

**MARLOWE'S CABIN:
Writing Across Nations**

by

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Abstract

Essay: Writing Across Nations

Immigrant literature is a term that denotes literature written by individuals who have relocated to Canada. The term is centred around the concepts of nation and citizenship and relates to Canada's state policy of multiculturalism. In doing so, the writing is portrayed to occur within such a framework, when frequently it questions and extends beyond it. In reality, such writing can look beyond the concepts of nation and citizenship and describes alternate frameworks to experience relocation to Canada.

Novella: Marlowe's Cabin

The main character has relocated to Canada from Germany. As a long-time resident he has built a cabin on an island on British Columbia's coast and reflects there on his personal and familial past. In doing so, he comes to realize that he was a victim of incest and considers the Second World War as a factor that led to the generational incest in his family. His realizations allow him to end this cycle of violence by safeguarding his daughter Marlowe.

Dedication

For Megan, with love.

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Essay:

Writing across Nations

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Immigration has long created important social and political issues in Canada. From the very beginning days, and emerging from its colonial roots as a settling and occupying force, the Canadian nation has regulated and directed immigration into its political and territorial borders as a matter of policy. As with every important political and social issue, discourse about different immigration topics has arisen in public and private spheres, in business and political settings, and in academic and workplace environments. And yet, immigration as a topic is unthinkable and unspeakable without the stories of the individuals who have suffered and triumphed as a result of the social and political processes that have affected them. These stories are shared frequently and in a multitude of ways – from tales around dinner tables and other informal discussions to discourse in the media, in our educational systems, and through government policies and publications. The main body of this project is one such story. In the following essay I examine the concept of “immigrant literature” by way of introduction.

Amid the plethora of expressions about the immigrant experience in 21st century Canada, literary approaches to this subject have become an important part of the literary landscape. In particular, novels by immigrants about their experiences have become a significant part of literary discourse and are included in many classes on literature in Canada. Immigrant literature, a frequently used term to denote, define and bundle such texts, has become a commonplace description for writing by immigrants. But while it is valuable to include these texts on the bookshelves of our stores and homes and in the curricula of our educational systems, it is important to clarify that literary discourse about national identity and the movement between and among nation states reaches beyond the nation state itself. In fact, while the term immigration literature seems to confirm the territorial and legal boundaries of

Canada, the very literary discourse about moving in and out of nations often challenges and transcends the boundaries of any particular nation as a political and economic institution.

Defining immigrant literature as writing by immigrants or about immigration implicitly diminishes the possibilities of exploring the limitations which concepts such as nation, nation state, citizen, and immigrant impose. Denoting writing about moving between nations or about having a specific cultural or ethnic heritage as “immigrant literature” accepts the nation state and the act of legally being a part of such a state as a key framework of the text. But the reality of the Canadian cultural landscape differs from the kind of clearly defined demarcations involved in the stereotypical representation of an immigrant, described as of a single ethnic background, arriving on a boat or plane and making her or his way in their new home country. Moving from one area of the world to another includes the process of interrelating and intermixing with other cultures. Rarely is the stereotypical segregation of cultures rendered in government and media representations of immigration lived out in reality.

In the case of one of Canada’s largest immigrant groups, people of German background, this claim becomes clearly evident from the statistical reality: while the 1986 Census reveals some 2.4 million immigrants who identify themselves as German, only roughly 900,000 are of single German origin (Day, 203). The remainder come from multiple origins, one of which is German. This trend toward a blending of cultural and ethnic backgrounds has intensified since 1986, as an examination of subsequent censuses demonstrates. In fact, when asked about their ethnic identification 39.4% of individuals in the 2001 census denoted Canadian as their ethnic identification (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census), an approximate increase of 9% over the 1996 census, while the overall population increase since the 1996 census was only 3.9% (Statistics Canada, 1996 Census). The same census also shows an increasing number denoting multiple ethnic origins. In light of these findings, it is questionable whether the binary counterpoint of citizen/immigrant with its roots in

the idea of transplanting a citizen of one nation into another is indeed the most useful categorization of writing about migration.

Immigration as a legal process is integrally tied to a national state, which erects and defends territorial and political boundaries and legitimizes citizenship through statutes. But while the nation state is a very real and tangible institution that often powerfully impacts the individuals and their lives and livelihoods within this institution, Benedict Anderson's eloquent and much quoted definition of the nation as an "imagined community" clarifies that the concept of nationhood as a fundamentally subjective and imagined one. For Anderson, the term "nation" is a flexible concept that exists primarily by virtue of the fact that the relationship between individual members of such a community does not exist as such. Rather, Anderson argues, it is an imagined relationship based on a created set of commonalities that are ascribed to a supposedly common state or nation. As Anderson clarifies, "the nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (Anderson, 5). The nation as a cultural paradigm is therefore a political and social vehicle for pursuing a variety of purposes, including territorial expansion and protection, economic stability and growth, and the perpetuation of moral and ethical values, often intermixed with and in relationship to specific religious and spiritual beliefs and ideals. Immigration, defined against and within such a political and territorial system, describes the action of becoming a part of such system by relocation.

Immigration literature, as a literary genre, frequently relies upon and indeed supports the nation as a key identifier for a supposed cultural identity. In this idealized national concept, individuals depart from one nation, often for reasons associated with that national identity, such as the repercussions of a government's political agenda on the life of an individual, economic pressure and limitations, or the exclusion of a particular way of life within the national cultural ideology and practice. Examples of such exclusions are a limitation of religious or cultural freedom, or

limitations against accepting gender and family alternatives that do not fit a cultural stereotype. The official Stats Canada website describes this process as one that “over the past 100 years has shaped Canada” (Statistics Canada, 4) and characterizes the individuals immigrating as “waves of immigrants adding to the nation’s ethnic and cultural composition” (Statistics Canada, 4), noting that “half a century ago, most immigrants came from Europe” (Statistics Canada, 4) while “now most newcomers are from Asia” (Statistics Canada, 4). Again the focus is on delineating immigrant information by creating a separation by category of ethnic origin, rather than elaborating on the growing trend of identification based on mixed cultural and ethnic backgrounds and histories.

The Canadian narrative of immigration paints the picture of a country that embraces and supports the collection of multiple cultural and ethnic identities within its national identity. It is, however, necessary to understand the processes and motivations behind the creation of such a national ethos. Eva Mackey’s exploration of multicultural Canadian identity in *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*, describes the process of settling a colony of the British Empire, and nationalizing that same territory through declaration, exploitation, and legislation.

Mackey points to the active shaping of the national identity as an inherently political process. Among many other examples, she cites the 1984 election of the Mulroney government as an instance of reconstructing Canadian national identity based on political motives. Mackey clearly identifies the shift toward a “severe reduction of state power, spending, and intervention, and the related aim of a more market-oriented, less protectionist capitalism.” (Mackey, 110) This shift coincided with on-going divergence and resistance to such a change, and a continued questioning of the national identity as applicable to key groups, with Quebec’s provincial government taking the a key role in expressing dissatisfaction with the Canadian national concept.

Mackey argues that Canada’s government responded by designing a populist national identity intended to unite Canada against such divisive politics. An important

part of such an imagined national self was the creation of an enhanced national other. Mackey states that the “constant attempt to construct an authentic, differentiated, and bounded identity has been central to the project of Canadian nation-building, and is often shaped through comparison with, and demonization of, the United States.” (Mackey, 145). Interestingly, the emphasis the Canadian government placed on multiculturalism was one of the defining features of Canada’s national identity used to separate it from the melting pot metaphor of the American national imagination. Richard Day’s comprehensive review *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* further examines the specific development and formation of multiculturalism in Canada and comes to similar conclusions as Mackey. However, where Mackey views multiculturalism primarily as a political project, Day expands his horizon to consider the cultural and social realities underlying such a project.

Day examines the notion of multiculturalism as a post-modernist idea, relating it directly to the discussion of the term immigrant literature. Day argues that “in cultural studies, literary theory, and educational debates, multiculturalism and postmodernism often appear together as correlates or in variously theorized cause and effect relationships.” (Day, 199). Day goes on to argue that in addition to the idea of multiculturalism as a state and nation building project which ironically has at its primary interest the creation of unified national identity, it is possible that “Canadian multiculturalism as state policy can also be seen as an attempt to evolve a new form of state articulation appropriate to a social condition of postmodernity” (Day, 204). Day argues that in a post-modern social reality, immigrant groups and groups of the colonial settlement each have lost their identification with a single ethnocentric identity, which is being rapidly replaced by a mixing across ethnic and racial lines, as evidenced in census data over the past decades.

Day postulates that the reality of multiculturalism as a directive of the nation state was built by dominant cultural groups possessing official recognition, namely the British-Canadian nation, the French-Canadian nation and, on its opposite side, recognized ethnic groups and self-governing Aboriginal peoples. It is important to

clarify that within such a state model of multicultural reality, ethnic groups and recognized peoples were identified in a way that delineated them as recognized minorities, subject to and separate from the primary national identity of the dominant cultural groups. With respect to the post-modernisation of Canadian cultural reality, Day argues that groups such as non-integrating Aboriginal peoples and people of multiple origins lack official recognition and visibility under a state program of multiculturalism.

Day's argument is relevant in the face of increasing political pressure to identify the population by segmentation into visible minorities with funding for creating cultural programs that further ethnic identification, while the social reality is rapidly changing to a landscape of ethnic multiplicity and a heritage of multiple origins. The post-modern paradigm, with its emphasis on plurality and non-definition and its commitment to a fluid, subjective, non-structural reality, appears to be a hopeful theoretical backdrop for redirecting the state policy of multiculturalism. Interestingly enough, the emerging genre of post-colonial literature provides one vantage point for pushing the boundaries of a state-prescribed version of multicultural reality and expanding it into the realm of personal history, cultural heritage and plural and often contradictory elements of multiple cultural and ethnic realities.

In such an analysis, literature about migration is less about the process of immigrating from one legal entity to another (and in the process describing and evaluating the drawbacks and benefits of one nationally imagined reality over another), and more about describing the conflicts of a cultural process that does not fit the prescribed notions of multiculturalism. A helpful methodology for understanding the tension between a state-prescribed notion of reality and the contradictory themes of reality arising in everyday living is provided by Stanley Cohen, in his milestone work *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. In it, Cohen makes a direct link between the state-induced realities of national identity and the repression or denial of realities in the same states that do not fit with the image thus created.

Cohen uses the term “Internal Bystander”, which he defines as an individual or group that knows “about atrocities suffering within your own society” (Cohen, 142). Cohen further describes the process of uncovering denial and “breaking out of the lie” (Cohen, 258) as the coming to a realization which changes the perception of the internal bystander, not allowing him or her to continue living in the same way as before. This psychological opening to a social reality, divergent from the imagined reality of a single national discourse, leads to the liberation from being a bystander and forces upon the individual the responsibility to take action.

In the myth of the Canadian multicultural state, the nation state focuses on itself as the provider of recognition, reparation, visibility, and power, while minorities are envisioned as passively and with supposed gratitude receiving such generosities from the dominant group as an invitation to participate in political, cultural and religious institutions. This conclusion unveils the underlying intention of the political project that is the multicultural Canadian nation state. It shows that the process of sharing, welcoming and tolerating is set up with the limiting intention that the source of such actions is the state and within it the powerful players of the dominant group, while the recipients of such actions are marginal minorities upon whom the actions are exerted.

It follows that literature that describes the experiences of people moving across nation states can and should concern itself with challenging the limitations the political system exerts. Nurjehan Aziz, in *Floating the Borders: New Contexts in Canadian Criticism*, explores the notion of form in such a movement. Aziz presents the important distinction between storytelling as a phenomenon of the oral tradition and the novel as a product of literacy (Aziz, 129). She points to the key social functions of both forms of artistic productions and postulates that the shift from storytelling to the literary production of the novel mirrors the shift from storing and communicating cultural information to producing and selling a cultural property from a position of authority. For Aziz, the telling of a tale means “that someone has witnessed, experienced, and survived something”(Aziz, 132) and that “people are sharing with

her through listening, responding, and appreciating”(Aziz, 132). Aziz postulates that the sharing of experiences that are important, valuable and meaningful is an event that takes place outside of an economic or structural system of power and within an interpersonal environment.

Jacques Derrida, in his 1966 paper “Structures, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences” perhaps most eloquently elaborates on the possibility of perceiving and thus commenting on the idea of a centre being both the focal point of power and a deliberate illusion designed to further such power in its execution. Derrida points out that within each structural system there is a centre “which is by definition unique” (Lodge, 109) that “constitutes the very thing within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality” (Lodge, 109). It is possible to recognize that the centrality of power exerted by the Canadian nation state in implementing the policy of multiculturalism escaped its own policy by largely remaining a direct and unequivocal representation of a white, upper class business and intellectual leadership. The centre, to speak with Derrida, in its homogeneity is not subject to the same requirements for multiculturalism that are imposed upon the structure.

Similarly Derrida argues that such an execution of structural power, while illusory, nonetheless has consequences. For Derrida, the history of the concept of structure is based on the invention of a defining centre which causes the creation of the structure while remaining outside of it, and a series of ruptures which replace one power centre with another, so that “successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names” (Lodge, 109). The consequence for Derrida is the exclusion of the element of play, and by extension the disempowerment of playful and creative elements that do not fit or further the system. Play, creativity, and plurality do not exist in the system, but between, beyond and outside, in the liminal spaces that are liberated from the structure.

The Derridean notion of play is what liberates the individual and the process from the structurality of an event, doctrine, or system. By acting from beyond the

limitations of the system, the element of play has the power to examine, understand and engage with the system's centre. The centre, for Derrida, is simply an arbitrary locus of power that exists primarily in its function as a signifier, which itself is interchangeable at the point of rupture in the structural tradition. Because the centre can be identified as function rather than content, it can also be identified as empty, interchangeable, and arbitrary. Derrida's idea of play then describes that the "absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (Lodge, 110). Thus, extending oneself beyond the nation state is to identify this centre as arbitrary and to play with what remains of the nation state when its centre is replaced by another centre, for example that of the hybrid identity of an individual of multiple origins.

Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* is a powerful example of the process of writing within, about, and outside of the structurality of a Canadian nation state, from a place of multiple cultural identity. In this work, Wah exemplifies the importance of recognizing the centrality of the dominant Canadian point of view as a something that can be played with. Wah shows how such playfulness, both serious and comically poetic, derails and illuminates the emptiness and arbitrariness of the centre. He describes the prescriptiveness of the cultural centrality that does not fit the main character's own key expectations and goals quite clearly: "Do what the father's fathers tell you; their words are your commands. First get a job get married get a house get a car (isn't that right)—then you can breath easy" (Wah, 17). This is the prescribed path, the reality of life as it is envisioned by national norms.

But the reality of moving across nations is quite different. In *Diamond Grill*, the main character's father immigrates to Canada and "his only schooling in English he picks up during six months in Cabri, Saskatchewan, just north of Swift Current. His father sends him there to work in a small café soon after he returns from China." (Wah, 65). Real life does not occur in the world imagined by the centre, but rather in locations outside of it. Wah describes one such location:

In a room at the back of a Chinese store, or above, like a room fifteen feet over the street din in Vancouver Chinatown, you can hear, amplified through the window, the click-clacking of mah-jong pieces being shuffled over the table tops. The voices from up there or behind the curtain are hot-tempered, powerful, challenging, aggressive, bickering, accusatory, demeaning, bravado, superstitious, bluffing, gossipy, serious, goading, letting off steam, ticked off, fed up, hot under the collar, hungry for company, hungry for language, hungry for luck, edgy. (Wah, 111).

In such passages literature opens itself up to an entity beyond the context of the nation state, inviting the reader to consider the reality of moving across nations; the reality, not of multiculturalism, but of infusion with experiences and knowledge different from and quite possibly unrelated to the world in which one is now immersed. Wah's text is quite clearly readable in the context of a post-colonial literary paradigm – a realm of thought in which moving across nations takes place not in the narrowly prescribed pathways of the official multicultural imagination, but rather along a series of divergent paths that each lead to the profound and personal experiences of people's interactions with other people and with policies.

In his equally well-written *Out of the Interior: The Lost Country*, Harold Rhenisch describes the experiences of a German family settling in the Okanagan. Again the narrator struggles with a mixed cultural identity. While the first-person narrator has two German parents, the text is focused intricately on the task of realizing, identifying and understanding the position of the narrative "I" both outside the context of Canadian national identity portrayed by government and peers, and the context of the German background of the parents to which he does not belong either. As in Wah's text, language plays an important role for Rhenisch:

This summer I heard my father speak German for the first time in twenty years. In German he is cultured and measured, but in English he is rough and hasty, bad-tempered, without subtlety and at times without either tenderness or understanding. English is an attitude – a language and a way of life learned, by imitation ... and suited only to the world of work and talk during work on the farm. (Rhenisch, 139).

Rhenisch elaborates on the Derridean rupture in the system of identifying the self through the nation, and the ways that replacing the centre with the English language, where before it had been German, changes and influences the reality of the structure informed by the centre. Rhenisch also describes the Second World War as another key rupture in the history-invented structures. “This was my father’s story,” writes Rhenisch, “and there was none more important” (Rhenisch, 45). He goes on to describe the poverty of a shelled German town in the final years of World War II, manifested in people’s lack of food, to the point where “there was nothing to eat, just nothing, but for a couple of *pfennigs* you could get a litre of beer” (Rhenisch, 45). He describes the displacement of the narrator’s parents as a result of the war, and as a result of their relocation to their farm in the interior of British Columbia.

In the following novella, *Marlowe’s Cabin*, I elaborate a similar sense of displacement by locating the power that informs and shapes the structure that flows from war. From war springs a lengthy and painful dissemination of interpersonal violence that reverberates generations after the war has ended. In the process of healing, the main character uncovers the locus of the structurality of his pain, and by unveiling it, curtails its power. The double-sidedness of the character’s cultural existence is rendered in his construction of a cabin, a traditional symbol of Canadian identity, using materials and processes uniquely familiar to the cultural background of the character but foreign to the residents of the Canadian island to which he has moved.

But once again, while the main character of the novella is in the legal sense of the nation state an immigrant, his reality is much more complex and hybridized than a simple matter of transplantation from one country to another. Rather, his stepping out of once cultural experience allows sufficient distance for reflection and understanding to trigger a shift in his perceptions of the past and present. It is not the nation state of Canada that informs and delivers such insight and possibility, but quite the contrary. The Canadian nation state has its own history of atrocities committed in its name. It is not the process of settling into the new national home that is

highlighted and described in what could have been deemed as an immigrant novella. Instead, it is distance in time and space and the resulting personal reflection which leads to an unveiling of the impact of the brutal and painful power of war far beyond its time. What is revealed in this process is not how one national agenda is superior to another, but how the nation state itself, regardless of its location and its ongoing struggle for self-preservation, territorial defence or expansion, and economic growth, creates and participates in acts of violence, each of which affect the individual lives of many people at the time and far beyond.

The critique offered by *Marlowe's Cabin* is not of how a specific war affected a series of poor victims who then come to another, more peaceful, more culturally diverse country, namely Canada, which provides them a safe harbour in a cruel world. Rather, it is a critique of the nation state as a concept and as a reality that creates and breeds violence on a state level. Understanding the nation state as a concept to be questioned, realizing multiculturalism in Canada as a political project geared toward furthering the creation of a national identity, and discovering the importance of localizing and unveiling such a source of power at the centre of the Canadian national structure, makes it difficult if not impossible to uphold the concept and terminology of immigrant literature and immigrant writing. Writing across nations can reach beyond inherently nationalistic political motives, and in fact help expose them. Writing that plays with the structurality and motives of the nation state and questions the locus of governmental power with the shifting and much less defined experiences of individuals who have multiple and sometimes conflicting cultural backgrounds, allows the reader to discover the limitations of national hegemony and its frequently misleading promises of national identity.

Novella:

Marlowe's Cabin



Vaginal.

Canal.

Drooping.

Dropping.

*Then a quick breath and within it the immediate and extensive unfolding of activity, history,
implication, possibility, demise, direction, discovery.*

*Another breath, and more, noise, movement, (colour?), (was that colour?), (was it?), then a
movement passed, past, patting his head, a hand, warm, then removed,
then another, cold, removed, then nothing.*

Closing.

Tired.

Sleep.

A first dream.

A vast flow of red. He is sinking in it.

He never recalls the dream.

Not even in the moment of his death.

Quiet.

Then the noise begins again.

He vomits.

It does not taste good.

Part 1
Convalescence



The cabin was quiet. The warm sun sank into the hollow of the bricks, the bricks soaking up the warmth, only to give it back, later, during the cooler parts of the night. During the early years on the island something had opened up in him that he did not understand, with a quietness he was unaware of and an implication which escaped him. Now, years later, he sat on his veranda, a favourite spot, and listened to the chatter of crickets and the forlorn barking of a dog a few miles up island. Unlike the July when he had finished the cabin, the nights of this year's summer were coolish and he enjoyed the warm heat pouring off the walls with their brick and plaster and stucco and with a dry smell and quiet force that supported his thoughts and convened a small cluster of memories.



Many years ago in a different world, Alexander had been there when the brick layers came, brick by brick they measured and placed, a trowel of cement, spread jam-like to the right, another brick placed, the firm tap of a rubber mallet securing it, and then another. Once the row was finished, the mortar was spread on top and the tapping and lifting and moving continued. The younger man, barely four years older than the boy, was mixing the cement, lugging the bricks, piling small mountains along the wall, like route markers, to help save the backs of the bricklayers, older and more experienced, with their red faces swollen from daily beer. The bricklayers had come early in the month and stayed late, to make the outside walls from large and heavy bricks. Each brick was combed with tunnels of air and emptiness, and seemed, to the young spectator, to betray the brick of its rightful claim to heaviness.

As the days passed, the boy learned that the building of a wall always started with a strong, red string, spun around a nail and measured angularly ten or twenty

feet into the distance, only to be strung around another nail, and wound until it was taut. Then the wall grew, first wide along the string, and then high with the help of the level, a short yellow one to start with and as it grew taller into the roofless sky, the younger man would go and fetch the longer one from the truck, where it had been forgotten, that day and some others before.

The bricks used for the inner walls were thinner and much shorter, and without holes. Alex had watched the days go by. With summer here and not much else to do, the building site was the main attraction. He was watching as he always had. Viewing and reviewing in his mind, a spectator to life, watching from the outside in, but never a part of the inside, for there, in the lives of people who were real, lay hidden the secret of his youth. He had not understood, and would not for many years to come, the power of a secret and its keeping.



Here, now, in another country, in another life, his was the only cabin built from brick on the island. The half-acre lot was graced by a couple of apple trees, older, it seemed, as though they had been planted before anything else had been built. And a cherry tree toward the westerly neighbour, Charles Thorson. He had met Charles only days after coming to the island for the very first time at the store by the dock. Charles had explained not too much later, over a glass of red wine on his veranda and overlooking the moss-covered, low-rising apple trees with their knotted bones and creaking, twisted finger-roots, that his mother had come from a small farm in Sweden some fifty years earlier, and had kept her name despite a string of romances and the birth of him, her only son, and had never married and never would.

Hearing Charles speak of his mother in this way, with an exhalation of warmth and emotion on his breath had somehow bothered and annoyed Alexander. He himself had never been able to know the depth of motherly love in the same way he had observed in others, and in the same way in which his own daughter would have seen it in Robin, he assumed. From the moment of her conception, a warm, deep,

humming suffused the core of Marlowe's being, a DNAish pulse without which her life would not be the same. He had not heard or felt the same pulse, and still to this day, he could not seem to understand how to put the same concern and devotional note of love onto his breath with which others crowned their memories of the very being that spewed them into life. Alexander's life, missing the keeping rhythm and driving foundation of this momentary and eternal beat, had always seemed a little strained (to those around him but also to Alexander himself). It was as though an effort was required to keep the systems going, a constant pushing and prodding and pulling and plodding of the plow of his breath and his body's beats and his life's movement and the earth's rotation.



Now the cabin was quiet, with the slight sounds of crickets and a far away dog being the only interruptions to the exchange of air from the world to his walls and then into the heart of his existence. Somehow, on the island, it seemed less cumbersome to push his life ahead. Somehow, the island's own hum carried his days for him, as though, in some unclear fashion, the land, and the apple trees, and also the quickly aging cherry were spending their juices to hold him in a way he had not been held since Robin had left him. He thought back to the times when the old house was constructed, back home, and he was merely a boy. Twelve years of age, and utterly lost already, or perhaps still. For he had never found himself in any meaningful way at all. The taste of that summer, with its dusty cement air and the consequential dry throat, that taste was still with him now.

Less than a month after the bricklayers had left, the roof beam had been placed, and they had had the Richtfest, the obligatory celebration upon completion of the frame, initiated by placing of a short, needled tree on top of the ridge board. The ridge board was the backbone of the house from which the rafters spread as the house's ribcage, protecting the core of it – its heart and the soul and the other organs – with the limbs of garden and garage spreading out from under it. As was tradition,

the pain of building had been obliterated in a barrel of celebratory beer. A short week later yet, (and he was still observing, but this time from the inside of the rib cage, as the roof was being eagerly covered by the demanding, orderly grip of tiles) a roofer had stretched out his hand through the ceiling window opening, under which he was perched, quietly hanging about. The hand was extended in silent acknowledgement of his condition of being a lost boy, a quiet boy, a boy who had not done or dared, but was frozen in this frame of family, jarring him shut and ripping him open at the same time. He took it.

“Don’t tell your Mom and Dad.”

He nodded and was hoisted up on the roof and sat as the clay shingles were placed, one by one. He sat on the criss-cross of the rafters and joists that were to carry the shingles, and the neighbourhood stretched out vastly before him. Sometimes, when a row of shingles came too close to his seat he had to get up and move, a dizzying shy step down, no hand holding him, no rope, nothing but the decline of the roof and then the drop onto what would be the porch and from there down the short hill to the asphalt of the street. He stepped and shook and stepped again and sat, at last, and the roofer was smiling at him with the curious pity of suspicion.

Once he sat, he looked out again at the same trees and houses that he had cycled through days earlier, nearly everyday in fact, since the age of five, and in endless circles, swerving around corners and wasting his time, the same trees and houses through which they processed as a partial family (his mother and he and then later his sisters as well) for their weekly Sunday ritual walk. It was the same neighbourhood in which, only a mere one hundred years before, stood nothing but a shepherd’s farm and around it the valleys and their grasses, and the hills and their trees, through which the sheep would run or rumble and be chased and then, once stuffed with greens, were funneled back into the dark and musky barn by that aptly named dog, the German shepherd. On one of the hills stood, imposingly, a linden tree.



There, on that day, on that roof, he had sat and seen the world from a different angle. It was a liberated view suffused with the guilt of freedom, the knowing that having transgressed the line, having interacted, secretively, with that man from beyond his silent tower into which he had been removed, was breaking a fundamental law of his family: Thou shalt not unveil the secret. Each time in years thereafter, when he would step across this line, the same feeling of elation would emerge and the same feeling of guilt. So deeply had this ring of silence been burnt upon his cornea, branded upon his skin, carved into his heart, that any transgression whatsoever rang the bells of alarm, of possible treason, of danger. But it held, beyond the bells and fear of death, and above everything else, the promise of sanity. And each time he transgressed the line he remembered the minutes on the roof with the view beyond and the feeling of truth which one man's hand had offered him and which his hand had accepted in a simple moment of trust.

The house was finished late that summer but none of the workers that came after reached out a hand.



Within himself, and one year after he had witnessed the bricks growing into walls and walls into the enclosed square that was to become his future, he witnessed something else. It started early in the morning, when the alarm had awakened him to another day and the bathroom's largish mirror had explained to him again the inevitability of his lengthening adolescent body. The dreams had started to get to him some years earlier and they had not let up. Large, oversized clocks ticking mercilessly to a dramatic implosion of fear, the claws of two rock faces creating a small and shrinking opening (into which he was sandwiched, panic-stricken, frozen in cold sweat fear and awaiting the immediate end of his existence).

It was on this morning that he began to understand the possibility of sanity. He was leering at his counterpart's empty face when a reaching hand of pain began to

pressure and squeeze the pulsing life of his stomach. A first firm contraction pushed him to the floor, curling s-like around the toilet's foot. A second push left him sprawling on his back, extending it momentarily in an arch before contracting it again into a heap of pain. The attack lasted until at last it released him into himself. Something was wrong, and simply knowing this, that something was not as it should be, the realization that what he had experienced in this moment was not right, left him clear and empty. From this momentary clarity arose the thought that if one thing could be wrong with his life, other things could be too. For a few moments of breathing in clarity, there was the possibility of realizing that something could change, something could be discovered, something could be revealed. There was the possibility of sanity, of clarity, of calm, of who he was. Then the door opened and his mother entered. From below on the floor her body extended tall above him. Dressed for work, her boots stepped toward his face, her nyloned legs disappeared into her skirt, hugging her hips, her arms rested at her side. Above the breasts, her hardening face could not restrain the opening of her mouth, could not hinder the cool, collected greeting.

“Was ist denn jetzt wieder los?”

What the hell are you doing now?

The possibility of sanity retreated and his mind sank into immediate darkness, a dense, mud-like mass of sluggish thoughts and no-movement, a holding still of being, a restraint tightly wound into nothingness, a disappearing act reaching dangerously far into the depth of his world. With that simple line she had erased his intermediate hope for sanity. There, amidst complete and utter stillness, he sat and rested, for another decade, while the world played its games, outside and beyond. Silently he waited, canned and preserved, until the day would come, where he could be released again, in safety, for all the world to see.



Alexander heard a door shut over at the Thorson's place. Surprised, he leaned back into his chair, stretching his head over and above his shoulder to glance at the neighbour's cabin. He had not expected Charles home, a day before the weekend. Charles had taken another (reportedly final) assignment in the city, a move necessitated by economic rules and realities, not his desire to get away from the sometimes blaring silence of the island. Seeing nothing, Alexander relaxed his arching back, sank into himself, and thought some more.



When he had first started to build the cabin, it had been a wet spring. The builder had been a local fellow who had long since moved back to the city for lack of work, and had questioned Alexander's idea for a brick cabin. In his view it seemed unnecessary, uncommon, un-Canadian. The builder's memories were suffused with the mildew smell of aging wood siding and the romantic rotting of the tiled cardboard-like roof tiles the other cabins exhibited in pride. His memories were of thin, breezy windows wet with condensation in the early morning sun. But Alexander had no such memories. He thought of the solid, double-pane windows, when they were first installed at their house back home, collecting themselves into locations with the twists of a cleanly and solidly structured three-position handle: position one – swinging in and open wide for a look out and a deep breath in, position two – leaning slightly open at the top but hinged closed at the bottom, for a mild breeze at night, but no chance for anyone else to enter, or position three – shut completely with an airtight lock and a seal that kept out most noise. The builder had to be convinced that bricks could be found, and mortar too, that Alex could do the masonry work himself with a little help from a do-it-yourself construction manual and the builder's advice, that the foundation would hold, that it was necessary, that it was worthwhile, that it was possible. But in the end it was Alexander's money, and his own decision on how to spend it, and the building began. The builder had reminded him of his father, somehow. A sense of peace and knowing, and a face red with drinking and the loss of hope.



He seemed to remember that his father had hopes for him during his early years. He wanted to see his son free, at liberty to act, to succeed, to be happy, though happiness was not a term his father had generally concerned himself with. The early years after the war had been poor. Butter was a rare treat, bread a major accomplishment, and soup, thinning itself over days into a watery broth, the only staple nourishment. Coal was impossible to come by and gasoline for cars only a memory that rapidly distanced itself from the realm of possibility. Alexander's father was born into a land that hungered. There were berries in the wood nearby, and a small patch of dirt grew easy vegetables – onions, cabbage, peas. His mother did what she could, there were twigs and branches for the chopping and a small fire in the hearth for warming.

American soldiers were roaming the countryside, authorized to enter any household, take what little food was there, displace the Germans from their home for shelter. Alexander's grandfather had been captured. The story went that he had been building bunkers during the early days of the war, had sporadically returned from assignments with increasing levels of responsibility, and, one short year after their marriage and his birth, and at the end of the war, according to a brief note and then another, had been captured by the Americans as a prisoner of war. Alexander's grandmother, sick with grief and fear, built a life with her sister, squeezing from the land most of what she needed. After the birth Alexander's father had been sickish, a yellow faint glow emanating from his skin and then a weakening of the lungs, a feverish head, a loss of weight, and fluid emptying from bowels, a shrinking of life in a body that did not grow. His mother convinced the neighbour with the only car in the area, fuelled by an ad-hoc burner of wood creating heat and pressure, to drive him and her down into town, where the hospital was supervised by Americans. The car sputtered its way down the hill.

He needed to be left and attended to, and after the favour, she would, day-by-day, ride her bicycle to see him. It was two hours by bicycle, each way, a quicker drop down into town on the winding road through the woods, and then a slower pedal up the hill and back, until tiredness made it a push at last. Her face was stricken with worry and fear each time she made the trip, for her boy, for her husband, of course. But there was a more powerful fear, an explosive, uncontainable, ravaging fear that smouldered beneath the ashen worry in her face. It was the fear of rape. American soldiers had taken over homes and food and public buildings, schools, government institutions, hospitals, roads. They brought cigarettes, Coca Cola, and nylons. And they raped. The hushed stories littered the dark corners of conversations, grew only in the shady edges of secret whispers, spilled out only between closest friends, in a sobbing sharp pain of rage and release, confused in a fog of resignation, exploding in an inhalation of fear, a breath that entered a secret chamber and froze, remaining forever and sharply the same, as a terminal remembrance of human dignity taken.

It was on the third day of pedaling to the hospital, looking into the sickly yellow eyes of her boy, and worrying about him, and worrying about her captured husband, and then pedaling back and then pushing up, when the Jeep rolled by. A group of American soldiers, some piled in the front seats, some more on the rows of seats behind, displaying themselves amidst a load of foods and blankets and coal and who knew what other treasures in the cave of the camouflage tarp between them, looked over and slowed down. It was in this moment that the string of calm, the final, single string of calm remaining singing at the centre of who she was, playing a tune of clarity and peace in her mind, expressing a song of innocence and trust, the last string remaining from what had supposed to be a momentous concert, a bouquet of sound delivered from a silver platter to the world, a sharing of calm derived from a plentiful source inside, it was at this moment that the final string broke.

Her pulse raced, razoring her veins with a fear so sharp, so clearly defined that her mind's capacity to understand expanded up and out. Here, above, she could see the vastness of the world, the movements of the stars, the finality of life, the fragility

of blood and its even more fragile container, that human body from which, in this moment, she had liberated herself, and above which she was floating. The soldiers, laughing, looking at each other, and nodding, offered a ride with waiving arms, digging an invisible tunnel through the air, reaching out for her to join them. The final quiet sound of nothingness engulfed her mind for a second, when, with a sudden and immediate decision for which she had no control, her rage suffused itself into her legs and calves and feet, inevitably straining her toes into instant momentum, pushing their tendons to a vibration which seemed to make the pedals (onto which she had jumped without knowing it) turn. Another breath and the slow smoldering rage exploded into action, her mind left behind, and her body alone accelerated up the hill, gaining speed, a machine pushing for its high performance.

The laughter grew, a chorus of whistles, the Jeep's oiled engine speeding up its own metal passion, a passion governed by the toes of the driver's foot, which were, though she did know this at the time, relaxed. She gained momentum, but the Jeep, trailing her at first, easily pushed itself behind her, sidling up against with a creamy inappropriateness, pushing her toward the road's side, which was lined by a smallish embankment from which nearly all the branches had been removed to heat the stoves in the houses at the top of the hill. Rage was now firing in her veins and was gaining, irrationally, power over her fear, in fact burning it up, the fear, to feed itself. One of the soldiers reached a hand toward her clenching thigh, which was muscling itself into strength, and from there the hand moved up toward her left buttock in a shaky but determined fashion and amidst the growing whistle and holler of the other guys on the truck. Just then rage beat fear (having burnt up more than half of her body's containment of the scary substance) and her left hand jolted from her handle in a backward motion that slashed the fake stone in her wedding ring across the soldier's cheek, clearly and precisely drawing a straight, clean line of blood. The laughter, which had now shifted to the man and away from her, filled out more and grew into a howl.

“Leave the whore alone,” one exclaimed with a drawl, “you couldn’t handle her anyways.”

“Yeah, she’s a feisty one, watch her go.”

Another roar of laughter and the driver sped up. The soldier, holding his face, looked back at her and raised his fist, and all she could see was a tidy stream of blood dripping from between his fingers into the thinning air between them. As the Jeep gained speed she dropped off and then, rage draining from her feet and legs in a sudden movement of exhaustion, dropped onto the embankment, returning to a darkening cloud of fear, dampened only by the vastness of her mind, into which she had taken refuge, and which floated above her body as a reservoir for life. The day passed slowly and at last she picked up the bike and pushed it up the hill. The road lengthened as she exhausted herself toward the house. As the trees let up she turned the corner to the field. A final push, a final sequence of steps, and the bike dropped against the cooling wall of the house, releasing its warmth into the early evening.

Her sister’s voice seemed strained and pitched with an unusual inflection as she opened the door.

“Gruess dich, Isolde, wir hab’n Gaeste.”

“Gaeste...”

Her question was empty. Guests? Who would be visiting? For a fleeting moment she considered that Hartmut might have returned from the prisoner camp, a scene which she had imagined many times, but which did not seem to fit the slight hover of anxiety in her sister’s voice. Then, through the very right corner of her eye, at an impossibly angle of vision, she registered the Jeep behind the shed.

The soldiers elected Isolde’s home as their station for the next four months. The sisters relocated to the smallish attic and were instructed to cook for the group, which had sprawled itself throughout the two floors below. They were jovial, even friendly, and the butter and meat and flour and coffee and blankets and coal and

coats and cokes and cookies they brought were a miracle. She managed to keep a friendly smile – the rage had drained from her completely, and had been replaced by a canned, static and cold-frozen fear that stymied her thoughts and left nothing but a shell, shocked into subordination.

The same night, the driver of the Jeep had welcomed her home, and then instructed her with gestures of showing an invisible cut on his cheek (cutting, cutting again) and pointed at the soldier she had managed to cut open with the full determination of her will. He gestured some more, making grunting noises (ouch, ouch) and then applied an invisible band-aid, which, she gathered, he meant her to retrieve from the Jeep's glove compartment, as far as she could tell from his gestures of driving a wheel and then reaching down to the right, where he flipped open an invisible compartment, making movements of retrieving a bandage (bandage, he waived, bandage, you know) and he gestured more.

“Blood, you know, the red stuff. Cut, here, him, (pointing) you know.”

His hand slit across his cheek and then pointed at the soldier again, nodding. When she returned from the Jeep, impossibly calm, the man with the cut took the bandage and she smiled, impossibly apologizing, and, as it were, through her eye's apology drilling out of her body any last presence of self-respect, and thus removing herself completely and utterly into the realm of mind above her head.



Alexander still remembered the day his grandmother Isolde had told him this story. As she spoke a jarred frozen surface appeared in her voice and split itself into her body, which spasmed microscopically into a flatness that seemed to extend beyond his boundaries of imagination. Nothing happened that week, she nodded to herself, nothing happened, they were actually nice, the soldiers, they were. The story was told absentmindedly, as though it was supposed to be a funny anecdote. The story was told intensely, as though it was the hidden key to his grandmother's pain. Alexander remembered his Grandmother Isolde telling him about his father, that

same day, an angel, in her eyes, a smallish, helpful boy, quiet, caring, calming, vast. The evening had come and Alexander rose from the veranda, opened the screen door and pushed himself inside. Vast beyond his years, she had said (he remembered her saying this) clear beyond his time. He imagined his father spilling a warmth that relieved a cold war, a cold world. After the hospital, the boy started to grow, she had said, and nothing ever happened with those soldiers.



The first thing striking Alexander, sitting on an orange couch above brown shag carpet in a furnished rental suite at the foot of Burnaby Mountain in Vancouver, about Canadian TV (or the US channels on the Canadian television set) was the existence of German people exclusively as sharp and tightly lipped representations of evil who seemed to suffer from acute brain-damage and were completely drained of emotion. Early conversation, or what little of it he could understand with his broken language, drifted to the same subject always, with near teleological precision and determinate inevitability.

“Where are you from, man?”

“Ze south of Djermany.”

“Yeah, I’ve been through there once, my dad took me.”

Substitute also:

“Yeah, my dad’s been through there once, he was stationed in Laar.”

Or:

“Yeah, my neighbour’s dad has been through there, in the army. Pretty country from what I hear.”

Some remarks about his field of study (physics), slightly uncomfortable often, a taste of Oppenheimer in the air, though unspoken, he thought. It somehow seemed inappropriate for a German to study physics, after all that happened, you know. It seemed perfectly normal though, that everyone he met knew Germany because of the

US occupation of the Western part of the country. Although, of course, that was not how people here thought of it. He had not, actually, had an interest in physics, but rather figured that without language, science was his only chance of succeeding during the first years. After all, a mathematical result could be achieved correctly without much language. Also, a friend of his father's (and he remembered this as one of two moments of guidance he had received in his adolescent life) recommended a study of science as a useful application of his intelligence, which (and Alexander recalls this moment clearly) would be wasted in the arts.

Other early memories of when he first arrived in Vancouver included his breaking of rules, of which, quite simply, he was unaware. At noon he purchased a gin and tonic (why he drank at noon was different question altogether) and left, casually, the university pub, to seat himself on the largish stairway to higher academia. His classmates were impressed, though he was unsure why. The same week he passed by a line of people (why they lined up he did not understand) to enter a club with his friends. Once again his friends were impressed, although once again he did not know why. A third early memory included a moment on the floor of his bedroom, and then a lifting experience raising him to the window and a moment of staring and a flood of tears and the thought that he should have never left.

The early days in Vancouver were unclear, mostly, with conversations choppy, hormones raging, and student life an overwhelming sea of confusion amid a new culture he did not understand and a language in which he was cumbersome. It took him some months to understand the giggle regarding his request to take a douche, the German onomatopoeia for shower. His feelings were empty and full in an unclear oscillation of forces, which raged within him, silently. Often people raised their voices, as though speaking more loudly would help him understand, and generally (and mostly unwillingly) his conversational counterparts identified him as slow or stupid, or both, but neither of which he was, though he could not disprove this by way of expressing himself. Some, though, saw the sparkle in his eyes and knew.

Alexander heard another noise over at Charles' place and proceeded to get up from his chair on the veranda. The cedar deck (yes, it was cedar) squeaked quietly, a sound which, though it did not make any sense at all, finally urged the dog barking in the distance to come to a rest. He stepped through the tallish grass, which had been painfully yellowed by the end of the summer and the island's usual shortness of water, over to the Thorsons. The screen door smashed. He turned and twisted his head, daring it to see around the corner, from which now Janice emerged. Charles and Janice, divorced since the previous year but separating for the past eight, no longer shared the cabin. Charles had taken it, and she had kept the house in the city.

"What a surprise."

"Hi Alex."

"Yes."

"Yes what."

"Just yes."

She smiled and the clear, clean wrinkles around her eyes exploded into rays of meaning.

"So quiet here."

"Yes."

"How have you been?"

The question asked really about their affair, during the time when Janice and Charles were separating, and of which Charles still did not know, and whether Alex was still interested in continuing it at this time or not.

"I have been well."

His answer indicated yes. And of course, what other reason did she have to come up to the cabin? There was nothing for her there, and she must have known

that Charles was in the city. He gained an insight as the dog started to bark again. Somehow it seemed closer.

“You?”

Her longish fingers now playfully twisted the button on her blouse, the button closest to the one open, revealing the uppermost curve of her bare left breast beneath.

“Yes, well. I have been well.”

“Do you want a glass of wine?”

“Yes, I suppose, I could. Yes, I would.”

They stepped up to the veranda. He disappeared to retrieve a second glass, the bottle was still full enough.

“Alex, how come you came here, you know, to Canada?”

She had never asked this question before, never during the many nights they had shared, in the cabin and up at the open shelter overlooking the channel.

“I don’t know,” he said, though he did.

He took a sip, she took a sip. Her fingers still played. It is a nervous habit she had, which Charles hated and he adored. For a moment his thoughts recalled his mother.



His mother. As a little girl. Glowing. Golden locks. Gentle lines paint her face in an awakening that reveals it has not happened yet. She was four in the picture, black and white, but clear and in good condition, the photograph. The paper was not yellowed and the corners were as clean cut and well preserved as the day they were cut by the studio, back when photography was dreadfully expensive and, consequently, rare. It was the only picture he had, except for the one in which he was a baby himself and, with his aunt leaning over him, he is fed by a clean white hand

extending into the photograph from the left. Holding a spoon (he seemed too young for solid food in the picture) the hand was presumably owned by his mother. Alex puts the two pictures down, first, and then away, back into the box they came from, and which he had pulled out for Janice.

“She always looks so pretty, in all the pictures.”

Janice nods though she looks unsure.

His mother’s father (a grandfather he has never met) wilted away after the war, heaving with the pressure of surviving the early years, and fundamentally confused about the fact that he had lost the war.



Adam Goldstein’s troubles had started with his last name. The early years under Hitler, a fanfare of marching songs, ever increasing numbers of flags and uniforms, and the promise of a bright future, had been somewhat spoiled by his last name. Too many Rosenbergs, Rabinovichs, and Goldsteins with their families and a few precious goods had moved away, or had been pestered, or had been relocated. An uncomfortable cloud surrounded his last name and it did not look right on the lists, whether they were for line-ups in marches, the day-long hikes through the country side with the Alpenclub, or on his employment papers as an accountant for the government.

Alex could only ever speculate (with never having met Adam Goldstein and no one in his family explaining, commenting, questioning, or exploring) that it was his grandfather’s last name that led him to move up the ranks in the governmental circles until, at last, he was selected for an SS training course in Austria. Being part of the SS (a fact never discussed by anyone in the family come to think of it, how did he know about this?) was life insurance that paid off handsomely as the years moved closer to 1945, and more Goldsteins and Rosenbergs and Rabinovichs were disappearing with ever more brutality. Adam Goldstein, according to his government papers, and despite the Jewish ring of his name, was a Protestant, though he did not

attend church on a regular basis. Alex was not sure whether the SS training had further eroded Adam Goldstein's sense of gentleness and caring, whether a lack of actual emotional and spiritual connection with his status as a Protestant had opened the door to his increasing coldness, or whether a more fundamental brutality had emerged in him as a matter of pure age and a powerful cocktail of hormones and genes and associations. Regardless, (and this was something that no one had ever openly speculated at either) Alex believed the destruction of his mother was his grandfather's responsibility.

He imagined (spontaneously and seemingly out of place) a pinning down on the bed of the youngish daughter, a quick and dirty deed, a rapid-fire execution, a fatherly hand covering a mouth, a brutal slaying of the golden glow in the black and white picture, that had led to the destruction of his mother. He seemed to know (though how he did not know) that the pin-downs oscillated with the forced beautifications, the dresses and hairbands, the stockings and shoes that her mother applied, somehow, knowing, somehow, committed to covering up, somehow, committed to erasing the regular, and increasingly frequent moments, in which Adam Goldstein relieved himself of the pressures arising from the stern, cold, systematic erosion of feelings in his training, at first, and then of the responsibilities that followed thereafter.

He thought that, as the months and years oscillated themselves into a darkening future, his mother's golden innocence had been replaced by a fundamental need for the recognition of the power that her beauty held over her world. He saw it as simultaneously the gravest mistake in judgement she could have made and the very decision which saved her from suicide or a complete darkening of her mind. In order to understand her father (why, oh why could he want to do what he did?) she had felt she had led him to come to her, breaking his weak will to resist with a simple movement of her hip, and she had him where she wanted him, paying attention to her way, exploring her and celebrating what he found. She had made up a story that left her powerful in a picture that told the opposite tale. By the time she was eighteen,

Alex thought to himself, she must have believed her story so much that it had become a truth to her. No harm could come to her, as long as her beauty remained untouched, and so, her life stretched out before her as a commitment to celebrate her own beauty. Alexander's mother was a beautiful woman indeed.



To Adam Goldstein, nothing made sense. As a leader of his accounting squadron, crunching the numbers of how many resources were needed on which front, at the highest level moving funds in and out of budgets, development of weapons, building of bunkers and bridges, building of camps, payment of services, the numbers were vast and coldly focused on achieving the goal of expanding German power, of proving to the world German success. Indeed, an air of success lifted him up during the days he was gone and then, returning home, more and more infrequently, he found nothing but softness he could not handle. A house full of women concerned with status (being Adam Goldstein's wife led to hushed whispers and friendly smiles, created murmuring explanations around them at the butchers or the bakers or at the department store and frequently lead to a discount or a free gift for his daughters), fashion and madness. He did not understand them and (in contrast to the simple and direct experiences of fucking Viennese whores who were obliged to the prestige laden accountant of the SS for their very survival and made love to him as a matter of life and death) found himself increasingly annoyed by the capriciousness of the behaviour of his youngest daughter.

Alex thought that Adam Goldstein had climbed up and out onto a limb from which there was no return and that he knew as much.



“Why did you leave your country?”

“Yes, why did I?”

He looked at Janice and, after a breath, raised his glass in mockery of a toast arose from his seat and extended his glass toward the heavens.

“Here is to my mother!”

A cold shiver ran down Janice’s spine, as though this one sentence contained enough knifish sharpness to obliterate any last ounce of love from her own body in a single, clean cut. There was something about Alex she had never understood. An intensity of knowledge, a sharpness of thought, a directness of experience that somehow, somewhere in his being had emerged as an inheritance of his past. That past, though removed in time and further distanced by his relocation to a new country and then his subsequent removal from that country to the island, seemed to be present, condensed, fortified in moments such as these when his eyes cleared further and began to shine with a vastness that contained a brutally clear understanding of what it meant to cut through the complexity of generational and societal insanity, continuously brewing and stewing down low, way beyond the everyday machinations of the new countries and their new promises and their new leaders.

Janice raised her glass and said, ever more uncomfortable:

“To your mother.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Just yes, I guess.”



Hartmut Erwin Herbst. 1898 – 1997. Prisoner of war 1945 – 1946. Father of Markus Herbst, who lived the first two years of his life without his dad, and really the rest of his life too. Husband of Isolde Herbst, who had, or had nearly been, raped by the US occupation. Hartmut Herbst, whose war had been lost, whose grandchild (Alexander Herbst) had emigrated to Canada, whose life had been lost before it started, in the trenches of two wars, whose mind required constant numbing, was an alcoholic and a gambler.

The engineering of defensive structures, such as bunkers, was a special art derived from a rigorous SS education obtained through a constant yearning for improvement and discipline. Unlike Adam Goldstein (whom he had met at a number of SS training camps over the years and with whom he was quite friendly, though neither of them elaborated on this fact after the war, when their grown children tied the knot in the (non-Jewish) ceremony at the church which neither of them attended) Hartmut Herbst did not have troubles with his name. Hartmut Herbst had troubles with his skin. Why, Alex still did not know, but his grandfather had olive brown skin. The amazing feat of veneerism, however, put a different spin on his skin. Hartmut Herbst had a reputation for miraculously easy tanning.

For as long as Alex could remember, his grandfather had violated the laws of physics by beginning his tanning regimen in early February. Covered under blankets (to ward off the cold air of early spring) he would bask in the weakish sun to emerge tanned, though a similar shade to the tan “left over” from the late tanning into November. Where one man had turned his career into a success despite his last name, another managed to do the same on account of his skin colour. After 1947, Hartmut Herbst rarely spoke.

Quietly sitting, occasionally grunting, frequently drinking and always stern, he hardly spoke to Alex. On one of the few occasions he spoke, Hartmut chastised Alex

for using the (by then commonplace) greeting 'Hello' instead of the sterner and (presumably) more purely German 'Gruess Dich'. Certain greetings were illegal, but still, he could, to this day, insist on using the German term, instead of the bastardized, anglicised term of the occupiers, the destroyers of his dream and life's work. The entirety of Hartmut Herbst's suffering was condensed in the bloating and drooping of his aging skin beneath his eyes, containing within them the singular wisdom of one who had known success and eaten defeat, who had lived in fear of being discovered and who had, indeed, not yet discovered the full extent to which his suffering paled compared to the suffering of the other victims of the war and of the world of terror he had helped to create.



In his late twenties it began to occur to Alexander for a second time in his life that perhaps his world was not normal. He still recalled the first time, knotting himself into a heap of pain on the bathroom floor as a youngish boy. The second time, again, was preceded by pain, and again it was arising from his stomach and spewing itself throughout his body in a rhythmic cadence of upset. He had suffered from regular bouts of intense stomach pain all his life, but had partly because of its regular occurrence and relatively short duration (it usually subsided by the end of a day) and partly because the experience was so old as to be an almost natural part of his life, never questioned the fundamental reason behind it. A full internal exam in later life, issued at the request of his family doctor, had revealed nothing but extremely muscular intestinal walls, trained from two decades of writhing and contracting at the heed of his autonomic nervous system.

But that day, the pain again took him so hard, so directly, so forcefully, that behind the wall of physical shock and exhaustion, opened a door of possibility for the second time in his life. "This," he thought, and he could to this day still remember the receding walls of his consciousness removing themselves into an eternal distance, "this is not right." The thought lingered, and as he let it linger it carved out a hook

and a hold strong enough to embed into his flesh, the muscular intestinal lining and in the fleshy walls of his stomach.



The next query started with a thought about his grandmother, Gertrude Goldstein (nee Hummer). All he knew of her, was from a time after her husband Adam had died of his heart attack. In her mid-forties (as he had been) she was left with nothing but her will to make a life, again. He remembered his grandmother Gertrude as a fun-loving person with a limited sense of humour. Her greatest priority being appearances, humour was a dangerous and threatening instrument which could cause her house of cards to fall, whereas fun was an instrumental part of supporting the same house of cards as proof that everything was good and fine, as a demonstration that all was well.

Alex did not know much about her past, as a child, as a girl, as a woman, as a wife. Come to think of it, beyond the fun-loving flow of words, he knew nothing of her life or the motivations that drove it. Everything was hidden in a darkish cloud, which, his mother being who she was, had never illuminated to him or anyone else. What little he did know stemmed from observation and, occasionally, a set of repeating anecdotes, less than a handful, which for some reason appeared sufficient to define and explain and delineate the reality that had been his grandmother.

Getrude (in an apparently humorous and somewhat too symmetrical attempt of the Gods to restore balance to Alex's family) had begun to speak rapidly, loudly and often after the war. In stark contrast to Hartmut, who had taken silence as the chosen shroud of secrecy, she had chosen to conceal her secrets by glossing them over with a constant and rhythmic spraying of words that covered all possibilities of quiet and (as a result) of the kind of thoughtful, investigative discussion that arises from a moment or two of silence. Whenever Gertrude was in the room, the air was filled with flamboyant stories, talented hosting, casual discussion and heaps of gossip.

Beneath Gertrude's acquiescent and richly sweet conversation lay a cutting ability to preserve her life, no matter what the cost. Gertrude had known all along (and what mother would not) of Adam Goldstein's secret pleasures with his youngest daughter. Her attempts at prettying her, spoiling her, dolling her up in ever more fashionable and desirable dresses and hats and stockings and berets and hairclips and shoes and bracelets and necklaces were nothing but that: a simple, quiet prayer for the insanity to end, for it all (and she had meant all) to be fine, again. She had known and seen Adam's rising career and with it the rise of his brutality, a remoteness in his eyes that spoke of his whores, and his brutal games, and his increasingly twisted sense of morality. She had seen her husband grow distant from her and suffer from his own success in avoiding his own disappearance and the questioning of his family and the security of his future.

At least Adam Goldstein had succeeded in protecting her, and she had enjoyed the status of being a Goldstein, and knowing that the ring of her name now no longer sounded odd or awkward. Goldstein was a respectable name. A name that held power. A name that bled fear into the hearts of those that heard it. Gertrude enjoyed the split-second of silence her name created, and the hurried and friendly obedience that followed obligingly and nearly always. And Gertrude was not shocked into quietness when the name lost its ring. After the war, and with the subsequent rapid decline of her husband's health and his death not three full years later, the name had immediately become a danger in its local context. Just as everyone had known who she was and had shaken in their boots at Frau Goldstein's power, now everyone knew who she was. She had gone from being an arrow to being a target in a simple matter of weeks.

It was Gertrude who insisted immediately that they leave Grafenstein and relocate to an unknown destination. Hurriedly, and as so many others had during the deep of the night of the Third Reich, they now, in the supposed light of the liberation and in a Russian occupied district, not three weeks after the Russian-flagged tanks had rolled through the town's streets in one end and out the other toward the now

deserted SS training camps at the edge of the patch of forest that graced the town, they had packed up only the most necessary of belongings and had left town in the deep of night. Aided by the support of what had been subordinates and comrades in a fight for a new world order, they hopped on wagons and then, at last on a train, with no goal other than to disappear and begin again, elsewhere.

They kept their name, but changed their story, (often repeated in a thin layer of inconclusive anecdotes) and this was all that had reached Alex during his days of youth. Some simple silly stories no one believed to be true but everyone cherished as the lies that liberated them from a destiny of pain.



She was smaller than the average child at the age of eight. She shook a lot and shivered. She looked away, side to side. She did not like men, but she liked men a lot. She was now an old woman. She has inflicted pain upon him. She has loved him. She has brutalized his life, with the same brutal cutting love that Adam Goldstein expended onto his Viennese whores, and that the same man had expended onto her, violently twisting her into the shape of a broken (white) daffodil. She has left him alone, since he has moved here, to Canada. On Pender Island, he did not have a phone. She lived in his heart, and she had torn him to pieces. She had tortured his intestines, and twisted his mind. He had not seen this, until now at the age of forty-eight, upon a veranda, with his lover Janice, who was eight years younger. She, his mother, had stymied his growth, and now, he knew, she has stymied her own. It lived on, under the surface, untouched, unspoken, unclean. Rust. River. Rugged lands, trying, so hard, to wash down the stale taste in his mouth, which, he knew now, was not caused by bacteria but rather by the depth of stale vomit, frozen in time and hindered in its explosiveness by waves of doubt which erode knowledge. She did not know. He did not know.



The evening on Pender Island was cooling now. Janice had stepped inside, and he turned his head up to the stars, which had sparkled at him for the past two hours after the sunset. They stretched vastly into the distance, drilling themselves into an empty, endless and hypnotic depth, which caused him a dizzying insight and a swirling feeling.

Amid the stars and somehow quite suddenly facing him, seemed displayed the history of the world as he knew it. As he imagined himself into the realms beyond him, further drilling into the universe's distance with his careless mind, he saw the movement of stars, and then their staticity. The world came to a sudden halt and then among the planets, arising out of empty space, and somewhere in the infinitude of this world, the lives of those who had suffered from that war and still did, generations beyond and below, arose. A line-up of non-stars, each carrying a sack. The sacks were still dripping blood from the dead meat butchered in a war, still drying off in the merciless sun of examination. The line-up marched by, and each, men, women and children, hung their sack on a stick, next to him. And while they dried, in the brutal, scorching sun, other, similar sacks had been hung next to them, now dripping blood of their own, so that, upon closer examination, the mystery was not the beauty of the world but rather its sustaining efforts to survive at all. He asked himself how (among this continuous invasion of stale, coagulated blood) could they be going on, how, in the name of the Lord, could this world continue as it was. Then he saw himself sinking, folding, melting down below, trying to escape a rush of more dead blood dripping from an ever-growing sea of sacks hanging above, and saw himself slipping on one of the rivers and pools of blood that had now collected themselves on the cedar floor of his veranda and onto which now he saw himself falling, while he was watching himself still and, as his final thought, he wondered how he could both fall and see himself falling at the same time and just then he came to with a rushed breath and, staring wide-eyed at the night sky, realized he had fallen asleep on his veranda, and that the bottle of red wine at his side was empty, and that Janice must have left,

and that the dog, presumably having stopped during this interlude of incapacitation, had now again begun to bark into the night. Oh, how he wished for some quiet.

But instead of quiet, now, after his dream, still in the grasp of the uncomeliness of the world filled with the sacks of deadened human flesh dripping the blood of destruction, came a wave of emotions. A dreary compilation of thoughts, thickly intertwined with a heaviness of the heart, gave way to the rising flood of tears that now engulfed him and shook him. He sobbed as he had not for the longest time, though what caused his tears he did not truly know. Perhaps it was the tough imagery of the sacks, still hanging, continuing to linger, each sack a war and its generational suffering. As one dried up three more were hung. The tears arose and were wept away not quickly but thoroughly, a heavy rising and release, as though he, for the first time in a long time, meant it sincerely, his expression of sadness for his life, and that of Adam Goldstein, and his mother and Isolde Herbst and Hartmut Herbst and all the countless others, the sadness arose heavily. But with it arose a new clarity, a deepened vision of the world which included a confrontation of its realities without the veneer of secrets.

Alex had polished and buffed this veneer dutifully for the first decades of his life. He had showed off the Herbst family's name in the good conscience of one who believes, all the while demonstrating a sense of pride, of comeliness, of concerted achievement. He had implemented his ways of inhabiting his house, his world, until the veneer had begun to speak for him and through him. The habits, the traditions, the expressions, the lines of meaning so casually inserted into the dialogues so often repeated over the traditions of the dinners and the lunches and the celebrations (of which there were many) had taken on a life of their own, to begin to speak through him the opinion, the meaning, the veneer. For it to break, as it had now begun to be, all by itself, presumably, and in his sleep, as it were, had been incomprehensible. To break the veneer would have required him to know that it was just that, a veneer, and not, indeed, the very reality which it pretended to be. But now it was breaking, in this most unlikely of moments, and from the simple consideration of an honest question

(“Why did you come here, Alex?”) asked by his lover and compatriot in the war of love he had waged against Charles, the very man who had welcomed him, and who, unknowingly, had been paid for his welcome by being cheaply cheated.

The veneer had broken, not cleanly, but in cracks, and from it now surfaced the next set of truths. Alex, recovering for a minute from the seeing the suffering of war, was not prepared for what suffering indeed he had to face, at last. With an unforeseen might (the pain started in his right arm and moved, spasming and erratically, onto his heart, and then again down to his stomach, now for the third time in his life confirming to him that insanity indeed was the cause of his problems) the final door to his awareness was pushed open. Viewing, as though it was a movie, he recognized the shape of his mother, standing over him in a shadow, the darkened room, her breast encroaching upon him, he a boy (and at once he knew that this was not the first, not the only, but one of many times that this cyclical game had played itself out – though how he knew this, with the kind of certainty he felt, he did not know) reaching for his softness, his approval, his closeness, searching, in its innocence for both power and forgiveness, a driving hand caressing him uncaringly and then her weight upon him, with his arm snatched low and tightly clamped, rubbing herself upon him, his arm now wet, another hand displaying a puppet, which his eyes followed in distraction, his mouth filled with her flattish breast and mumbling helplessly and before he came to and truly woke up she was gone and he remained there wondering, just waking from his sleep, what had happened, what had been real, and what an unseemingly dream. And then again, it repeated, and played again, and then again, the scene, and others, and more, a flood of images spilled onto his canvas, now that the veneer had been compromised, and somehow his intestinal walls contracted now decidedly firmly forcefully to create the pain that stopped all progress and ailed his stomach into a final eruption in which he vomited (reddish from wine or blood) onto the deck. Dreamlike, still, as he had been since the stars and after Janice must have taken her leave, he came to, his face wet, his stomach still writhing in pain. But now Janice came running from the inside to see what had

happened, and he realized she had not left at all, and then she embraced him and left to return with towel and cloth and cleaned him up as though he was a young boy and she his mother, her left breast still shining through the shirt and still painting the curve, which he so loved to admire.

The break was minute and then the flood returned, some images made sense, some not, but deep within the revolting reality of this emergence, among the image-like confusion and remoteness of his conscience, he noticed a kernel of truth, which stayed and grew and strengthened, and the beauty and power which was such that he experienced a clearing of his dreaminess and a firming of his conviction that indeed his mother, who had suffered her turn, had made him suffer in the same way, for the same, insane reason that Adam Goldstein had discovered, for the reason that the world's fabric had been ripped, cleanly and with a single cut, to reveal an incoherent, radical mess of motives, emotions, and brutal subjugations of the human spirit to a system of human behaviour that was no longer human but rather driven by the need of a narcissistic and manic machine, at the heart of which was the same rip in the same fabric that it perpetuated.

“Where did it start, and where, for Christ’s sake, will it end,” he somehow distinctly remembered saying as Janice wiped up the vomit on his cheek and in the corners of his mouth, still motherly and still his lover, and still the divorced wife of the man who had welcomed him home onto this land of apple trees and the cherry too, his favourite since he had arrived. It would not end, he knew, and yet, he knew as well that it could, with him, and wondered if it was too late, if his awakening had meant that he had harmed another in these decades of slumber. But nothing revealed itself and, content that one veneer had been broken and the secret revealed from within, he settled into the softness of Janice’s arms, which were warm in the coolish night, and listened intently to the silence, which had, at last, settled upon the south of Pender Island, and into which her breath sweetly blossomed.



“Shshshsh,” she exhaled and caressed his forehead lightly. From where she derived her love, she did not know. Alex had been a friend for too many years and she could not see a life without him. There was an intensity about him she admired and cared for but that also made any real bond between them impossible. In the fury of their affair, through which she had resolved to leave her husband, and which had played her hand in dealing the deck of divorce, he had inflamed her with his intensity, his drive to explore and exploit each moment to its fullest. But there was no possibility of a real union, a practical one, a meaningful one, beyond this simple exchange of intensity – his, driving into each second with a drill to suck from it its final glory, and hers, truthfully expressed in the twirling of the shirt’s button, living her life with a seeking thirst for happiness and fun beyond the days of labour and within the devotion to a simple thing.



His mind still raced but no new images erupted. He settled into a life without veneer, and sickeningly, madly, devoured the new-found knowledge. Within three breaths, everything was clear. His life, at last, made sense.



Alex’s head lay gently in Janice’s arms and lap as they sat, he sprawled on the floor, she leaning against the steadfast bench beside the screen door.

“I thought you’d left.”

He was feeling slightly better, though his entire body was shaking in a microscopic fashion, in a futile attempt to process and understand the fear and sickening certitude of his revelation that the dream-like images indeed were real, and that more had happened than he could have ever imagined before. He turned his head up, shrinking the muscles at the back of his neck in a twisting motion and brushing (quite accidentally) his chin up against her breast in this movement, which caused both of them to smile and then to smile again (the second time at the fact that both had smiled the first time).

“No, you fell asleep and I went in to read.”

He nodded. He had not fallen asleep, but rather had traveled, it seemed, to the stars and had broken, inadvertently, his ties to a world of veneers, and had drilled himself (or was it more a falling into, yes, for no effort had been expended – he had simply been immersed in the intensity of images and thoughts that had arisen as a result of the dream-like journey) into an awareness he had not known existed before.

“When is Charles coming back?” He asked as though she should know more than he did, but a shrug of her shoulders appointed him the source with the most exact knowledge. The images, and the violent vomiting explosion of his innards that had followed, left him shaken up, but somehow, somewhere, a cutting sense of calm had embedded itself as a direct result of the events, as the main proof that something new was happening.

“We have to tell him.”

She no longer smiled.



Tell him what. There is nothing to tell. You got sick. I was there. I don't love you. I left. But she knew she was wrong. For the past six years, she had looked at her affair with Alex as nothing but a vehicle to end her relationship with Charles. Quite consciously and coolly, quite determined and deliberately, she had known that to find the strength to leave Charles, after all these years, and for no good reason other than that he was not what she thought he ought to be, she needed fuel to extend the fire of her desire to escape. And an escape it was supposed to be. Sex with Alex was great, exciting, satisfying, different. Intense somehow, and liberating for her, though the cloud of secrecy oppressed her during her divorce. There was nothing to tell and that was it. But somehow, something had changed. She had come up to the cottage specifically to ask Alex this question. Why, she did not know, but somehow, she had sensed that the veneer of intensity, which she had come to love and treasure during their nights up at the log cabin on the ridge, was nothing but a surface. Her days in

the city, a welcome relief from Charles's upset and her own cloud of lies, both of which were somehow more distant and less immediate when experiencing the drive of the metropolis, had turned stale too quickly and had left a gaping question about the value of her time in the cabin with Alex in her mind. She had needed to know. To know whether there was more, any more, than what they had had. She needed to probe and discover who and what he was below the charade she had used for her own benefit over these long six years. When she looked at him now, she could see in his eyes, stained with the remnants of tears and darkly illuminated with a depth of knowing she had not recognized in him before, that there was a being, a person, a man in her arms who she could truly begin to love.



His vomit smacked of the same reality as the voluptuous streams of events that now poured down from the heavens in a frame-by-frame replay, as what he assumed was the final eruption, forming streams of events – movie-clips of Hitler's speeches, media clips of concentration camps, novel snippets of Germany's post-war (East and West). Memories and images he did not know enveloped him, pouring ever more heavily into his swirling mind, and delivering to him, in this oddly factual, cold, impersonal fashion, the reality that the stench of his stomach walls, as it spewed unto his tongue and down his cheeks and chin, and onto the cedar planks of his veranda, the clear and unmistakable message that the veneer was shattered for good. Janice held his back from behind to support his now trembling, shaking, sweating body. She put her warm hand and long fingers onto his neck to cool his heat. The reality that was emerging was tangible and not to be taken lightly. It seemed to confide in him a new secret, a secret about the nature of reality, which, for the first time, and in a pile of nauseating stomach acid and under Janice's warm hands, was as fundamentally real as his body, and the floor onto which he now collapsed again.

Part 2
Transfiguration
❧

It had been a late afternoon seven years ago. He had come home early from teaching his class, an undergraduate course on the history of civilization, when he greeted the customary “Heello, anybody home?” into the hall. Robin kept regular hours at her office job and the only person who might be at home was Marlowe. She had her birthday just a few weeks ago. Now she was fourteen and he had found himself increasingly losing control over her destiny. Her growing up from a playmate and sweet childish kid to a young woman with a severe will for independence and an equally strong loathing for the father who had once been her favourite hero had been a difficult process for him. His relationship with Marlowe was suffused with turmoil and personal disappointment.

There had been no reply and as he proceeded upstairs he did not think much of the trail of girl clothes strewn along the hallway. Somewhat absent-mindedly he tossed open the door to the bathroom and entered. Marlowe had just come out of the shower and with her head wrapped up in a towel had not heard him and still did not see him. It took a split-second for him to scan her body, that of woman. It was an automatic scan, a scan that unveiled and examined, measured and compiled, probed, dismantled, and devoured.

It took another split second for her to realize he had entered and she turned to him. Time now stretched into a truly eternal moment in which the air was electric and her nakedness, the tautness of her skin, the delicacy of her figure, the gentle lines of her breasts (those of a woman) burnt his breath with a sudden anxiety. Another split-second and her eyes displayed a question at his reaction, then widened with an unmistakable realization. She grabbed a second towel and protected herself. Her eyes arrowed crystalline directions at him, which he followed immediately. A mumble of apology, for interrupting, an averting of the eyes, a quick turn of the step,

and a pulling closed of the bathroom door, which was too obviously gentle and accommodating, completed the process.

Nothing would ever again be said of that moment, and, somehow, though he was quite unclear as to the reasonings or mechanism behind this change, their relationship improved. She became more open to him, less disturbingly cold and cuttingly brutal, and yet there was now a part of her he could no longer seem to reach. In a simple, single, unexpected moment, she had, with him and for herself, crossed the final dividing line to adulthood. Recoiling a general sense of openness behind the protective wall of her womanly identity, she, his only child, now existed as her own person, and was finally and completely beyond his reach.



His affair with Janice started at around the same time. He had, on account of a minor inheritance and a general financial security that came with his tenured (though junior) position in the department of history at the same university where nearly two decades ago he had impressed his new-found friends with an inability to perceive cultural rules, convinced Robin of the value, no, necessity, of purchasing a family cabin on Pender Island. As he had pursued this new venture, she had, resigned to his capricious and unpredictable nature, stepped aside and allowed him to explore this next project on his own. Not a month later, he had arrived at the island with a realtor and, immediately after viewing the lot had accepted the asking price, subject to an inspection with regards to quality of soil and the nature of the well. A week later, the mortgage papers were signed and the title transferred. During first weekend, visiting the lot with the realtor, whom he had previously only spoken with on the phone and who had turned out to be an intelligent and calming business chap who had successfully taken the leap to a full-time island existence, he had stopped into the only corner store to grab a soft drink on the way back from viewing his future estate.

The realtor, casually nodding to the cashier and then, somewhat more animatedly pointing toward the back of the store, directed Alex to the figure hovering over the local selection of red wine.

“Alex, come meet Charles and Janice Thorson. They’re going to be your new neighbours.”

“What a coincidence, I’ll take this as the good omen it was meant to be.”

His voice was clean and clear and carried itself into the air with a cityish directness that somehow rang out of place in the small corner store and simultaneously raised an eyebrow of Charles’ face and led Janice to raise her hand to her straight brown hair, which (with a slight ferocity and a definite elegance equally out of place in the mildewed atmosphere of aging groceries) she swung back as her head turned sideways against the movement of her hand in a somewhat contrarian gesture of stubbornness and appeasement, a combination which, in the future, he would never escape finding electrifyingly attractive.

“Good to meet you.”

Charles voice was low and calm and confident in a holding sort of way, a way that held whatever it addressed, with a sense of honesty and integrity, a self-knowingness that revealed itself as relative to a larger world, of which (and Alex presumed this simply from the tone of his voice, which he found to be piercingly and almost painfully soothing) Charles simply and in a direct manner assumed himself to be a small but natural part.

“Yes, good to meet you.”

Now her hand shook his. The handshake was softer, cooler, calmer, and also a moment too long, he thought. His slight and invisible glance to Charles revealed no notice, and her hand dropped in a swing, while his remained, and then fell into his other, which rubbed it and sucked from it any dew deposited by the rising of her sun.

“Yes, good to meet you both.”

It was his turn and his voice had lowered now to island speed, somehow in shock, somehow appalled, somehow intrigued by how a simple meeting could have shaken him so deeply.

“Well, we’re on the run here,” the businessman interjected and pulled his client up and toward the front, while Alex’s head turned slightly in a nod while he pushed out a final hello: “I suppose I’ll be seeing you around then!” and a smile and then they were out, though he recalled nothing but the dew and the sun and the softness of her hair (which he imagined) though he did not recall the smell of mildew or the heavy integrity in Charles’s voice, which somewhere inside of him had now registered as negative, though at first he had found it attractive.



During the first years on the island, as a visitor still, his affair with Janice intensified. Although Robin had suspected it, it never entered their discussions. During the sixth summer, more often than not Alex could be found having dinner and laughing with the Thorsons on Pender Island, to which he had retreated, though Charles, still providing and still tied to the mainland for income, was often late in arriving at the beginning of the weekends and sometimes early to leave at their ends. The second impression of Charles was that of a gentleman and friend. The second impression of Janice, which Charles introduced to him trustingly, was captured in the way she made her longish fingers play with the button of her blouse which barely hid her breasts from his yearning view.



Forgive them, father, for they know not what they do. Forgive them, son, for they know not what they do. Forgive me, father, for I know not what I do. Forgive me, mother, for I could not forgive you. Forgive me, father, for not forgiving mother. Forgive you, mother? Hardly. But then, in Janice's arms, his eyes got watery, and, still holding his stomach from the aftershock of pain, and in this flooding emotion, his mind reached out to the stars for another time, and there in the vastness of the larger world, he knew, lay hidden the secret for his forgiveness: it was, quiet simply, a matter of scale. Once more the dead meat, bound in sacks, appeared and dripped upon him, and within the drop, which he could see growing toward him as it falls, he saw a key, and a lock, and as they meet and mate and turn, a door opened in his heart and there, unexpectedly, lay his own forgiveness densely pressed into the treasure of his daughter's image, naked, and yet clean and his own gaze a simple, loving moment of pride in him and her and all there was.

In this moment, Janice lowered her head toward his, and kissed him gently. Her lips flowed upon his and within their touch and their warmth and their caress he knew that it was done.



He felt her lips on his and only one thought entered his mind. Charles. We must tell him, he thought, though he let the kiss be what it wanted to be and it wanted to linger. Her hand reached behind his head, held him, still. She looked at him, quietly, and he came to a rest.

Now, he was still lying in her arms, still shaking at the removal of the curtain which before had been his saviour and condemnation, we must tell him now. We must tell him, he said.

How can we, she thought, and how can we not. She looked at him sternly, cleanly, no.

How can we not, he said.

How can we not, she said, and she nodded. She was unclear on how she could. She knew how not to, they have done it for seven years.

Do you love me, she thought.

Do you love me, he said.

I thought I didn't, she said.

Make love to me, he said.

And for the first time, she enveloped him completely, and he allowed her to, and they wrapped each other into a blanket of the realities of aging bodies of moving parts of dying days of raging hope of listless waiting and then at last they came clean and clear and sprung forth into more waiting and uncertainty but not now they didn't care for they knew that this was as it had to be.



He thought back, from time to time, to the night on which he learned to understand his life. Janice had long gone, to Ottawa, where she was now teaching. He was happy for her. Charles had sold the cabin, he never did speak to him again, after they told him, and especially after Janice moved east. The new owners rarely came, and when they did he did not speak to them. He saw Marlowe often and Robin sometimes. Marlowe came to the cabin whenever she could, and they enjoyed each other's company. It was clean, clear company. He had mopped it up, the mess, with Charles and Janice, and the night on the cedar deck. It still, to this day, showed the stains that told the story.

He looked down at the stain and smiled, then shivered. Still it reminded him, still he got tense. His life was unlike anything he had ever expected. But he had mopped up the mess and, it appeared to him more and more often, that he had done

his job by doing so. Life as a mop. It was not impressive, but it carried weight, in its own way, clearly. He had paid his dues and the slate had been wiped clean at last. He left no legacy, and that, he now frequently thought, is the legacy he had aimed for. Years passed gently and cleanly again. He became quiet as Hartmut, not chatty like Gertrude, and he was thankful for that. The United States announced another war against Iraq. He could not bear the thought, not now, not now that he has seen the sacks of bloodied flesh hanging, not now that the stain was here on his veranda.

His cabin was built from bricks, it was the only one on the island built in this way. He himself had measured the walls into the distance, he himself had carried the bricks and spread the mortar. He himself had made them breathe and still they did to this day, protected him from the hot of summer and cold of winter.

Last summer he planted a linden tree, behind the cabin, at the top of the hill.

Long,

Longer,

A final longing,

Now an expansion, through calm.

Now a contraction, through calm.

Now an explosion, through calm, that can't be contained,

and through his eyes, a last time, he sees her, and she smiles.

It has been worthwhile, he thinks, though as the last breath begins to expire he is unsure. But then

she smiles again, Marlowe, and he knows the time has come. Exhale.

Don't inhale.

Exhale.

She is safe. He can see it in her eyes. Now she smiles again. Now she holds his hand.

Just exhale.

Exhale, knowing you will never inhale again.

You should try it some time.

It really is a jolly.

Exhale, still.

Exhale.

Still.

Still.

Nothing.

Nothing, at all.

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