such as charm, intelligence, wit or status. The love expert called this "falling upward." Is that what happened? When I first met you, at that tightly-packed party last year in Montreal, I'd stepped out of the smoke onto the balcony for air. It was snowing and the parked cars had turned into big cakes soft with frosting.

"Listen," you said. "It sounds great out here." We stood in the full padded quiet of it.

"In film, they use Coffeemate to make snow crunching footsteps in foley sound. It has a good squeak." Julie told me this. She's an excellent source of conversational anecdotes. I think you liked me for that. For knowing the sound substitute for snow.

"Let's go see how this sounds, want to?" you said and I thought you looked familiar. We slipped back through the party to grab our coats and ran down and out. People billowed around you and I remembered having seen the photos of you standing with other long-limbed band members on CDs I'd sorted and packed at work. "Gotta go," you told people. "We're going to listen to the snow."

Now, on the roof, the gravel dents the soles of my feet and Sunday hangs in the cool air. I have to catch my train. This winter's snow is melting and grainy with dirt. On my block in Montreal I could walk along on the roofs of the row houses to the end of the street but this factory isn't connected to anything. I go to the edge and look over to get back the sense of direction I lose inside your windowless place. The

photographer came to do a shoot of you at home, "acting natural." You posed sprawling in a hammock. I fidgeted around picking dry leaves off your plants, waiting for you to finish so we could go out and do something. We went to see a band and coming home through the vacant lot between here and the railroad tracks we saw a dead cat and argued about it.

"That's awful," I said.

"I don't know what happened to the head."

"It's right there, I saw it."

"No, it's not around."

"Sure it is!"

"Look, I've walked by a million times, and I know it doesn't have a head.

"You've walked by a million times? You just leave it there?"

"What should I do, bury it in a shoe-box?"

"I didn't know it was a neighbourhood fixture."

"Do you want to talk about this some more?" you asked, very quietly, as if it required unbelievable patience to talk to me.

I wanted you to feel that my lack of tempo was endearing, that a dead cat deserved attention, that living in different cities made it hard for us to know each other but seduced us with glimmers of full potential. We walked along the tracks in silence. Slush seeped into my shoes.

"Listen," you said. "We have to talk. My schedule is going to get really crazy, I'll just have no time, for myself or anyone. I'll be on the road for months when the

new CD comes out, you know, even more than before and it was pretty crazy last time, as you know. It'll be great to hang with you when it happens, but I can't guarantee anything. Especially when we're long-distance anyway. I mean, even when I'm not touring."

"Hang," I repeated. The railway ties were the wrong distance apart for my footsteps. Too close together to step on every single one, but too far apart to reach every other one. I kept scrabbling in the uneven gravel in between. "There never was a guarantee," I said, wobbling on the rocks. "Aren't guarantees for household appliances?"

"I just can't give you enough, it's not fair to you. I've got to get into the touring groove." You strolled steady on the shiny balance beam of track; on track.

You used the vocabulary of a musician but you'd earned it with your fingers, callous-tipped from guitar strings. Everything with musicians was always a groove, like a groove, or totally not a groove. Musicians also said "hang" without the "out" and this used to strike me as unfinished and morbid. I learned your lexicon. I redefined "soon" as in "See you soon," or "Talk to you soon," according to your schedule. Before I met you, "soon" meant less than a week.

On the road your days and nights ran together and you were unreachable unless you decided to reach. You travelled and performed and travelled again. Sometimes in between I'd catch rides to Toronto, but mostly my days of work and nights of sleep occurred predictably in the same place. I used you as a calendar, only bothering to calculate my period if I'd seen you less than a month ago. When you

did shows in Montreal you'd stay at my place for a few days, but your time, full of sound checks and interviews lined up by the label's publicist, was not your own, much less mine. At the concerts I stood in the dark wash of applause, staring at the bright stage. Like everyone else, I was transfixed by the jangling chords and the band's jagged rhythm. Music filled the hall and you were making it. When you had a solo girls screamed at the flexible bend of your body around a guitar. I was connected to you by something as vibrant as a guitar string. I resonated.

You said "I can't give you enough," even though I said I didn't need a guarantee. I should have turned around and tripped back along the tracks right then instead of going back to your loft which was as accommodating as an empty swimming pool. But I went in and sat on the couch while you brushed your teeth. You climbed the laddery stairs to your bed ledge.

"Hey," you said. "Aren't you coming up?" You tossed down a pillow into my lap. When I didn't move, you came back down. "Come on, let's go to bed."

In bed you held my hand and fell instantly asleep. I tried to calculate how many days and nights we'd spent together in the year I'd known you.

We only saw each other in snippets. You'd come and empty your backpack out across my apartment and then stuff the socks and T-shirts back in at the end of the weekend. You always took your box of condoms with you, so I knew there were no guarantees. Your confidence was as portable as a song. You had perfect pitch and classical training and could sing a piece of music just by looking at it. I took your musicality personally and saw your perfect pitch extending to your entire life and

your ability to experience the world more fully than I ever could, attuned to the timbre of voices, dog howls, kettle whistles. When I came to your place I kept my backpack zipped, slipping things out as I needed them. If I'd had longer than just weekends here and there I would have unzipped, eventually, and emptied all the small dark pockets out for you.

"Why are train station ceilings so high?" you ask.

"To make you feel lost before you've even left," I say.

Our goodbye on the hard bench stretches through the digital minutes on the departures scoreboard at Union Station. One-O for me, I'm leaving, I get the point.

"You have an eyelash." You reach over to lift it off my face. "Top or bottom," you say, holding it between your thumb and forefinger.

"Top," I say and as you pull them apart it does stick to your forefinger and you tell me to make a wish as you blow it away into the station echoes. I wish for what. Nothing benevolent. For you to think of me every long hair you pull off your pillows and sweaters.

As I walk up the stairs to the tracks I turn and watch you heading for the street. Your back. I sit down in one of the last seats, sweating in my shirt, your shirt (I put it on before we left your place), smelling of you. Usually I find it hard to know exactly when I exit your zone. Leaving Toronto, I used to feel the elastic stretching thin between us. This time it snaps before the train pulls out. You should have seen, gathering speed, the train and my tears, in tempo.

Coming home to my empty apartment is as lonely as being left there. You are a memory again. But a long term memory now. That's different. In my kitchen I stare at the sad curve of the sugar bowl and the softening fruit. I am alone with the layers of sound in the kitchen. The bubbles in my glass and the ticking clock resonate like train station echoes. It's cool out, but I open the door to the balcony. I hear the thud of doors slamming downstairs, someone whistling, a phone ringing. Then a baby, cutlery in the restaurant kitchen across the alley, swooshing wet traffic at the corner. The city night is packed and the fullness reassures me.

I miss you even though we were never in the same place and miss is the wrong word, implies something temporary about absence, distance. I cry at the drop of a memory. But memory, too, is the wrong word if that's almost all there ever is. Was. Has been. My mind, unruly, keeps springing back to present tense.

At work I ship and receive, sorting CDs from one box to a shelf to another box with a crew of other imported Anglo Montrealers from Winnipeg, Vancouver and Halifax. Addicted to Montreal, the limits of both our French and ambition keep us at this job. Fringe benefits at the record label are the odd free CD, T-shirt and concert ticket. Small compensation for daily tedium. Today, though, the monotony is a comfortable shoe and I wear it, glad for its shape. On the way home I stop at a Van Houtte to get a juice.

"*Un jus de pamplemousse*," I mutter.

"*Monnaie pour l'autobus?*" the server inquires, frowning.

This happens because I cannot bring myself to speak French loud enough.

"JUS de PAMPLEMOUSSE," I repeat hopelessly. On my way out I run into Julie.

"Hey, Love Magnet," she says. "How was your weekend in T.O.?"

"Never again," I tell her. "History."

"History?"

"Story of my life," I say. "I have a degree in History, you know."

"We have to go for coffee."

"I'll call you." I move away like I have somewhere to go. I'm not ready yet, for rehashing or revealing.

I remember months ago, in the cookie aisle of the sterile Superstore by your factory home I put my hand in your jeans front pocket and we kissed in stillness for a long time until another cart turned up at the far end of the row. Afternoon on a weekday, the long shiny grocery aisles are good empty places for kissing, for dancing to the muzak. The soft toothbrush bristles of your hair feel good between my fingers. You stop talking when I touch you, tilt your head back, craning toward my touch, closing your eyes. You forget to buy your cookies. Back in the factory, it inspires me, the unhurried way you roll the condom down as if it is something good to do like buttering toast right to the edges. Your hand is warm. You are weightless on top of me, your kisses are wild, your tongue everywhere. When we have sex, it feels like music. I feel you concentrating on your intonation, improvising. Now I know how it must be to play with you as a musician. The curves of the futon are hard under the sheet from years of sleep, petrified waves of dreams. The friction against a cotton sheet on the hard pallet makes me skin my knees. I feel you, the smoothness of you

underneath me, your chest, the corners of your hipbones, your head my hair brushing your face your nipples your hand curving against the small of my back our skins smooth as soap against each other we lie still and breathe and I notice my knees scraped and bleeding in two pink spots that later become roundly perfect scabs, dark and symmetrical, like I haven't had since I was eight and teetered along the sidewalk in strap-on roller skates. The scrapes are burgundy talismans. They last much longer than that visit did and for weeks afterward I have special feelings about my knees.

Julie had cherished a cold she caught from a fling in Boston one weekend and I'd laughed at her. But this was different. My knees were more profound than her cold, more intense and evocative than a runny nose.

You were almost never in the same city when I spent all that time with you in my mind. My memory was limber from constant use, I stretched it every day, re-examining the sensation of waking up with you, polishing it. I played our sequences over in my mind. They were songs on a tape I couldn't hear enough times while I was washing dishes, getting dressed. The tape stretched, played at the wrong speed, uneven. I kept listening, it was the only tape I wanted to hear. Without you I compiled a composite whole by patching together fingertips, stares, instants, scenes. I took the bus, turned corners, remembering.

"Are you two still together?" people asked me.

"Sure we're *together*, I'd say (my emphasis). I'd met a man who wasn't there; together was a state of mind. This week when someone asks me, I yell: "*I'M* together! I am really just *so* together!"

"Right." She nods, unconvinced.

I try to practice unremembering. I am on a past fast. A present diet, Now for breakfast lunch and dinner. But I get tired of Now, just like yogurt on those yogurt diets. Sometimes I forget to be vigilant and look out the window and stop seeing and your thin self is folded around me in a warm crescent or we're sitting on your kitchen floor eating frozen blueberries out of the bag. You use a bag of frozen peas on your knee when it swells, you've had the same bag for years. The blueberries are for eating.

One time you swore you'd written a letter but I received nothing. Months later, it escaped from mail limbo and arrived with worn edges and a faded post mark, an envelope of thin European pages. It was out of context, context always changed too fast. By the time I received the letter, you were on a different continent. I tabulated the x's and o's, out of habit, for the record. Letters don't have a long shelf life. They are a risk. Who knows how many re-readings they'll withstand upon receipt. Due to postal havoc, a letter I'd written to you came back in the mail. My own letter, now from some place else was smudged and post-marked, the handwriting only faintly familiar. I opened it, curious to see what I'd said. Nothing. Except for volumes between the lines constructed to hint but not reveal. It is the cryptic, boring game of not saying anything first. Phone calls are safer, if you want to cover your tracks, the content just evaporates after a while until you remember only the most important part, who called who. I played this game like a strategist, as if I could conceal my feelings from you and still be myself. You were unafraid of

answering machines, of letting your thoughts crystallize. Sometimes I'd arrive home and your voice would be warm on the tape. I'd listen again and again and save it on the machine overnight, even though it was already on the tape in my brain, endlessly looping.

"Do you have changes?" The Korean man at the depanneur asks me, when I go to buy morning milk with a twenty dollar bill.

"No, sorry," I say. I need changes. Now, please. Buying milk helps, actually. The best-before date on the milk can be comforting, it's a harbinger of the future, of another month, a different season that's on the way and tangibly close if the milk will be sour by then. Time/milk heals all wounds. I buy a paper to speed the passage of time. It will be out of date by tomorrow.

I imagine my thoughts of you ebbing as the snow dissolves, leaving behind grit and dog shit. I remember you imitating my voice as loud and nasal. This is some kind of step, remembering something annoying. Some days I fool myself into thinking I'm getting down to the dog shit of memory. Anger, I know from having been on the receiving end, is the phase after sadness and sometimes gives way to a restored equilibrium. But that can take years. Some people say that years from now CDs will be blank. The music they somehow contain will just disappear. Poof! — and everyone's record collection, will be rendered silent. If my mind were a CD, the catchy tune of us might one day evaporate, without a trace.

The way you have the media on your side does make you larger than life.

Your voice hovers around me in stores and restaurants. I remind Julie not to fall in love with anyone famous. I turn on Brave New Waves and the dj says: "If people want to work on this show, there's just one simple test we subject them to. You have to talk about Madonna for five minutes, without using the word 'deconstruct.'" Then, without warning, he plays, not Madonna but a track from your album. Julie tells me to listen to the East Indian Rhythms and Bluegrass Jamboree programs on community radio to avoid you. "These are safe," she says. "On these shows you'll never hear the band from hell."

But when I hear your song the supple melody floats out toward me and I let every note touch to prove I can take it. I feel the music completely, in every part of my body. We are communicating fully, just like Leonard Bernstein said.

I'm watching for spring. Every day there is more light. I don't walk with my head in the clouds. I like to look at the sky, but while I'm moving I look down. Everything I find on the sidewalk is an omen, open for interpretation. Pennies, used condoms, a spilled box of Smarties, bright tablets against the grey pavement. These are the horoscopes, the fortune cookies of alert pedestrians. Today I come across a derelict cassette, crushed and spilling ribbons of shiny tape. Some of it loops up into a tree, forming a tangled kite tail of music, unravelling.

Honey

The Honey Man stood behind his flea market table, his grey hair curling softly. In the sun, kilo jars of honey glowed amber on the table. The glow was so fine and healthy Lydia and Jeffrey were drawn right to it.

"Honey looks so beautiful in jars," said Jeffrey.

"It does," Lydia agreed, abandoning her mood for a moment in spite of herself.

"Here," said the Honey Man. "This is from the last half of June. It's a light honey from clover and wildflowers." He dipped two popsicle sticks in an open jar and twisting them smoothly to prevent dripping, he gave them to Lydia and Jeffrey.

It tasted just the way Lydia liked honey. Sweet but mild, a light, wonderful syrup. That pale honey was early morning light in a bottle, glowing gently.

"Mmmmmm! That's fantastic!" Jeffrey said, in that way he had of appreciating things.

"Now try this," the Honey Man offered. He was soft-spoken. This was not a hard-sell or sugary come-on. He was just matter-of-fact about the quality of his product. "This one is a little later, from the last half of July. Clover. With maybe a taste of buckwheat starting to come in." He dipped a stick in for himself and tasted it carefully, squinting discerningly. "Yep. You can taste the buckwheat in there."

This honey was richer, dark like the chunks of resin Lydia used to use on her viola bow, and stronger tasting, densely sweet. Two women came up to the table and the Honey Man shifted his attention to them, handing out pieces of honeycomb. Lydia wandered away with the clean taste of the sweet wood in her mouth. Jeffrey lingered at the table, examining the jars of honey.

She sifted through boxes of charm bracelets and cruddy earrings a few tables down while Jeffrey lingered, examining jars of honey. He always took so long at these things, looking at everything and exclaiming. He wanted to purchase something at every table even though his apartment was already crammed with stuff. Jeffrey coveted things, especially old things. He worked at a downtown factory that made rubber stamps. The shop was old, not computerized, and he was learning to put together lines of type on an ancient Linotype machine. That the machines were completely obsolete only made it more interesting for Jeffrey. At least for the summer it seemed romantic and appealing. Another arcane skill he was perfecting was proof-reading backwards to check the spelling and number order on the stamps.

Lydia always knew at a glance there was nothing she wanted. She strolled through the flea market. Flipping through the old paperbacks or the scratched albums in decrepit record jackets just stirred up dust and depressed her. The Sunday was hot and hazy, even out on the Waste Island, the pastoral green suburbia west of Montreal. She felt heavy. It was hard to keep her eyes open and she wanted a coffee. She headed toward the grassy lot full of parked cars glittering in the sun.

After a while, Jeffrey ambled up, carrying a plastic bag full of flea-market items. She knew the contents had to be a paperweight and some antique bottles or crumbling books. Remember how this used to charm you, she told herself.

The car was an oven.

"Let's stop for a beer, do you want to?"

Lydia didn't say anything. A beer was the last thing she wanted. She needed coffee. She drove while Jeffrey crinkled through his bag. She remembered sitting in the back seat when her parents had silent drives like this.

They stopped at a cafe-terrasse with umbrellas at the tables. Lydia ordered coffee and Jeffrey a beer.

"You know what I'd love to have is a roll-top desk. You know? One of those old ones with all the compartments and slots and inkwells."

"Those cost thousands of dollars, Jeff."

"Well, I'd still like one if I could get a good deal. Maybe a beat-up one I could refinish or something."

Lydia held her unused sugar packets between her thumb and forefinger and

flapped them against each other for no reason except to show she didn't feel like listening. "I should be doing laundry. I have to go to my mom's tonight," she said abruptly. I am so rude but I can't help it, she thought. She looked at Jeffrey who was wearing his favourite holey grey T-shirt. It had the neck cut out and the arms cut off and made him look anorexic. She looked at his bed-head hair and tried to think why everything he did annoyed her. "Eating is such a sensual experience," he'd said at breakfast, loving his toast. His thoughtless enthusiasm made her cringe.

"Let's go," Lydia said, thumping down her coffee mug and looking for the waitress.

"Lydia?" said a familiar voice. It was Pierre, whom she hadn't seen in ages, in a waiter's white shirt and apron.

"Hey!" she said. "How are you? What are you doing here? I mean, I guess you're working, obviously, but I thought you were going away." A brightness lit up her words, she noticed as she spoke.

"I was, I did. I'm back. I've been working here for a month or so."

"That's great. Do you still live in the same place?"

"Yeah, same one." Pierre lived above a florist's and his apartment had always been filled with wilting flowers he scooped from the flower store's garbage. Lydia had thrown away old flowers whose stems had turned to mush and dumped jars and vases of putrid water down the sink whenever she visited. From a distance that memory seemed picturesque. "How's it going? How's your mother?"

"Pretty good. Well, fine. I'll have to give you a call. Take care." They had run

out of things to talk about two years ago, when they were still going out, what could they say now? She told herself she wasn't being friendly just to be annoying, not half believing it. What about Jeffrey? What would she say to him, one day when met like this, no longer connected.

"Thanks for introducing me," Jeffrey said in the car.

"Oh for fuck's sake, Jeffrey." It didn't matter, she wanted to say. It doesn't matter.

She drove to his house. She was thinking of what to say as she stopped the car, but then Jeffrey just opened the door and got out. She watched his slender legs as he climbed the steps to his door in his baggy shorts.

"You have a beautiful body," Jeffrey had said to her that morning, before the day had begun to sour. "And such gorgeous lips."

"No," Lydia said, shaking her head.

"No you don't? Or no, you don't want to hear it, or no, don't say that because you don't know how to say anything nice back?"

Under the covers Lydia clenched her toes without answering. Sometimes there were right things, compliments and endearments in her head but she couldn't let them out. Spontaneously, she only said the wrong thing.

Her bedroom was swamped with dirty clothes. Things were heaped on the floor and piled on her dresser in a way that made her feel ineffectual. It must have been a month since she'd done laundry. All her underwear was dirty, even the old

shredded ones with sprouted elastic. If she could collect everything and transform the chaos of dirty clothes into the more structured, active state of laundry, she knew she'd feel better. She went to the fridge and looked at the unappealing bits and pieces of old dinners cluttering the shelves, some mixed-up tuna turning grey in a bowl, and wondered where her life was. Standing on the triangle of cold floor in front of the fridge she ate cool green olives out of the bottle. She and Jeffrey had gone out once and then a few more times and now it was six months later and she never did laundry any more and always got to work late and felt tired. Lydia was a chemist. She prepared the lab experiments for chemistry classes at a private high school. She performed the experiments herself first and then measured out the right amounts of chemicals for the students, pouring solutions into beakers or scooping granules onto the scale. She had always had systems, and she had always done her laundry every week. She pulled the dishtowel off the fridge door handle for starters and began to collect bath towels and face cloths and stuff them into her laundry basket.

The laundromat was hot and loud with the sounds of spinning machines. She divided her heap into loads, sprinkled detergent into the machines and clanged in her row of quarters. It was too noisy and distracting to think in here. She wanted to stay for a long time, not thinking.

Lydia watched a mother lift her son out of the empty laundry basket he'd climbed into and set him on the table where she was pairing socks. She gave him his own small socks to ball together and he stuffed one inside the other. An old man

folded at the other table. He wore a hat, suit and tie, incongruous among everyone else's jeans or sweats. He folded meticulously, arranging a stack of greying white shirts, a pile of boxer shorts faded to transparency and a bunch of identical dark socks. His hands shook as he folded but he was deliberate and steady.

She thought of Jeffrey, who bought dozens of socks all the same colour so that when he lost one it wouldn't matter. When he did something sensible, Lydia was always surprised. She sat watching the laundry people. Normally she brought a notebook and wrote letters or made lists while the laundry did itself. Today she just sat there, recuperating.

At the end of the dry cycle she took her hot things from the dryer and spread them on the table to fold. She made a neat stack of clean T-shirts next to a pale cotton jumble of underpants and felt a small sense of renewal. After Jeffrey did his laundry he jammed it all into an old hockey bag without folding anything and everything got home so wrinkled it was hard to believe it had been washed.

"How's Jeffrey?!" Lydia's mother shouted, looking up from a copy of *The Watchtower.*

"Fine!" Lydia answered loudly.

"What? He should have come over, it's better with three people."

Miriam, Lydia's mother, loved Scrabble. Lydia could only ever make small words but Miriam and Jeffrey played strategically, reaching out to the red triple word score squares at the edges of the board.

"Is Dad downstairs?" Lydia asked, gesturing.

Her mother nodded as she got out the box. Lydia's father didn't play Scrabble. He watched TV in the basement. Miriam didn't watch much because she couldn't make out what they were saying. They had a decoder to get the closed-captioned subtitles, but the shows Miriam liked, miniseries, for example, weren't always closed-captioned. Lydia went over to visit because talking on the phone was becoming impossible; Miriam couldn't tell who was calling any more, even with her hearing aid. Last year she'd quit her job as a receptionist when she stopped being able to answer the phone. Lately she'd been taking Sign Language courses at the Centre for the Deaf. Lydia was learning, too — she went with Miriam to class once a week but her father didn't know any sign language yet. Miriam had started going to church when the deafness began to set in. There was a sign language interpreter there and a number of people from the Deaf Centre attended. She was going deaf due to side-effects from an anti-nausea drug she'd taken during her pregnancy with Lydia. She had begun to lose her hearing five years ago, but it wasn't until recently that she'd told Lydia the cause.

At the kitchen table, they each picked their seven letter-squares and lined them up on the little trays. Miriam began rearranging hers; Lydia had mostly vowels.

"Hey Lyd," her father said, up from the basement with an empty glass in his hand.

"Hi." She watched him fill his glass half-way with rye.

"Would you like to play this time, Gene?" Miriam asked. "We've only just

started," she added, raising her voice since he hadn't looked at her.

"No, there's a game on TV, got to get back down there," he mumbled with his back to her.

"Speak up, Dad. You know you have to." Lydia felt her face get hot.

"Yeah, yeah." He took a swallow from his glass. "GAME. DOWNSTAIRS." Yelling, he glared and pointed at himself and then to the floor before disappearing back down the stairs.

Miriam looked back at the board. Lydia was stiff with anger and couldn't make any sense of her letters for minutes.

She looked at her mother who was intent on the game. Miriam watched lips carefully and with the scraps of sound she got she could understand pretty well when spoken to slowly and directly.

"What's Jeffrey doing tonight then?" she asked after she put her word down. N-Y-M-P-H.

"He's busy. I'm not sure what he's up to." Lydia had been bringing him along most Sundays. He was a buoyant companion. She had liked to feel his knee against hers under the table when they played Scrabble. L-E-A-D.

She always became acutely aware of every sound when she was with her mother. She focused on the Scrabble letter squares clicking down on the board and the crescendos of TV noise in the basement. Miriam sat, concentrating, unhearing. Lydia lost, as usual. They put away the board and ate wedges of pie. Lydia heard the TV click off in the basement but her father didn't emerge. He just stayed down

there. Pie stuck in her throat.

Miriam got up and washed the pie plate. She cleaned fiercely. Lydia watched her from behind and inhaled the scent of dish soap. Miriam felt fragile through her sweat suit when Lydia hugged her goodbye.

When she left her parents' house the evening was cool. Outside the house, sound still echoed with exaggerated resonance. She was aware of kids' shouts and the radio music from other cars as specific separate sounds. On the way home from NDG, she thought of Jeffrey's long limbs and the way the fine hair grew smoothly on his forearms. She didn't stop at his place but went to bed alone for the first time in months. She slept firmly in the middle of the bed, aware of the space at her sides and the crispness of her fresh sheets.

In the morning, she put her bread in the toaster and went to the front door to pick up the paper. Next to the tube of newspaper on her porch was a paper bag. Lydia took it upstairs, feeling its weight. She lifted the jar of honey out and twisted off the lid. She dipped a knife into the smooth contents and drew it out, trailing a shiny strand that ran down the side of the jar. Lydia spread the pale liquid to the edges of her toast and took a bite as the honey seeped into the bread. The jar gleamed luminous on the table, casting a yellow shadow; sweetness slid over her tongue.

Once-removed

Mom and I fly in to New Orleans from different directions and share a cab downtown. In the car I adjust to her size. Every time I see her, her smallness startles me. Airports make her even littler. I wanted to lift her off her toes in the babble of the concourse but settled for hugging her, compact and raincoated.

"I don't recognize anything yet," she says, looking at the drive in from the airport, alike in all cities.

She grew up in New Orleans where she had a grandmother called Grande-mère who served toast on silver trays and pressed her foot down on a bell on the floor when she wanted the table cleared. Humid nights they slept on the porch under the twirling ceiling fan. I memorized her memories as a child in

Winnipeg where New Orleans sounded as warm and green and foreign as Oz.

Warm air floats through the taxi window. We've left behind winter in our Canadian cities to embrace the sprawl of memory and family.

"How are you doing, Paige?" Mom asks.

"A little shaky. Never done this before."

"It's very hard the first time," she squeezes my hand.

My daughter, Claire, is a wiggly spark at 18 months, and I've left her in Montreal with friends. I suffered pangs the whole flight down. I showed her picture to my seatmate.

Recently, there was a story in the paper about Immigration deporting a Nicaraguan woman and forcing her to leave her baby behind in Canada. The baby in the story, a one-and-a-half-year-old like Claire, got sick after his mother had been gone for a few weeks. He was diagnosed with infantile depression. After two months, his mother was finally allowed to collect him. Two months is one tenth of your life when you've only lived for 20. I tell myself one weekend out of 18 months is a fraction so tiny it is almost immeasurable.

When I look at the newspaper, the stories that jump out at me are the short ones at the edge of the page about kids Claire's age. The other day, a toddler tumbled out the third-storey window of an apartment in Halifax. Her small body dropped onto the cushioning awning of a pizzeria on the first floor, then rolled off and fell to the sidewalk. She lay motionless on the ground for a long silent moment, and then wailed. The paper reported that she was fine, just bruised and shaken by

her fall from the sky. This reminded me of the little girl, aged two, who fell down a dry well shaft in Texas. She was stuck down there for days. A microphone was lowered so her parents, and the media, could hear her talking. They also sent down food, toys and a flashlight. She burbled to herself sometimes and slept, but also cried which tormented her parents who paced, out of reach, at the top. I wonder how such falls will affect these physically unscathed children in life. I wonder about lasting emotional bruises, if they'll be afraid of heights or depths or something more complex, whether their fall off, or in, sowed seeds for a neurosis that will burgeon later in life.

At the Meet the Family Wine and Cheese we wear name-tags. We mill around looking at tables laid out with items to endow us with a collective memory. It is a family museum exhibit, with old photos, ledgers, wedding invitations and pieces of lace. We are part of the exhibit like those people at historical sites in period costume except we don't have to wear bonnets. We have memorized the scripts of our own life stories.

Our name-tags all have colour-coded dots to indicate which branch of the family we're from. The red-dot relatives are spread out across the south. Mom and I are part of the blue branch that has splintered into twigs and scattered all over.

Someone has a computer set up in the corner and is running the family tree program, devised for events exactly like this.

"I'm Rich," he announces. "From Baton Rouge. And yourself?"

"Paige, Montreal blue-dot."

He hands me an intricate organigram of relations.

"So I guess we're related?" The concept is strange to me. As I know it, I'm the middle link in a simple mother-daughter flow chart, with fathers in parentheses.

"You're blue and I'm red. My great-grandfather and your great- grandmother were brother and sister."

Rich says this as if it's nothing to span the distance between us and ancestors in a sentence but I am family-impaired. I get relative vertigo when I hear great-grand and I've never been sure what a second cousin is or what once-removed means. I search through the pages of Laroux to see if I'm really connected to this tree somehow but it is a mass of lines and boxes with names and birth dates. No faces, no You Are Here. I find Claire, jutting out from my name and her father's. He is there in bold print as if he is actually present in the text of my life, and not teaching English on the other side of the world. It startles me to see him as part of this family structure, but I remember filling it in on the questionnaire, for the record, Claire's record.

"What do you do up in Montreal?"

"I teach English. And you?"

"Oh, to all those French Canadians up there, I bet."

"Actually, my students are mostly new immigrants from other countries. What do you do?" I repeat my question, probably sounding pedantic, like the English Conversation instructor I am, practised in deflecting attention and getting other people to talk.

"Computers," he says and steps back to his station where people have gathered with questions about the tree.

Mom comes over with a glass of wine and a napkin of mushroom caps for me.

"Bummers," I say, my vocabulary held hostage by a one-year-old. I say things like *bummers* instead of mushrooms, *peep-hole* instead of people.

Mom glances at me, then looks around the room, zeroing in on people's name-tags. A tanned old woman with tinted glasses comes up and peers at her face, then her tag.

"Charlotte?" she says, "It's Aunt Huelon." Despite the name-tags, people announce themselves as if they're on the phone.

"Why Huelon," says Mom and as she introduces me, she sounds faintly southern.

"Nass to meet you, Paige," says Huelon. "I'm so glad your moth-a brought you down to Nawlins." There is no R, in her New Orleans, just the suggestion of one. "Where's that little one I heard about?"

"Oh, it's so far to come. Friends are looking after her in Montreal. I'm sure she's fine," I add, to reassure us both.

"Paige and I are ready to *laisser les bons temps rouler*," Mom laughs, more Cajun every minute.

The next morning, there is a walking tour of the French Quarter, led by Uncle Pee Wee. Mom and I drift off on our own walking tour. We walk through the streets

lined with stores selling souvenir T-shirts and pralines and real dried alligator heads on sticks, the left-overs from soup and wallets. On the street corners small kids hold out cardboard boxes for money as they clatter away with thumb-tack taps attached to the bottoms of their Reeboks.

Gazing up at buildings and the spirals of wrought iron balconies Mom steps out into traffic without looking and I grab her back. "Mother! Look where you're going!"

"I'm not a toddler, Paige," she says.

I worry about her. Sometimes I think of her alone at home, teetering on stools to reach high shelves or slipping down the rickety basement stairs. Lately I miss her so much I sometimes can't sleep. I don't know if that's normal. In my imagination when we're together, I never snap. Now I grab her small hand and squeeze it.

We see streetcars, but it's a city bus that has a screen on the front flashing DESIRE in digital pixels. Kids are walking around like movie extras, fingering the valves of the horns they carry without cases.

"I remember slipping down the stone sidewalks of Canal Street in steamy summer rain," Mom says. "It never occurred to me I'd be here one day with my daughter. Where will you take Claire, Paige? Winnipeg?"

"I guess. Portage and Main sounds so flat compared to Magnolia and Elysian Fields." The poetry of street names here is lush. It matches the fringe of the papery banana leaves, the actual outrageous bananas growing in clusters right on the street.

Winnipeg's streets are without tendrils: Elm, Oak, Ash. Montreal's are much more saintly and austere than Tchoupitoulas Magnolia-Felicity-Terpsichore-Calliope. But the balconies and crumbling facades here are familiar. Maybe I ended up in Montreal due to the New Orleans in my blood. Maybe Claire will find herself in a wind-blown prairie city, Wichita or Fargo or the Winnipeg I left.

Someday we'll be able to talk about all that. The other day she amazed me with a complete exquisite sentence, announcing "I like corn," as she plucked the kernels from her bowl. The stars and moon stuck on her ceiling glow green after soaking up the bulb light and in the dark she says, "Dars. Dars. Moon. Great." It amazes me to see her acquiring language effortlessly, when I spend hours with my students on simple constructions that are difficult for them. They have spent years of their adult lives in another language and are locked in its tenor and rhythm, unable to bend their tongues around English. Chen from Shanghai told the class his young daughter refuses to speak English or French to him because his pronunciation is so bad. I know if we stay in Montreal, Claire will learn a fluent French and mock mine forever.

"Claire is verging on being a kid, you know, Mom, racing out of infancy."

"Whoosh! It goes so fast."

"I always wonder, what if I miss something, something important while I'm at work. What if she starts humming Bach or eating whole cakes of soap and no one notices. What's happening now that I can't see?" I got the machine when I called Montreal this morning; my worrying is stymied.

"You're allowed to miss a speck or two," Mom turns to me. "You have to let go a little."

"But, Mother, I let go every day. From 9 to 5 I leave her at daycare and go to work."

"And you really whoop it up there."

"How else am I supposed to let go? I'm it. Her father's in Japan for God's sake. You had Dad around when I was little."

"For the weekend, Paigey. Just a couple days. I want you to have fun."

Bourbon Street is lined with places that look like Dairy Queens selling mint-juleps, daiquiris and Campari-coloured drinks called Hurricanes, to go.

"Let's get one," Mom suggests.

"Isn't it a little early?"

"We're on holiday. Two Hurricanes, please." She pulls dollar bills from her purse and the woman behind the counter hands her a cup of red slush. "Hmm. Awful. A cherry sno-cone with rum in it."

"What you do as a tourist." I sip grains of ice through the straw. Claire loves ice. Sometimes she and I pass a silvery oblong back and forth from mouth to mouth until it dissolves.

At home I wake her up in the early dark for breakfast. We eat the same thing, warm bowls of oatmeal with raisins. Then I bundle us up, take her in the stroller to daycare and catch my bus to work. When I run into friends after work I can never go for a spontaneous coffee or beer. My daughter and I live according to

schedule. Boiling the macaroni for dinner I imagined coming here, exploring the city without a stroller, without a squirming toddler, enjoying whole, uninterrupted conversations.

That night Ryan, a lawyer cousin from Nawlins offers to take a bunch of us out to hear some local music. "Go on," Mom says, on her way to meet Huelon, "Why not?"

Ryan buys me a beer. Instantly maudlin, I tell him: "Before this weekend, I'd never left my daughter overnight in her lifetime. A year and a half."

"My job is like that," he sympathizes.

I haven't been to a bar in years and I stare at guys in white T-shirts talking to girls in snug satin tops. I feel like my students from China who want me to interpret not just the language but the strange world they've landed in. They ask me: "Why do people here wear broken pants? And rings in their faces?"

All of a sudden I feel the pressure of the milk building in my breasts. The travel-pump I got from La Leche is in the hotel room and I'm ballooning. I'm going to leak all over my shirt in the middle of a bar. I squeeze past the crowd on my way to the bathroom, following the heavy round sound of the tuba amid the sharp chaotic brass of trumpets, trombone and sax.

Inside, with the door locked, I unbutton my shirt and knead my breast, squeezing the nipple. A fine mist of milk sprays out into the sink. When I pause, a single drop collects on the nipple tip. It would take me hours to unburden myself this

way, coaxing the milk through the tiny perforations of my nipple. Claire can nurse this out of me effortlessly. My sore breasts feel like they're packed with hardening cement and people are banging on the door to get in. I knead a little longer, then splash water on the faucet and taps where they're milk-speckled.

Back out in the bar I feel surprisingly lighter. The room has become a movie scene of New Orleans nightlife. Everyone's on their feet and the bartender is up on the bar, dancing from one end to the other with a bottle of bourbon in his hand, pouring splashes onto upturned faces, hitting a mouth or two. Glasses crash to the ground when he belly flops at the end of the song and slides along the bar, feet in the air.

Mom is sleeping when I get to the room. I pump in the shiny bathroom. The travel breast-pump has a suction cup you attach to the nipple, you pump air in and out and the milk collects in a bottle, as strange and efficient as science fiction. In the breast-feeding literature this is called "expressing milk." Fully expressed, both sides, it amounts to only half a cup. It would barely fill a juice glass. I dump it down the drain and rinse out the bottle. I've tasted it before, it's thick and sweet, like melted ice cream.

When I first went back to work, I was making so much milk I had to shut the door to my office and pump at lunchtime. I produce less now, since Claire doesn't nurse for hunger any more, but for comfort, after work sometimes, or before bed. Those are our most tranquil moments. Mom tells me that as soon as I tasted orange

juice as a baby I lost all interest in breast-feeding, which saddened her. "You always did love juice," she says ruefully.

We are on the fortieth floor of the hotel and our room is right behind the elevators. I listen to them for hours before I sleep, the muted dings as they deposit people on our floor and the pulley sound of cables working non-stop. I think about slender, steely cables hoisting boxes of people 40 stories high. In the busy confusion of pre-sleep, I control the elevator with my thoughts, giving Claire, the only passenger, a safe ride.

I open my eyes to see Mom standing in her underwear doing stretches.

"Good morning," she says, reaching her arms over her head. "Have a good time? I didn't even hear you come in. I went to an oyster bar with Huelon and Pee Wee but we didn't stay late. The group photo is at 9:00. Are you getting up?"

I blink at her sleepily.

"Oh. Sorry. I was only talking because you opened your eyes." She gets on the floor and draws her knees to her chest.

I reach over for the phone and from bed I dial Sheila and Marc. Everything's fine, they've all had breakfast and are going out to the park. Sheila tells me they won't transport the kids there by pulling them behind on the toboggan. In Montreal parents often use toboggans or magic carpets in the snow, they're easier to manoeuvre than strollers. But this winter, a baby slipped off into the path of a snow plough and was scooped up, and fatally buried, a lost ball of bright snowsuit under

heaps of heavy white.

"Well, have fun," I say bravely.

"Sure," says Sheila. "Don't worry."

"Be careful," I add, since she brought it up.

Sheila has to get off the phone because Sam, her three-year-old, is yelling for her, so Marc gets on. "Hi Paige, except for the trauma at bedtime, we're all doing fine."

"Trauma? What are you talking about?"

"Oh. Nothing. Nothing. I thought Sheila mentioned... It's just at night. Claire's been crying at night, that's all."

"Why? For how long?"

"It seemed like forever but it was only a couple hours. Two, maybe three. Off and on."

"Three hours!" Infantile depression. "Let me talk to Sheila." Mom is putting on her Jergens and looking at me.

Sheila gets back on the phone. "Don't worry. It's normal, that's why I didn't say anything. You can't expect her not to notice you're gone and she's in a completely different house. Please don't worry. She seems fine today."

"I'd just appreciate it if you were honest and told me when there were problems."

"Would you like to talk to your daughter?" she asks. Sometimes Claire will tolerate the receiver in her ear long enough to hear my voice and say, "Mama!" But

the most appealing thing about phones is pushing the buttons and this tends to make conversations short. "Button-button," I hear her saying as she gets within reach of the phone and from this unreachable distance, I feel like the mother at the top of the well.

"Hi Claire-pear, Claire de la lune," I say, and the phone goes dead. I hang up.

Mom comes and sits on the edge of my enormous slab of hotel bed. Who ever sits on your bed like your mother? She smooths the edge of the sheet over my chest. She has a streak of lotion on her chin. She uses cold cream on her face and the clean flowery smell of it wrapped around my childhood. "Coal cream," I'd thought it was, and didn't understand its whiteness. In recent bouts of mother-missing, the rows of white Pond's boxes at the drugstore have made me weepy. The creamy waxy scent of Revlon lipsticks, the smell of her kisses, also gets me quavery.

"You know she'll be fine."

"I do? How do I know that. How am I supposed to know that. How do I know this won't scar her for life? She's been crying for hours at bedtime and Sheila wasn't even going to tell me."

"I don't think she could be scarred for life in the space of a weekend." She tucks the blankets in around my body, mummy-style.

"They say, experts say, that a person's character is fully formed by the age of two. Or is it four, I can't remember."

"You used to cry and cry when we left you with a sitter. It ripped apart my evenings, even though you were always asleep by the time we got home."

"So it's your fault I'm neurotic," I mumble this into the pillow.

"Are you coming down with me?"

"I'm sleeping."

She pauses at the door, looking back at me. For the group picture she's wearing her Laroux family reunion T-shirt made to look like the old package design of Laroux sugar from when the family ran the sugar mill. "I'll be on the mezzanine, where they're taking the family photo."

I lie there, a child who has been given quiet time to calm down, a petulant adolescent left alone with her hateful selves: irritable daughter, neurotic mother.

I get up and stand under the strong thrumming hotel shower, lathering my head with complimentary shampoo. When I was little Mom would bring a mirror over to the tub and I'd sculpt the bubbles in my hair into stiff points and coils and laugh at my reflection. Then I would lie back to rinse out the shampoo and she'd pour water on my stomach, a thin stream that felt like it was riddling a hole through my belly. It was during a bath that I asked her if she was going to die. She said Yes, someday, and I said When. She said, Not until you're all grown up. Some people say you never really grow up until your parents die. Mom says her sense of her life changed after her mother's death. I'm not ready. I get out of the shower and spread rich dabs of "coal cream" onto my face.

The big reception room that held the family display has been cleared out. The photo is the last event of the weekend. Everybody is standing and sitting in tiers, dozens of people grouped in these blue and white t-shirts like uniforms of a team I

was never on, but they say, "Hey, Paige, get in over here." I thread my way through rows of relatives to stand by Mom, my small blue dot.

Composition

Irene's window of time opens mid-afternoon, when her son and daughter are both asleep. It lasts an hour and a half, sometimes two, long enough to read the paper, tidy the room that's strewn and stickiest and drink one uninterrupted pot of tea.

She lowers herself slowly to a kneeling position. Underneath the red seam of her scar her stomach muscles are mending, forming the dense fibrous tissue of healing. She tosses puppets and blocks into a laundry basket of toys knowing Billy will scatter them again as soon as he gets up from his nap. "Billy will, willy bill," she murmurs to herself. She'll just clear a little space. One of the cats stalks over and folds herself neatly onto the smooth platform of a library book. "Enjoy the peace

while you can, Lucy. Where's Georgia hiding? Haven't seen her all day."

The phone rings and she hauls herself up to get it before it wakes anyone. It's Mario, checking in, does she need anything?

"Everyone's asleep. Juice and yogurt," she tells him. "And something for dinner. Something delicious," she says sadly.

"You sound funny," he says.

"Just tired."

"Take a nap, now's your chance. You should see the sky here."

"This guy? What guy?"

"The *sky*. Clouds are racing."

Their studio, in a filthy building where filmmakers and designers rent space next to sweatshops, has a view of the mountain, the cluttered rooftops of the neighbourhood and sky. Irene can picture Mario leaning back from the blocks of fonts and images on his computer screen, and gazing out. In a few months she'll go back to work there and deal with the cool, neat problems of the textureless screen. For now, she's full-time into touch and feel, the moment to moment circumstances of soft, wet, warm, dry, feverish, cold, sleepy, hungry.

She hangs up and puts the kettle on. Then she stands by the phone and stares at the calender. She should have asked Mario what day it was. Her days at home run together. Is today Tuesday or Wednesday? Janine will be two months old in a couple of weeks. She pours water over her tea bag, caffeinated. So far her caffeine intake has not kept the breast-feeding baby awake, she sleeps long hours, a placid infant

compared to her brother, restless since birth, and even before, when he turned around and positioned himself feet-first at the last minute. The second pregnancy was more familiar and comfortable than her first and Janine absorbed this sense of calm in utero. Whatever else happened during those months, Irene had felt reassured by the predictable order of her body's inner workings.

Now she tries to find distinct markers in the days and count back to the weekend, when Mario was at home. It must be Wednesday. That means it's the fifteenth of January. Fifteenth. Two months exactly since Paula died.

When Paula died, Irene kept going. After all, her life is full of life; her scars are life-producing ones. *They opened me up and pulled out life. Not so for Paula.* It's something that occurs to her every time she touches her healing C-section. A reflex.

"Life's too short, don't spend it all in one place," Paula said. This was before Irene knew of any health problems. It was that statement that allowed them to become friends. "My paradigm shift," Paula called it.

Paula had been Irene's boss, the manager of the graphic design department of a shiny P.R. company downtown. Irene had to come in early, gobble lunch at her desk and stay late just to keep up. Paula was always there earlier, and whatever time Irene left, Paula was still in her office, sifting through the stacks of designs on her desk. She had an eye that zeroed in on weak spots, she'd give back Irene's proofs scribbled with arrows and X-es in red pen. Then, one day, at exactly five o'clock she stopped by Irene's desk and said: "Life's too short. Don't spend it all in one place."

"Look who's talking," Irene said.

"Speaking from experience." Paula looked over Irene's shoulder. "I like the typography, but the composition could be stronger," she noted. "Just how I feel. Composition could be stronger."

Paula started working alternate weeks, between chemotherapy treatments. In the office her illness became common knowledge. At noon one day, early in this new schedule, Irene saved the file she'd been working on and went to Paula's office. "I've heard about this custom called lunch, what do you think?"

This started a joyful routine; lunch was new for both of them. They ate leafy salads and sprouted bread at a health food cafe. When Paula said she needed a spiritual tonic, some grit and grease, they went for *steamés* on St-Laurent. At the chipped-linoleum diner, between two strip joints advertising *danceuses nues*, they'd order their hot dogs with sauerkraut, onions and relish, crowing, "All-***dressed***!"

"I wanted to be an artist," Paula told her. "I'd rather be an artist. I studied fine arts, not commercial."

"I've never seen your work."

"Oh, it's banal. Not as good as yours. What I'm good at is critiquing. My strength is poking holes. And what kind of a person does that make me?"

"A good critic. The boss. The big cheese."

"Or a career nit-picker. I mean, ultimately it's a good thing if I get people to do the best work they're capable of — oh, doesn't that sound pretentious! What does the best even mean here, a really great poster, for God's sake."

"It's good to be demanding," Irene offered, generously, since she recalled the

squashing effect of Paula's harshest critiques.

"And then there are these kids right out of school who come and show me their portfolios. Who am I to be the cruel arbiter of job/no job for them? Oh, anyway. They're better off without the stress. The ones I don't hire should be grateful."

"Yeah, right, for being allowed to live the stress-free life of the unemployed."

"For not getting sucked immediately into this boring vortex. You know what? This half-time life is great. I recommend it. I just wish I could be doing something more fun in the other half than hanging around in hospitals. But what about you? How's Mario? Did you guys recover from the parental visit?"

"Exhausting. We cooked and cleaned and saw sights and argued about the price of getting into the art museum and once we got in we argued about the sex and death of the Symbolists. It was a complete visit. And I learned something." Irene paused and leaned toward Paula. "He wants to have kids."

"You didn't know this."

"Honestly, we'd never talked about it. He brought it up before his parents came because he told me they were going to ask."

"Well?"

"And I said the thought had occurred to me, and he said, ready when you are."

"And are you ready?"

"I have to think about it."

"I wouldn't. If I were you, I'd get pregnant in a flash," Paula said, and made violent stabs at her french fries with a fork.

When Irene had forced herself to chart the path of Paula's cancer, from breast to lymph, she became short of breath and ashamed, fearing selfishly for her own body.

"It's just a job," the new Paula would say, standing ready to leave at exactly five o'clock. She was transformed, like Scrooge after the visits from the ghosts. Irene let herself be transformed too and left with her, on time. Paula had a collection of hats and wore a different one all day every day to conceal the startling pink dome of her scalp.

Her tea grown cool, Irene is staring into space when she hears Billy plonking down the hall. "Hey, big kid, have a good sleep?"

His face is pink with nap. He nods.

"Nwork?" he asks.

She gets him a cup of milk and he climbs on her lap to drink it. Irene has a sip of cold tea and breathes in the warm cookie smell of Billy's head. He begins to fidget with questions.

"Can I have a fish? I would like a fish."

"Do you want a tuna sandwich?"

"No! No! A swimming fish!"

"How about a salmon fried in a pan?"

"No, not a fish to eat, a fish to play with in a quarium."

"But you can't really play with fish. All you can do is look at them."

"I like to look at them. Can we go see the fish at Paula's?"

Paula's fish often swim to the surface of his thoughts. When he asks about them, Irene squirms away from the subject. She will not tell him about Paula. She can't.

Crying peals from the front of the apartment. Relieved by the interruption, Irene pads down the hall and lifts the small bundle of her daughter out of the crib. She'd thought one child was consuming. With two, more thoughts are left unfinished. She lays Jan on the changing table and strokes the smooth pale curve of her belly and pats her narrow bottom as she changes her diaper and the miniature plastic pants, size smallest.

She brings Janine into the living room to nurse and sits down in the rocking chair. Bill clatters after her in his prized rummage sale cowboy boots. "I think Janiney needs more sleep."

"You're probably right. I think she'll have some milk first, though. You had milk when you got up from your nap."

"I had it in my big boy cup," he reminds her.

"She's going to have it the baby way."

"I want to go outside. I want to go to Paula's and see fish."

"How is it you have fish on your mind?"

"Hmp."

At three he isn't interested in tracing his thought process. He doesn't know

the expression, "that reminds me." Ideas just get into his head and if Irene doesn't see them going in she is always curious about the trigger. "When I finish nursing the baby, I'll get out some Playdough for you. Maybe you could make some fish with it." She has gone over to the other side, the team of parents; suggesting something as a compromise when it is nothing close to his craving.

He looks down and sends a piece of Leggo under the couch with a deft kick.

"I'm just not sure there are fish at Paula's any more. She went away and the fish might have gone, too."

"Why?"

"Oh gosh, Billy." She lifts Janine to her shoulder and pats smooth circles on her back.

John probably still had them, she should call to see how he's doing. She could imagine the emptiness of their apartment. Of course he still had the fish, he probably hadn't changed a thing, was letting dust collect in a felt-like layer in case it contained particles of her. Billy had loved to coat Paula's aquarium with finger prints, touching cool glass as he stared in at the flickering shapes.

"I'd get a cat, if I weren't allergic," Paula had told her. "Have you noticed the most neurotic people are allergic to cats? Strange, picky, fussy people. And it's a continuum from cats to kids, I don't have cats and I'll never have kids."

"You're not neurotic. You're about the most well-adjusted person I know. You're organized, that's all..." In the silence that followed they watched wisps of steam rise from their tea cups and vanish.

Paula's apartment was perfect. She'd sponge-painted the walls of the rooms poetic colours; alabaster, ochre, sepia, and painted the mouldings vermilion. Her desk was a flat black table with no drawers. Spacious and light, there was never any clutter or disorder in the rooms, as if to compensate for the disarray within her. John lived there with her, they'd been together for years, but to Irene it was always Paula's apartment. They drank pots of raspberry leaf tea there as Paula's health flowed and ebbed.

"Mom, come here," Billy's voice from down the hall tugs Irene back to her own apartment full of stray blocks and crumbs.

"What is it?" She gathers up Janine in her blanket and goes to see. He's standing in front of the closet.

"Georgia's making a funny noise."

Long, low yowlings come from behind the boots and shoes. Irene turns on the closet light and with the baby in one arm lifts some boots and coats out of the way so they can see better. Georgia is sprawled on a sweatshirt protecting a small ball of grey fur.

"What is it?"

"I don't know." She stares hard at the cat, who does not meet her eye, and tries to make sense of the furry clump. Too big for a mouse, could she have found a rat in their apartment? Irene's mind is fixed on rodent, so it takes her time to see that it's a kitten. "You know, Bill, it looks like she had a baby. Only one, thank God." How could this have happened? She almost never got to go outside. She was an apt.

cat. Irene had noticed the sway of her stomach and thought she was just gaining weight. Mario would be mad. He'd wanted to get the cats spayed but she'd refused. They got them when she was first thinking about getting pregnant and she couldn't endorse ripping out anyone's ovaries, then, or later.

"It's little," Billy moves in close and crouches down. "Is it a boy or a girl? Where are its eyes? Is it sleeping? What's its name?"

Georgia licks the small lump of kitten and turns it over with her paw. It lies inert, refusing to nurse.

"Where's its cord, Mom? Why is Georgia washing it? Maybe it wants nwork?"

Georgia picks it up by the scruff of its neck and moves deeper into the closet. Irene feels a twinge as she sees the kitten hang out of her mouth, limp, unmoving.

"Let's leave Georgia alone with her baby, OK?" She takes Bill's hand.

"I want to see. I want to play with the baby." He drags his feet but follows her back to the kitchen and accepts the lumps of playdough she gets out for him. She spreads out a square of plastic table cloth for him on the floor and sits down to finish nursing PJ who has borne the interruption patiently.

Two months exactly. But nothing had been exact or discrete. Things were messy and overlapping as if she were watching one channel with ghosts of other figures flitting around in the background. At the funeral she was swollen huge and could barely fit into the pew of the church. Her back cramped, the baby thumped and she cried because she couldn't concentrate.

John called her the day before Paula died. "She'd like to see you," he told her.

Irene went to the hospital. "If it's a girl, I'm calling her Paula Janine," she reminded her friend.

Paula tried to smile, exhausted. John sat still, at the other side of her bed.

Watching her lids close, too heavy to stay open, the small form in the bed reminded Irene of tucking Billy in. That night she sat in Billy's room as he slept, listening, in the dark, to his breath.

When Mario, driving home from the funeral, said, "Of course this is sad. But it's not exactly a shock. You knew it was coming," she wanted to shake him. Because there was no expecting this. It didn't matter that it had always been hovering. It was a shock. Irene always absorbed the minutes and hours she had with the pale night-gowned Paula in the hospital bed and looked forward to when she'd be better again, dressed in bright, protective colours and invincible in her living room. To say it was not a shock was to deny her sharp, ragged sense of loss.

But then, in no time, there was the new baby and the blurry exhaustion of labour at the hospital, the fierce unending pain, Mario's scared face next to hers, and then the tent over her stomach cutting off her body from her view when they realized another Caesarean was necessary. Afterward the sleepy haze of pain killers, holding Janine next to her in bed, Mario there with Billy and her sense of being surrounded and complete, a family of four. Even back at home there were too many new sensations for her to think of Paula. The falling in love with the baby, examining every whorl and crease of her, the tiny pink balls of her toes, the fine porelessness of her face. Billy had to be restrained from squeezing her small arm and saying, HI

HI HI while she was sleeping. Gifts of sleepers, booties, snow suits poured in and nights slid into grey winter dawns as she rocked and nursed. And then, to her dismay, she couldn't bring herself to call the baby Paula, the round syllables on her lips sounded strange. She kept calling her PJ or Janine. Just for now, she told herself.

When will there be a time beyond now? Irene gets irritable and wants to vent and finds herself hovering near the phone, Paula's number at her fingertips. When she realizes what she's doing, a line from an old gospel tune "Operator, get me heaven on the line" floats to mind; then the gaping absence following presence, the there, not there of death. Dying strikes her hard and makes her dizzy so she has to grasp the palpable plastic of the receiver, and lift the dial-tone to her ear, just to hear something.

"Georgia left the baby in the closet, Mom, look. It's still sleeping." Now her son is at her knee, the dead tiny kitten in his three-year-old hands. She takes it from him, a capable mother, calm.

"I'll put it in Georgia's basket on top of the fridge, Bean, that's a good place to sleep." The kitten is perfect, nose, whiskers, ears, tiny pink paw pads all intact, but too still.

By the time Mario gets home, she's tired of questions, tired of explaining. "Could you get rid of it please. Call the vet's office, they'll know what to do."

"What? Why?"

"I don't want it thrown in the garbage."

"I think we could just wrap it up and put it in the trash can, it's so small."

"No, I just said—"

"I don't understand. Isn't it a good thing we don't have another cat on our hands? Despite your objection to birth control?"

Irene gets out an onion, a knife and a cutting board, begins to chop and sniffle.

Mario shrugs and picks up the phone. Billy watches him from the kitchen floor where he's drawing and eating crackers.

"Dad, Dad, who're you calling Dad?"

"Someone to come and get the kitten."

"Why?"

"Something's wrong with it," Mario explains. "Maybe it came out too soon, before it was ready to be born."

"Is it dead?"

Mario glances at Irene. "Ah, yes. Yep, I guess it is."

Irene hears the clear, piping syllables of Billy's question in shock. Where did that come from? That word, how did he find it, learn it, absorb it into his vocabulary. What does it mean to him? It amazes her, the things he knows without her knowing. The secrets have already begun. When she empties out his small pockets before laundry she finds collections of twigs and stones and scraps of paper, evidence of another life, a process beyond her reach. She hasn't known how to tell him about Paula. She wanted to protect him from death as long as possible. Soon he'll be

asking questions, looking for a more precise definition. Then what will she say. She is cutting, chopping, mincing, finer and finer still, bawling.

"Are the onions making you cry, Mom?"

On the phone, Mario gives their address as if he's ordering a pizza.

Janine wakes up and cries and Irene lifts her out of her basket. "PJ, PJ, Paula Janine," she murmurs, trying out the full name, stroking her cheek, and dropping tears on her.

Mario is cooking the onions when the doorbell rings. He goes down the stairs to answer it with a spatula in his hand. "Ah, *bonsoir, c'était vite*. Come on in, just a sec."

A man in a blue mechanic's jumpsuit comes up and waits in the hall. "Thanks for coming," Irene says.

"*Pas de problème*." With huge gloves and big boots he is prepared for any job, any size of animal.

Mario comes out of the kitchen with a huge black garbage bag that appears completely empty. "Here."

The man gives Mario his clipboard to sign and makes no comment about the weightlessness of the bag.

Irene wonders if the two of them are exchanging looks at the door, rolling their eyes in her direction. Or maybe this happens often, with pet parakeets, cockatoos. As she nurses Irene hears Georgia's yowling again, the drawn out feline keening. She rocks into the gravelly distress, for Georgia and the kitten, for Billy and

his expanding vocabulary, for Paula and PJ. Paula Janine.

The Back of Her Hand

The days are getting longer, when she leaves work it's still light out. Jane walks out the door, shedding the officeness of her day, scrunching her shoulders to get rid of the phantom phone and shoulder rest growing out of her like a mushroom. She doesn't take her work home with her except in her aversion to phones. The bus rolls through the blue light of evening and Jane stands in the aisle and watches the streets slide by sideways. She tries to conjure dinner by visualizing the shelves of the fridge. Nothing appears.

Maybe Destiny is making dinner. More likely she's out and there'll be a note: "gone to R's." Or else she's sitting in the dark in the glow of the computer, struggling with a paper and she'll say "Don't ask" when Jane says hi. If Jane keeps

quiet, after a few minutes Destiny will get spiky: "You're allowed to say hello, you know. You don't have to tiptoe around like I'm completely mentally unstable." Then Jane will say, how's it going and Des will say, oh, ok I guess except that I'm losing my mind. How was work? and they'll have broken the ice that forms quickly lately, after just a day or two of not crossing paths.

These thoughts flow through Jane's mind on the way home, rinsing out the residue of work. At her job, she gets calls from the scattered points of Flin Flon, Dawson City, Red Lake, Timmins. People ask her questions about the courses they are taking by correspondence. What type of soil is best for root vegetables? Where is the book's section on the pituitary gland? What are the other management techniques, besides laissez-faire? Her mind is adrift in questions with short answers. Some people call because the number is toll-free and they want to talk; after she locates the information they ask for and tells them the page number in their textbook, they hang on, talking about the weather or grandchildren. Jane had been intrigued by the vague ad in the paper. "Candidate must have good general knowledge and a university degree." It read like a dream want ad. As a telephone instructor she spends her days on the phone and after five never uses it, startling friends by showing up at their houses without calling first. Or she just talks to Destiny.

Destiny is reading the paper when she gets home.

"Hi, there's nothing to eat," she says. "Want to go garlic?"

"Who's this from?" Jane picks up the envelope propped against the salt

shaker.

"Cam, I think." Destiny waits for Jane to open her letter so the name will slide out of the envelope into place. They know all the fragments of stories started and finished or dangling in other cities and countries. They can divine who mail is from, even when it doesn't have a return address. If they ever wanted to, they could answer each other's mail, convincingly imitating the appropriate handwriting and life. Sometimes they receive a mystery bearing bright petals of foreign stamps and a serrated scrawl instead of a name after "love." Who do I know in Ecuador? Destiny had wondered the other day, staring blankly at a postcard. Jane was the first to remember the guy from Destiny's Spanish course and decipher the name out of the scratch.

"It is Cam, you're right."

"What's going on?"

"'Got a job cutting my fingers and cleaning fish in a restaurant. It's fishy but at least at this job I know where the smell is coming from,'" Jane reads. She puts the letter in her pocket as they go out the door.

They head to their favourite souvlaki place, behind one of the neighbourhood's white stuccoed Mediterranean facades, slip into window seats and their waitress in her blue uniform with soft white shoes puts down water, napkins, and no menu because she knows they know it by heart. The restaurant is full and warm and the weight of Friday sinks through Jane's body, cementing her feet to the floor under the table.

"So how was today? How's Martin?"

"Moody. But he didn't throw his phonebook. He told lies to people who called in. Whenever anyone asked about the Psych exam and he just kept telling them 'Hypothalamus.'"

"Hypothalamus?"

"He always says that when someone asks about Psychology. Someday someone will find out what he tells people. He used to work as a telemarketer selling carpet cleaning and he'd talk really fast and ask people if they had any small children or animals they wanted cleaned. He's reckless." Jane looks up at the plates of food, not theirs yet, floating by.

"Oh, if I had a job Fridays would be special again." Destiny craves and glamorizes Jane's job. To an eternal student, coffee breaks and staff meetings sound solid and appealing.

The souvlaki nurse brings the oval two-pita platter with fries for Destiny and salad for Jane. She bites into the sandwich and feels the feta and tzadziki carbonating on her tongue.

"How would you feel. I wanted to tell you. What if," Destiny begins three sentences. "Me and Ray are thinking of moving in," she says. "Together."

Jane takes a deliberately big bite so as not to answer. She has trouble swallowing.

"I spend so much time there anyway," Destiny goes on.

"It's March. When would you move?" As if she doesn't know July is when

everything changes in Montreal. In a massive game of musical apartments all leases expire on Canada Day. No one goes to picnics or parades, everyone is always moving, or helping friends move.

"Not until July. I wanted to tell you as soon as possible."

"I didn't know you were planning to move."

"I wasn't really, not actively. It just sort of came up." Destiny puts down her pita, a mistake, it goes limp and spills out of its paper cone, impossible to pick up again in one piece.

Jane looks at her roommate. Even as events transpire, they hear themselves transforming incident into anecdote: Wait until I tell her THIS. Now Jane doesn't know who she'll tell, although she feels this story shaping itself: *I felt dumped, but only lovers can dump you. How can friends dump you? It's backwards, what would they say, let's be lovers? I felt dropped, like we used to say in grade six when girlfriends discarded you. Dropped.*

"I'd better look for a place," she says.

"But maybe you think this is a bad idea."

"I think you should do what you want."

They eat in unusual silence after that and walk home without talking. March gathers momentum around Jane, rolling toward July. There is a message blinking on the machine at home. "Ray. Call me."

Ray. For the past six months Jane had watched him carefully, to see if he'd put his cigarette out in a plant, if he'd bring beer or just drink what was in the fridge,

whether he'd put the seat back down. She watched him watch Destiny. She watched Destiny when he was around, noticed if her fingers moved to her mouth, her nails to her teeth. Jane listened to him talk. Jane knew Destiny had watched to see if Jane laughed at Ray's jokes, if the laugh was genuine and how long it lasted or if it flourished in a roll of her eyes. Jane waited for everything to remind him of a story with himself in the starring role. She waited for interruptions, listened for tone, to hear him say to Destiny on the way out the door, *That's what you're wearing?* She waited for any small betrayal, for him to attempt to forge some kind of alliance with her, by saying, while Destiny read her novel, Don't you think Destiny should read more non-fiction? They had always subjected each other's partners to this scrutiny, every instance was a multiple choice question in a continuous long exam.

Sprawling, full of souvlaki, on the living room floor, Jane hears her roommate talking on the phone. There has been a shift in allegiance, she feels conspired against.

As *colocs*, she and Destiny have outlasted six years of leases, men, jobs, an answering machine and a combined total of two and a half degrees. *Colocs*, short for *colocataires*. The way the Quebecois say roommates, it sounds like co-lucks. Jane wonders if her luck is changing. Their life together was actually more solid than luck or love. Jane's romantic relationships had never outlasted an appliance.

Destiny hangs up the phone. "Let's go for a beer."

"With Ray?"

"No, I want to go out with you."

"I don't really feel like it."

"Oh." Des sat down on the couch and looked down at Jane lying on the floor. "You're angry."

"I don't know." *Jane's an introvert*, Destiny told people. *It takes her forever to figure out what she's feeling.* This announcement always made Jane feel diluted as if it were a watered down way of being compared to Destiny's explosions. Going out for a beer is a gesture to signify solidarity in the face of change. Jane wants to turn away from the extended hand and withdraw, the way Destiny is withdrawing from their apartment. She feels betrayed by the suddenness of Destiny's decision. They had not been going over this in conversation, passing it back and forth until it wore down into a thin slip like soap. But now that this change is out in the open she wonders why she didn't see it coming. Destiny was almost never at home any more. When she was, she was tense and smouldering about a paper, or Ray was there with her. They were nocturnal and self-absorbed. Grinding coffee at midnight, sleeping all morning. The apartment did seem too small when Ray was there. You could hear too much. The floorboards squeaking. Ray peeing, that loud splashing sound that all men make. But Jane had never asked *him* to come and make it in her house.

She lies on the floor for another long minute. Then she sits up and puts on some going out music; she doesn't want to stay home and decipher her feelings. Guitar fills the apartment, loud and familiar, the Liz Phair album they've been listening to all winter. "OK, let's go."

They stand together in the bathroom brushing their teeth. Jane watches

Destiny illustrate her mouth with lipstick, tracing the wings of her lips.

Destiny's hippie mom named her, setting a certain tone for her life. It attracted attention. Her high school English teacher fell in love with her. She said it was her name on the class list that lit up like flashing neon for his mid-life crisis. They started going out when she was in his class. His wife left him, taking the kids, and Destiny moved in after graduation. It lasted until she decided to go away to university. There, Jane met her in a literature class where there was much talk of naming and the inscription of meaning.

By the time the tape ends they are dressed in layers for the end of winter, shirt, sweater, jacket, scarf, leaving hats behind since the balm of spring moistens the air. At the bar on St-Laurent, they order a pitcher through the rush of loud music and smoke. They sit at a round table, hands encircling mugs.

"It's been years, you know. Here's to years." Destiny clinks her glass against Jane's. "I'm not sure if I can live somewhere without you."

"You must be pretty sure."

"I'm never sure until it's too late to change my mind."

"Well, I'm sure Ray will be good company."

"But he's not you."

"Nope, he isn't, is he." Jane doesn't see why she should make this easy. She swallows her rusty beer and stares blankly at a guy in a toque who has come up to their table.

"Hi ladies, mind if I sit down?"

"Yeah," Destiny says, but he already has. "So, as it turns out, it's not chlamydia, but *venereal warts*!" she declares loudly, and gives the toque guy a long look in the eyes. "And they can occur on the vagina or the virus can spread to the cervix where it can cause cells to mutate. Very common, the doctor says. Men often get the warts on the penis or the *scrotum*!" she tells the visitor.

Jane snorts and gets beer up her nose.

"I'm going to get another drink," he informs them, standing up in a hurry.

"And if they're on the *scrotum*, condoms don't necessarily obstruct the transmission," Destiny calls after him.

"The problem with men is, they just don't listen." Jane shakes her head and pours more beer, laughing so that she sloshes it on the table. The beer softens her anger, blurs her sense of dislocation. She laughs hard, so hard that tears come and with them, grief. She feels, of all things, sudden sympathy for the guy in the toque. She too, has been dismissed. What started off being a howling laugh turns into dejection.

"I'm going to be lonely," Jane blurts. Destiny grabs her and they lean together, hugging, damp, hiccupping.

"We'll never have to say, 'Let's be friends'" Destiny tells her. "That has to be the most inane statement. If you were going to be, you wouldn't say it."

"I thought of that." But Jane imagines their closeness diffusing over an area bigger than the apartment; evaporating.

They keep drinking. They dance in steamy beer vapours to the 80s music,

back again. They buy tequila shots, poured in glasses the waitress extracts from her holster. The overhead lights come on at 3:00, slicing through the smoke, exposing everyone harshly flushed and sweaty. When they get out of the bar, St. Laurent is frozen to glass. Off-balance already, they falter on the sidewalks coated in slick frozen rain. They have to fight gravity, the gentle slope of the Main down to the river is steep with sudden slipperiness. Jane falls down promptly and Destiny flops on top trying to right her. They laugh dizzy, sore and wet. Up again, they cling to each other and run from pole to parking meter, falling from the ice and beer and tequila. The cold wet is still pouring down, liquid ice. Half-way home they collect a woman stranded in high heels at a parking metre. She can't get anywhere alone on the slick surface in such shoes. Arms linked, three-strong they travel up the street, making a detour at Duluth to drop off their acquaintance. Then they continue up the street northward, where at dusk, the sun sets. It isn't real north, but Montreal north, on the island that operates on its own compass and calendar. Where the grid of streets is askew, where all leases, and therefore new beginnings, start on July 1, in new apartments, empty except for bits and pieces in corners and closets. Home is spinning when they get there.

They peel off their wet jackets and dump them on the floor. Wobbling, they take off their boots. Everything is soaked; jeans, hair, socks. Destiny takes off her sodden jeans and pitches toward her bed.

Jane goes to the kitchen and fills two large glasses of water. "Here." She puts them down by the bed and flops down next to Destiny. Since her aim is off she lands

almost on top of her.

"Oof."

Jane looks at Des in the lamplight. It's hard to focus, she's drunk and sleepy and they're too close. She stares at her face having never seen it from here before. It is from this point of view that touch overrides sight, she thinks, looking at the close-up curve of her friend's mouth.

As if she hears her thinking, Destiny slips the back of her hand along Jane's cheek.

Jane reaches up into the hollow of her curved fingers and turns her palm against it. The skins of their palms meet, Jane imagines their fingerprints blending.

They lie still, feeling this slow new heat. Only their hands touch, folding in and around each other, barely grazing, hot with possibility. With her fingertip Jane traces the curves of Destiny's lips, the familiar path of her lipstick. Pillowy. Their kiss is new and wondering, exploring the cushion of lips. They pull back at the same instant in sleepy awe; there's a boundary to the exploration. Jane needs time to absorb it. Wordless, they hold hands and slip separately into sleep.

Hours later Jane wakes up, curled against Destiny under the comforter, the light still on, glasses of water untouched. She recalls the dreamy coalescence. Who kissed who? Who leaned forward first? It was a coincidence of timing, the way they say the same thing at the same instant, often, having lived together so long. She sits up, clicks off the lamp and eases out of bed in the blur of dawn. In the bathroom she takes two aspirin and then puts the bottle by Destiny's bed. Taking one of the glasses

of water, she goes to her room.

At noon the next day Jane stands by the fridge in her long underwear drinking a glass of Coke. She reaches over and flicks on the burner for Destiny who has measured coffee and water into the pot. Even in the fog of hangovers they move instinctively around the kitchen together, spooning, cutting, toasting, rinsing, boiling, anticipating the browning of the bagels, the gurgle of the coffee. Certain textures of morning are as familiar as milk; her own throat clearing, Destiny's sneezes, the grasp of the melted crooked coffee pot handle. The unwinding of the tough strip of plastic from around the frozen cylinder of orange juice, the jingle of a spoon circling in a cup. Today they don't look at each other. When Destiny reaches around her to get a knife off the counter, and their arms brush, Jane jumps.

"You guys out late last night?" Ray asks. He has stopped by with a bag of bagels and lox.

"Tequila. What were we thinking? I need a morning after pill," Jane says, looking over at Destiny who stares at the coffee pot without responding.

Jane had taken the Morning After pill once, the morning after a broken condom. She'd had visions of that particular sperm fusing itself to the egg with conviction. Another time, they had counted down the seconds out loud of Destiny's Early Pregnancy Test as the beaker of liquid sat on the kitchen table, clear, with the threat of sudden blue and change hanging in the air, and then, not materializing. They have a collective file of their combined experience, cross-referenced. The

roommates confided in each other about the people they slept with, the words uttered in sleep, or in abandon. Months later, in casual conversation, details might emerge, confessions so intimate they were startled to hear them again. Where in the files does last night go, Jane wonders.

"And so then, with a loud crash and a flash of lightning from the sky, there's a voice that says: 'Repaint and thin no more!'" Ray tells a joke, trying to fill the space their silence leaves.

"Unh," Jane and Destiny utter one syllable of groan together. They spread the pink tissues of salmon on toasted rings. It's not normal for them to be so quiet but Ray will probably attribute it to a late night of drinking. Jane wonders if that's what it was, if alcohol had determined everything.

"What do you want to do today Des?" he asks. "It's beautiful out."

"I'm postponing today. I won't be ready for it until tomorrow at the earliest. I'm going back to bed."

Jane looks thoughtfully at Ray. He brought his newspaper. He'd already absorbed that much of the outside world. Destiny had told Jane he sometimes woke up squirming with plans for the day. He'd outline his intentions as she slept and she'd wake up to a whispering of activity.

Destiny gets up from the table and goes to her room. Ray wanders after her. Jane hears the rumple of covers as they crawl onto the bed. She sits at the table in the debris of sesame seeds. She presses down on one to make it jump. From the other room, Jane hears a murmur. She listens, flipping seeds with her fingernail. She

needs more sleep but feels edgy, *pas bien dans sa peau*, as the saying goes, not right in her skin. Her stomach is bubbly from cups of coffee, and her head is wavery. She tries to sort through the layers. Kissing someone she'd never thought of touching before. What was that? If Ray hadn't come over first thing they could have talked about it, or would this be the one thing they never discussed? Maybe Destiny is telling him right now what happened, explaining that they were drunk and she'd felt guilty about moving out, that it didn't mean anything. Or maybe she's saying last night changed everything and she'll have to rethink the move. Most likely she's not even talking about it. Which means Jane knows something Ray doesn't, a curious shift from yesterday.

She can't stop recalling the kiss. The startling tremor of possibility when their palms touched. She tiptoes down the creaky hall to Destiny's bedroom door and stands outside, listening. She is standing there, balancing on a quiet floorboard when it starts; the shucka-shucka of the bed moving, of them moving together. Her jumpy stomach lurches. The floor squawks as she walks away.

Bearings

Ray saw the pile of shredded paper on the kitchen table as soon as he walked in. His legs were sore and his hands were freezing. He'd been out riding all night. It was September and getting too cold to bike nights without gloves. He sat down at the table with the damp scraps speckled brown from coffee grounds. The note had been written, ripped up, tossed in the garbage and retrieved. He went over these steps in his mind and matched them with Destiny's instinct, reservations, regret and determination, in that order.

He read a few of the paper shards. "...hard and tangled...feels a necessary...I remember once..." These phrases reminded him of sentence fragments carved into a round stone on the mountain. One hot night she'd taken him to read that sculpture

in the dark. A lump formed in his throat. He pushed the scraps around on the tabletop, without trying to fit them together. Underneath them lay her key to the apartment.

Bicycles are a seasonal currency and spring and summer he worked at least twelve hours a day to make the most of it. Destiny had moved in July 1 and all summer they'd been surrounded by bikes and parts and people coming and going. At night when she came home from the library they'd take a shower but his hands would never come clean. She'd kiss the grease-grey ridges of his fingernails. Things seemed smooth. He loved summer, in warm weather you coasted.

In the spring she'd been agitated and manic, coming to his apartment sleep-deprived from writing papers, furious at the world. He was sure it came from spending too much time cooped up reading about reading. Once she walked in and slammed herself into the closet.

He spoke to the door. "How're your papers going? They due soon?"

"What, makes you say that." Her voice was muffled from inside.

"Want a beer?"

"I hate this. I feel homeless. Or like a kid dividing time between broken homes." She opened the door and stomped out. "It's like I'm having an affair, if I spend a few days here I feel guilty when I go home. Jane has started treating me like an uninvited guest. When we go there it's like we're invading her space, but that's how I feel when I come here. It's hard enough for me to focus and this makes me even more scattered — and then you cross-examine me about my courses!"

"One general question is not a cross-examination."

"You were just gearing up to one, I could tell. People bring you broken things and you fix them. You're well-adjusted. Pick on someone your own size."

He watched her pacing the kitchen. "What do you want to do?"

"I can't live with myself."

"Arm wrestle?"

"Grrr." She came close and glared into his eyes, her face an inch from his.

He stared back, her proximity making him cross-eyed. They stayed still like this for a full minute, eye to eye. Then, in one quick movement, he thwacked his forehead against hers.

Her glare shattered in surprise. Clunk! She got him back.

"Ow."

Rubbing their heads they slid into a pile on the floor, laughing. He asked if she wanted to move in.

First, she had to move out. Destiny and Jane had lived together so long they were a couple. They knew each other's life-histories inside-out. They could cook home-made spinach ravioli or moussaka without talking about what they were doing. They'd pass cutting boards full of diced vegetables and pans of sauce back and forth while they discussed other things. They spoke in a certain register that didn't always make sense to him. He thought of those whistles that only dogs can hear. They dressed alike, the way women who've been friends forever do. Same sweaters, same black boots, same number of earrings.

"This is really good," he'd say, eating the cinnamon squash soup they'd made. They would nod and keep talking to each other.

He always waited for them to run out of things to say. Jane talked to people all day answering questions they called in about their correspondence courses, and Destiny spent her life reading and writing. Apparently these activities just generated more words. And they saw each other every day. Ray had never had a roommate like that. He'd never had a *lover* like that. How much new was there to say every day? He used words as if they were parts he had in limited supply. Often he listened to the roommates talk. Sometimes the minutiae was overwhelming and he'd just let their voices wash over him:

"I forgot to tell you, I went to Pierre's place for dinner yesterday," said Jane.

"Oh, that was yesterday, how was it?"

"It was veggie burgers."

"No way."

"He's converted. He offered me a spirulina soya-milk shake."

"Yum. That's typical. He's such an extremist. A nice cup of Inka?"

"Mint tea, actually, and ginseng ampoules."

"Oh no, did he make you listen to Enya?"

They had codes. To them, certain foods and music, books, all had intricate meanings. Sometimes he'd been unable to imagine he and Destiny living together. She and Jane were entwined. He felt it was like someone deciding to leave her marriage for you. How could you know she'd be happy? Who would she be when she

was no longer part of the partnership that had defined her for years? In hindsight it seemed so obvious.

Sprockets, brackets, calipers floated through Ray's head after a full day. In bed he'd try to do a count of how many he'd done, how many left to go for tomorrow, a blurry tally of bikes merging into one when he was sleepy. He liked the simple physics of bicycles, although he could fix anything. He'd always thought he might go somewhere, India, or China, or Central America where they were still the most essential form of transportation. He'd offer his services — contribute in a useful, practical way. Make himself indispensable to the cause. While he sorted through frames, Destiny went over conversations she'd had during the day.

"I talked to Paige and she told me she's in love." She loved talking about other people in bed.

"Hmm. What time do you have to get up in the morning?"

"With that guy Alistair who I always thought was slime. She claims now he's out of a bad relationship he's different."

"Are you going to school tomorrow?"

"She said they've each been involved with extremely selfish people in the past and now they are both surprised at how great it is to be with someone considerate."

"I have to get up early. Can you set the alarm for quarter to seven?"

"Don't ignore me, I'm telling you stuff."

"But what are they doing here in my bed? Paige and whoever."

"It's not sordid, it's a story. You have no sense of narrative. I'm talking about

love. They're going to Saskatchewan so she can meet his family."

"Driving?"

"What? Yeah, I guess."

"That's a long drive."

"Jane hasn't said much since I told her I'm moving in with you."

"Are we still talking about love?"

"Yes."

"Is she upset?"

"A little sad, I think."

"Am I going to have to replace Jane in your life?"

"You couldn't."

"You two will always be friends."

"Living together is beyond friends. It's a pattern, an etching, a shape."

"Let's etch," he said, putting a hand on the S of her side.

"It's strange to think we won't be under the same roof any more. How will I know what she's doing, or what she's thinking." She jerked away from his touch and sat up to examine a toenail.

In the fall with no one to tell him stories, these conversations came back to him. Destiny used to get mad at him for zeroing in on extraneous elements. What kind of machinery was in there? he'd want to know about the Victorian textile mill in her novel. What kind of car do they have? he'd need to know, when she mentioned anyone's road trip. She said he was nut-and-bolt-fixated. He liked

listening to her describe what was happening in the thick novels she read, she distilled it, and added her inflections. He loved her ability to understand the details of fiction. He couldn't imagine sorting through all the character histories and family connections, he adhered to more tangible reading material, instruction manuals and schema that spoke to him with clarity.

She'd made him notice the words for parts. He was changing a brake once when she asked what he was doing. "I'm pushing down the cable to disengage the nipple."

"Hmm, interesting. What else?"

"I already checked the shoes and replaced the pads."

"Shoes, pads, nipples. So intimate."

"I changed and lubricated the bracket bearings."

"That's why I like you. You can lubricate my bearings."

"Nipple," he said to himself after she moved out. "Flange, lip, cone, cup. Bearings."

July 1, moving day, was hot and jungle muggy. They sweated lifting boxes and boxes of books, dishes, clothes, rolls of rugs and furniture. Moving vans and trucks clogged the street and people marched in lines like ants carrying loads in and out of houses. At the corner an upright piano dangled from a crane like a huge single earring.

They loaded up Jane's stuff into the truck Malcolm had lent Ray, in exchange

for a tune-up. He and Jane made the first trip to her new place while Destiny finished throwing stuff into boxes in her room.

"I said goodbye last night," Jane told him as they left the old place. "Walked around touching shelves and windowsills, after you guys left. So today is reserved for greeting, for starting."

Her new home was small but high up with the special feature of trees in front and back. She buzzed around opening doors and windows, cupboards and closets, as if to make sure the space was all there. When they drove back to get Destiny she was sitting in the middle of the floor, in the barrenness of their life dismantled.

"Come on," Jane said, grabbing two garbage bags of clothes. "You have to come visit my new abode."

"Yeah," Destiny said, without moving.

At the end of the day they sat in Jane's new kitchen surrounded by boxes, drinking beer from bottles slippery with condensation. A warm, leafy cross-breeze blew through the apartment.

"It's nice. I'm staying here," Destiny smiled.

"I don't think," Jane said, "there's enough room."

Looking back, Ray saw that his sprawling apartment had been lacking something. It was huge and so affordable they'd decided not to look for neutral ground. But it didn't have the fresh, bald, unbegun quality that Jane's did. Or the perfect sense of space of the girls' old place with the small shelves put up in just the right place to hold a plant in the sun. Destiny's stuff was in bags and boxes and his

work spilled out of the workshop with the odd spoke or inner tube ending up on the kitchen counter or the edge of the bathtub.

That night they took cool showers and lay separate on the bed. It was too sticky to touch. "Happy house-warming to us," she sang softly.

It was right both ways, somehow. He and Destiny, together. Walking through the street sale between the tables of cheap watches and glassware gleaming in the sun. They stop for ice cream, he licks melting drops from her knuckles. Sweet. She presses the small of his back to make him look at something, a book she wants in the used-book store window. *Small*, one of her favourite words.

If he mentally squinted and tilted his head, Destiny and Jane. That was right, too. The way it had been in the beginning. On their balcony, with earth spread out in black clumps, planting marigolds and pansies in window boxes. From the sidewalk across the street he watched their hair and the colours of flowers waving in the wind. If he squinted hard, it was like he'd known all along.

He could almost convince himself not to take it personally, as if it was something between them and he'd just, for a while, got in the way. The next instant it would shock him. In the morning he'd wake up alone and wonder where she was, oh yeah... and the awareness would slide in, this daily recognition becoming a piece of his morning routine. His bolts gave him pause; they reminded him of her earrings. He sat immobilized in front of a drawer full of them. Destiny had left him for Jane.

The note, left torn up on the table, was not a surprise. It had come after a hollowing confrontation the night before. And sometime before that, the coasting

had stopped.

Mornings, he and Destiny went to a cafe where the flood of neighbourhood artists, loafers and people like them had driven out the old Italian men. J.F. joined them and they joked about Mile-End separating from the rest of Montreal and Quebec. J.F. rolled one pungent butt after another in his brown-stained fingers and they flipped through the gory pages of twisted metal car wrecks in *Le Journal de Montréal.*

One day when Ray forgot his money and asked if she could pay for his coffee, Destiny stood up and dumped the contents of her wallet on the table. The change came spilling out, clinking down on the tabletop and rolling off in all directions. Then bank machine slips and bills wafted down, a five and three twos, landing in the ashtray and empty coffee cups.

There was a silence as Ray and people at surrounding tables stared at her.

Then J.F., leaning back with a soggy little stub in his fingers, clapped, saying "Bravo!" as if it had been a performance. She got down to gather up her coins.

"What was that all about?" Ray asked when they got outside.

"Nothing. I'm sorry. Just frustrated. Thesis," she said and got on her bike.

"Some kind of last straw? Do I owe you money? What was the first straw? Wait."

"I have to go. I'll feel better once I get some work done."

He leaned to kiss her cheek but she turned her head and the kiss got lost in her hair.

That night she called while he was still working. He let the machine get it and listened. "Hi, I'm over at Jane's, think I'm going to stay here tonight. See you tomorrow."

"Something's backwards," she told him a few weeks later.

It was September, cooling off and business was starting to slow down. There wouldn't be too many more late nights. That was good, he wanted to go to a movie someday soon. He tried to remember the reviews he'd read in the paper. They never stuck in his head.

Destiny came home and dumped her books at the door. She walked in to where he was working and watched him.

"I'm ready to punch out," he said.

"I'm going to move in with Jane."

"What? You already did that."

"No, this is different," her voice wobbled.

"What are you telling me?"

"Oh, Ray."

"Are we talking about love?" He laughed, a harsh sound. He felt they'd had this conversation before from a different direction.

"Yes."

"You're in love with someone you lived with for about a decade. Did you just notice?"

"Yes. No! It just happened. Everything's backwards. It never occurred to us

before. It's like we couldn't recognize it until we were apart. Maybe we didn't want to see the complicating possibility. But now it's all I can see."

He screwed a bolt tighter than necessary. That bolt would never come out. "Maybe you just miss her. I sort of miss her. You shouldn't do anything sudden."

"I've known her for seven years."

"This is still sudden." He frowned. He should have paid more attention when she told him what happened in her novels so he would know what to do in this circumstance. Or what to say. He tried to think if there was anything he could say. He felt pieces falling away inside him. He dropped his wrench and wiped his hands on a rag. He ran his hand lightly over the frizzle of her hair. "Don't go," he said. "You just got here."

They stood there until he couldn't stand the concern in her face. He grabbed his jacket and a bike, the first whole one within reach, somebody's mountain bike, and headed out the door with his shoulder through the frame. He thought he'd ride all night.

"Where are you going? Ray! Why don't you please just yell at me?"

A year ago, more now, he had put up signs on telephone poles and fences all over the neighbourhood in a reckless appeal for her to call him.

They first met when she came to get the coaster break for her Raleigh Space Rider fixed. It was a classic old three-speed with one hand brake and one coaster brake she'd found at a garage sale. "Nice bike," he told her and explained how they

last forever and all this brake needed was new cones and bearings and if the bike had an overall tune-up it would be good as new. She nodded as if she were listening. But later he knew she hadn't been. She was not impassioned about the way things work, no matter how much he explained, unable to stop himself, hoping to pique her curiosity. At the time she was just being polite, which he would have taken as a compliment if he'd known her better. It was June and busy when she came to collect her fixed bike, there were lots of people waiting, no time to talk, her kinky hair fizzed around her head. She paid and left.

That's when he put the signs up with his phone number. "Raleigh Space Rider, call me, let's go to Neptune." He couldn't believe he was doing it. He could have just waited until he ran into her again, but he'd never seen her before and maybe she'd just disappear. Sometimes the density of familiar people in the neighbourhood seemed so high it was like there were no strangers or anonymity left, he felt he might as well be living in a small town as opposed to a city of over three million people. Other times people he'd never laid eyes on appeared and it'd turn out they'd been living across the street for a year. He went out with a stack of photocopies and a roll of tape after midnight, so he wouldn't run into anyone he knew in the process. He figured if friends recognized his phone number he could say it was about a bike part that had come in. He didn't know why he chose Neptune except Venus was too cheesy, Uranus was out for obvious reasons of taste, and the moon had already been claimed by astronauts.

"I'd rather go to Saturn," she said when she called. "It's closer. And there

might be saturnalia."

It was hot, Montreal was adrift in a heat wave. They rode through the summer night and the air felt like warm liquid. Their bikes sliced through it. The streets were smooth in the dark, the pavement held the heat of the day and gave off a dusty scent. Their tires were soundless on narrow side streets and they floated through tango music, and baseball games on TV, the urban summer smells of sun-melted tar, garbage, and smoky barbecues. At the park a green front, several degrees cooler than the rest of the city, rose from the grass and trees and people strolled around the tennis courts, the soccer fields and the empty concrete vessel of the wading pool, drained for the night.

Ray sat back on his seat and dropped his hands to his side. He balanced in exhilaration. He wanted to reach over to touch her back as they rode and feel the bumps of her spine. They rode up the gravelly path that wraps around the mountain through the trees.

"Coolth," she said.

It was darker here and they kept right so they wouldn't be flattened by cyclists crashing down the hill. Part-way up, they stopped, sweating, and splashed their faces at the drinking fountain. The grade of the path is gentle but by the time they reached the pond at the top, grandiosely known as Beaver Lake, he was ready to flop down on the grass. But Destiny kept going. She got off her bike and pushed it up to the top of a rise that overlooked the pond. She swung her kickstand down and began walking in circles under the trees. The white moons on her dress shone in the dark.

"Here it is," she said, after a minute. "Here."

He went over and she was standing on a flat hard spot.

She grabbed his wrist and moved his fingertips against the hard surface they were standing on. It was stone, flat and cool.

"What is it?"

"Words. Feel." She pressed his fingers against indentations in the stone. Later he would look back on this and remember how tangible words were to her, carved in granite or not.

After a minute he lit a match and glimpsed the engraved phrases. *Je t'écris tous les jours...le soleil entre les arbres...le vent dans les feuilles...* arcing around in a circle.

When the match went out, he waited for his eyes to adjust. He could hardly see her, in the dark the edges of her blurred, and only the spots of her moons showed up clearly. They stood on the stone circle and she turned her back and leaned against him. He ran his hands down her arms to her fingertips and slowly back up to her shoulders smooth and round in the dark. He reached down to her knees and brought his hands back up underneath the thin cotton of the dress. His hands were cool from the stone, her thighs as smooth as polished granite, but warm.

Later, they rocketed down the mountain on their three-speeds, she on her Spacerider and he on his Meteor. In the dark, they flew, and the familiar curves of the path were unexplored territory.