

2009

The Sweetness Barrier

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The Sweetness Barrier

By
Sarah L. Berneche

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the Department of English Language,
Literature and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
2009
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Abstract

The Sweetness Barrier is a collection of eight short stories representative of the impact the food industry has had on North America. Unlike other popular Canadian food writing, which focuses on the jovial and humorous aspects of food culture, this collection details the ways in which we, consumers and producers of food, have been eating, growing, buying, and distributing irresponsibly. While food may aid in emotional, mental and physical recovery, this thesis highlights the ways it also wreaks havoc, ravishes and destroys us. The convictions behind this work originate in Samuel de Champlain's Order of Good Cheer and in the idea that we are healed when we eat and celebrate together, and are explored further by illustrating how Western society has become increasingly atomized as consequence of our collective, albeit perhaps unconscious, refusal to eat together at the dinner table.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their contribution to this endeavour:

To my advisor, Dr. Susan Holbrook, for her patience, wisdom, guidance, and insightful suggestions for *The Sweetness Barrier* and countless other projects;

Dr. André Narbonne for your brilliant edits, advice, dedication, and friendship;

Dr. Dale Jacobs and Dr. Veronika Mogyorody for your enthusiasm regarding this project;

All of the graduate students for your continuous support, specifically James Farrington, Jen Ferguson, Jonny Flieger, Stefie Hedge, Josh Mehler, Marissa Reaume, and Neil Wood.

A special thanks goes out to Andy Cockbain and Dr. Danielle Price for your encouragement and helpful suggestions, and to my incomparable family, with love.

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FIELDS AHEAD

Birds cawed in the tall maple. Harry crouched behind the lilacs and observed the crows as they fluttered, black dashes appearing between the leaves. Fast, slight movement. He can't remember the name of the girl who died here years ago. The local papers said the birds pecked out her eyes and ate at her lips, leaving only her bones behind. He knew her by the doodled circles etched on the front of all her notebooks. A girl found her bracelet in the field, a sterling silver bracelet with the name engraved on the inside. He ran towards the birds and they fled from the trees like a candle blown out, a thin line of gray smoke cascading until it grew invisible.

"You can't shoot worth anything, you know. That's what people are saying. And that farm's not making it worth anything, either."

"I don't care about what people are saying," he said.

"Nobody's farming anymore. Everybody's buying from the supermarket. There's no money in it. Not any cheaper. Plus you can't shoot anyway. You're wasting time. Should come down to the rink sometime and watch the game. The league plays on Mondays if you're interested."

"No thanks. I think I'm all right here."

"You used to be really athletic."

"I'm not really big into sports anymore. I've got other stuff to do. You should see Catherine's list."

"Well, if you change your mind. Can't say the opportunity will always be there. But you know where to find us."

When Mike left, Harry fired off into the air, the gunshot echoing.

Harry's father, Jim, knew the body of the girl that was found back in the fields by the farm. Not the girl, just the body, the outline of the body. She was there, under the covers. Her little body, blonde curls stubbornly bobbing out from underneath as she was transported toward the vehicle. Her bracelet was found back there with her name engraved on the inside; that's how they tracked her down and identified her. It was a shame. The Adlers never went anywhere, not even to church. Liz Adler went to the local market once a week, on Saturdays. Jim knew she gardened, could talk a long while about growing things. She had a kind face; she smiled her crooked smile at him when he walked by her house one day. A garden full of magnolias and marigolds and daisies lined the porch. She was not particularly attractive, but there was something appealing about her. There was something honest in that stare of hers. The Adlers never kept any lights on and Liz told him her husband was often away. Harry, had gone to school with her daughter, but Jim couldn't remember her name. A real pretty little girl. Amy, or Annie. An A name.

Nobody really talks about it, but the town's immersed in that memory. They've called this town a safe town, a good place to raise your kids. Those who've lived here and whose parents lived here and who have family who live here know. Their children don't walk to school unattended; every yard is fenced. There are locked car doors and front doors and side doors where once there were no locks. The community's still safe, but just in case.

The afternoon after the funeral, a *For Sale* appears like a gatekeeper. Elizabeth Adler, dressed in black slacks and a blouse, carries cardboard boxes to the van, loads them up. She walks down the concrete driveway with her head bowed. Her husband's accepted a transfer. Maybe Liz will go back to school and pursue nursing, like she had always intended. Annie was a one-in-a-million chance. There likely won't be another. Liz imagines damp dirt and sharp-edged

stones, moss, spiders that crawl in the night. Soft skin nestled and sinking, birds coming and going, watching, nesting. The sirloin's been done a long time but it's still rare in the centre.

Ella doesn't buy meat in the stores anymore. She says you can never trust it. Can't trust that the stores aren't selling you bad meat. You can't tell where your cow was raised, what it ate. They're feeding corn to cows now and the local kindergarten teachers are still teaching the kids that cows eat grass. That cows eat grass!

Ella has had terrible experiences with animals. She fell off a horse when she was eight and has regretted mounting it ever since. While she was growing up, her mother bought meat at a butcher's in town and Ella would glance at the counter through the clear glass, smudge her fingers across it, wait for a pickle, or kielbasa, or whatever the over-the-counter person might willingly pass over. Ella was fascinated by ground beef, fascinated by its rich red colour. She was enticed by spirals of fresh meat placed over brown paper. The smell of bologna and olive loaf and mock chicken, smoked sausages. Her mother loved this place, thought it was clean, sanitary. An independently owned shop with real butchers who knew what they were doing. Ella saw beef as spaghetti.

She converted to vegetarianism after visiting a local farm. Chickens pecked at her feet. She saw pigs stun-gunned, hung, attacked by flies. Their throats slashed, their insides gutted, blood everywhere. Some people manage to get away from the animals: boneless wings and chicken nuggets, meat bought pre-cooked and pre-packaged for those finicky about coming into contact with raw pork. In the corner of the butcher's, Ella glances at the current meat display. So much meat made attractive with lighting, organized into neat packages. So much meat and yet none at all. Ella doesn't buy meat anymore, but many omnivores don't really, either. She watches as a woman in a bright coral blazer picks up a package of ground beef, pale red. There are white

packages with red, pink or brown blocks wrapped in clear plastic. Hearts and ribs, breasts and feet, no eyes.

“I know it costs a lot more, but it’s worth it,” Phoebe Newton says. There are people who buy whole cows from the county because they know the cows are fed grass. The cattle graze around the pasture, chewing cud. Wide open fields. Harry used to work on these fields, back when he was a teenager. He mowed the lawn and tended to the animals and cleaned up the coops. People knew of him, but no one really knew Harry. He was shy, quiet, and kept to himself. He wore his pale brown hair cropped short and his green blue eyes could pierce harder than a butcher knife. That’s how he was commonly described. Lizard Eyes, some people called him, though no one in town uses the nickname anymore.

“I know it costs more, but I know what I’m feeding my family this way,” Phoebe says as Jim Hawkings loads a hundred and fifty pounds into her van. She has a deep freezer at home waiting for the delivery.

Ella has been to the farm a few times. She visited the farm at twenty-one, went to see the chickens. She had been there years before, back when she was a child, back when she and a few friends went to ride horses and she fell off. She had bumped her head on the ground and strands of her blonde hair rubbed the dirt as a goose egg formed.

Jim’s business isn’t doing so great, but it’s starting to take off, he says. The organic movement is moving forward, with the drive toward more local, sustainable agriculture. Soon he’ll be selling cows all the time to all kinds of people. They’ll all be interested in what he has to offer. He wanted to put his son Harry through school; it just never quite worked out that way. He thinks he might be able to put his grandkids through, will get to see them with their medals and

their honours. When Harry and Catherine get to children anyway. He dreams in diplomas and in degree ceremonies, scholarships, grants and internships. He envisions grandchildren with Harry's eyes and Catherine's hair, beautiful children with brains. The cows will put those kids through school. They'll give those kids chances. He's waiting on Harry and Catherine; he wants to see it happen.

"What's for dinner?" Harry asks as he closes the front door behind him. He doesn't usually enter this way, but he does today, because he knows Catherine is scrubbing floors.

"Do you smell anything cooking?" He doesn't. "I thought you would've brought something home with you. You've been gone for hours. Thought maybe you and the guys had really got yourselves knee-deep in trouble, or had shot something big." Catherine is far more fluent in sarcasm than English.

"No," he answered. "No, I ran into Mike in the fields, but that's all."

"Thought so."

From where he was standing, he could hear the sound of the sponge hitting the tile. Catherine's urgent scrubbing.

"You know, Harry, when's this going to end?" she was kneeling now. The sopping sounds stopped. Catherine had never called him Lizard Eyes and he had never called her anything but Catherine. "How long is your father going to keep this up? He's been going at this farm for decades now, and he's got no money, and we've got no money. You need a job. The diner doesn't pay. You need to quit this. You're so set on hunting your own food, making your own food, helping out at the farm. We're not making it."

Catherine heard the sound of the door shut, and went back to sponging condiments off the floor, sticky spots from a dribbling mouth or reckless juice pouring. No children, yet still so messy. She sighed loudly.

Ella asks, “How much would you pay for an ice cream sundae?” Her and Jenny are sitting in her living room, drinking red wine out of large glasses smudged from greasy fingertips.

“Depends on how good it is.” Jenny has discovered, through trial and error, that there is no limit to how much she would spend on any item.

“Even if it’s terrific. Nuts, cherries, the whole deal. How much?”

“I don’t know. Fifteen dollars?”

There is a sundae in New York City that costs a little over \$2, 000, complete with real gold nuggets and a diamond ring inside. Ella subscribed to *The New York Times* and liked to flip through its pages. “Wouldn’t that be sweet. Want to propose and you don’t even need to buy a ring. You buy her a sundae instead. You get ice cream out of the deal,” Jenny says.

“You can’t be serious.”

“But just imagine! You have dates on Sundays, you see each other on Sundays. You’re proposed to...with a sundae.”

Ella rolls her eyes at her friend with the red ringlets and green eyes. For Jenny, life is a riot, no nuts required.

“You know they have ice cream that tastes like chicken parmesan, and one like a cheeseburger.”

Ella scrunches her face in disgust.

“Just saying. I still prefer my ice cream in a cone.”

A woman tucks a yellow blanket under her daughter, ensures the girl's snug. Teeth are brushed, hair combed, a dry throat remedied with a few quick swigs of water taken from a plastic cup with a monkey's face hand-painted on one side, a cup passed down for a couple generations. Not because the cup is worthwhile. Just through happenstance. Outside the wind moans and sighs; the windowpanes shutter and return, shutter and return, the glass shaking in its hinges. Watch for witches on broomsticks, monsters under the bed, do not talk to strangers, do not walk across the street without holding an adult's hand, listen to grown-ups, clean up after yourself, eat your fruit, do up your jacket, hold on to your mittens. Love in commandments. The girl slid her hand under a pillow, silver bracelet disappearing beneath the pale pink cover. The tabby, Gregory, climbs up the bed. They can hear the sound of his nails scratching the comforter. The girl chuckles softly. "He can fall asleep next to me," she says. The woman sighs. "Goodnight, A." Very few people knew Annie Adler back then.

Phoebe Newton is no stranger to the great meat debate. She charges up and down grocery aisles in search of signs. Organic, but is it sustainable, or industrial? High-fructose corn syrup, glucose-fructose, aspartame, seven names for corn. Jarred or canned, fresh or frozen, pure or from concentrate, bad lemon crops raise the price, pomegranates – but how to eat one?, all-natural or conventional peanut butter, Phoebe is bewildered and a little perturbed. She wonders: free-range, conventional, omega-3, or organic? Grass-fed, grain-fed, no animal by-products, conventional, AAA beef. She is confused in all of this pink, red, brown, all of these strange cuts.

She's at home the night AA disappears; that's how they refer to Annie Adler in the newspapers now, and she finds it odd. The Adlers live five houses down and Phoebe Newton is fearful. She watches her three boys and one girl through the window in her kitchen as they play in the backyard. Wants to keep an eye out for them. Nobody really knows how AA disappeared or

where she went. Elizabeth Adler slept that night; her husband was away on business. The Adlers have no other children. Elizabeth woke up in the morning, woke her daughter up, and gave her oatmeal for breakfast with brown sugar and raisins. Combed her daughter's hair, helped her brush her tiny teeth, helped tie her shoelaces. Elizabeth took Annie to school, handed her over to her teacher. Grabbed the lunch pail from the backseat. Annie hugged her mother, bracelet dangling over her mother's shoulder.

"You hear about that Annie girl?" Jim asks his son. Jim was a lean man back then, still had all his hair.

"Hmm?"

"Harry, you hear about her, the girl who disappeared? Isn't she some classmate of yours?"

"Annie, yeah. She draws on her notebooks all the time. Mrs. McAllister tells her to stop all the time."

"You know where she went?"

Harry shakes his head. Jim knows his son doesn't have very many friends. His son is not popular. It doesn't seem to bother Harry at all. "Nope. She likes to walk around the yard, likes to pick flowers and hold them scrunched in her hands all recess. She just likes holding flowers."

"Well," Jim Hawkings begins, "Nothing wrong with that." He doesn't know what else to say. Harry zooms a toy car around on the carpet.

Nobody's been buying anything from his farm. Some still come by to pick up fruits and vegetables, but they seem to like the grocery store packaging. He's wondering if he should open his own shop in town. Put his meat away on white trays, cover it in plastic wrap. He can't imagine anything but this life of his, the farm. Glancing through the window to see fields ahead. He likes the smell of the farm and big, blue open skies. He likes the way the world appears out

here, no one around. His wife helps sometimes, but mostly she just tends to the house. She volunteers. She crochets. There were the attempts for more children. They tried hard for more children. Lila made lists of possible children's names. There existed large families in both of their minds. It just seemed too daunting, too unaffordable. Maybe they should have tried to make it. They got started later in life. Lila rode horses at the farm down the street. She rode them and won competitions, and Jim was infatuated with her. He was helping her clean one of the horses – Mishka – when Lila stopped dead in her tracks. “When you going to ask me out, Hawkings?” she asked with that wide grin of hers. They dated a long time. Dated until Jim had enough money to marry her. They were surprised to even have had Harry. They were lucky to have even had Harry.

When Jim spotted the stretcher with the silhouette of the little body beneath the white cover all those years ago, he felt his heart tumble forward into some desperate, black cave. A girl his son's age. He slammed his teeth together and bit down hard on his lip. “Where's Harry?” he yelled, “Where's Harry?” He rushed around and felt sweat bead up on his forehead. Lila was in the kitchen, hunched over the sink, cleaning potatoes. “Take it easy, he's upstairs playing with his cars.” Jim felt the taste of iron surge in his mouth.

When Harry walked back into the house, Catherine didn't appear impressed.

“Dinner's on. Been on a long time. Wasn't sure where you went.”

He looked down at his feet. He watched as her feet appeared in his line of vision, and he looked up to her still blue eyes. “Not sure where you went, either,” he said.

“I can't give up on him,” Harry sighed. “Dad believes in this, I believe in this. We walk and the whole thing falls.”

“There are other farms, Harry,” Catherine rolled her eyes. “It’s not like the damn farming industry’s just going to fall like that. Not like every farm around here is just going to call it quits and stop selling produce. But you need to get a job.”

“I can’t get one so long as I’m helping my dad.”

“Exactly,” she sighed. “Now let’s eat. We’ll talk more about this later.”

“I don’t want to talk about this. This is important to me, you know that. You entered into this knowing.”

“Things change, Harry,” she said. He realized she rarely ever called him by name. “We can’t just sit here romanticizing.” Catherine walked into the kitchen and began to prepare her husband a plate, fill it with vegetables and mashed potatoes. “I’m craving independence, a reliable income. I’m craving a life.”

“Dad says it’s coming, it’s picking up,” he said, following her in.

“He’s been saying that for the last twenty years, Harry. For twenty goddamn years.”

“It’ll happen.”

“Even if it does.”

“Then we hold off.”

“A few more months, tops.”

“A few more months.”

Ella sits beneath a large elm, enters into its shadow. She stares at the children playing in the park. There’s the woman who lost her daughter standing over by a bench, staring too, but not at the children. She’s staring through them, into them. Ella can’t remember the woman’s name, but she recognizes her as Annie’s mother. Has seen her in the local papers. National headlines haven’t caught on yet, to her knowledge. The little girl who was found in the brush, eyes pecked

out by birds. People are eating at the picnic tables, sandwiches and apples and big bags of salted potato chips. The mother isn't eating, neither is Ella. She woke up late and just had breakfast. Nobody seems to have dogs in this neighbourhood, or if they do, they certainly don't walk them through this park. The papers claimed Annie was abducted from school. Lured through the wire gates. There's an entry over in the one corner, an article said; she could have gotten through. Someone might've gotten through. Took her away and killed her and left her body behind the farm for her bones to show. Stripped and left, her necklace found right over her head like a silver halo. Nobody gets to know Annie Adler now, but Ella thinks they all believe they do, just because they've seen her picture and can tell you what colour her eyes were. They think they know her just because they know who her mother is and where she went to school. Elizabeth Adler doesn't care where her daughter went to school, whether her eyes were green or hazel, whether she was named Annie or Amy, Alice or Amanda. Doesn't care what she looked like at all. Elizabeth Adler misses telling her daughter bedtime stories, misses kissing her on the forehead before she turned out the lights, misses the smell of life come alive.

Jim Hawkings walks out into the pasture one morning to find nothing. "They've all disappeared," he mumbles under his breath. No cows, no chickens. He sees nothing but grasslands. Gone in the night, the newspapers will say. Rumour says someone stole them, herded them out in old Jim's sleep. Jim crouches down in an old pair of denim, looks around at the dead farm and puts his head against the dirt. There's grass and trees and cornfields farther on, and the brush where Annie Adler died. Annie Alexia Adler, the obituaries say. Five years old. Cause of death: undisclosed. All the cattle, gone, all of the animals, gone. Only the birds caw.

FALSE FRUIT

The strawberries had gone out with the green door. Julia noticed as soon as she went home. She trekked up the path that led to the house at the end of the lake, where a woman lived with her husband and their dog. Julia wondered what this visit would feel like as the sun blinded her. She felt this particular heat right through to her bones, right through her torso where her ribs were showing. Flat stones formed a walkway to that house, the one that shook now and then from the explosions at the salt mines. It was almost the way she remembered it, but the shingles were new and the door was no longer painted green. She could recall when her mother first brought the green paint home. Her father shuddered as her mother slipped a brush up and around the doorframe. Rose, her mother, liked it, had insisted on it. “We should leave it,” she announced before her husband could contest it, looking up at it in a worn pair of jeans and an oversized t-shirt, white splatters across her chest. “It might grow on you.” Apparently it hadn’t, or her mother had changed her mind.

People rarely came out here; there wasn’t anything except the lake. Not like there had ever been, or as if people had ever come out here. Julia could remember running beside the lake when she was younger, back when her mother grew fields of strawberries. She’d kneel down and muddy the knees of her jeans picking them, plucking the red fruit from their lithe stems. Red fruit like cushions, studded with tiny yellow seeds. The pale juice would run down her face, down her hands, and settle on her shirt. The fields had been parcelled, sold in lots and the plants pulled out.

“Strawberries are false fruit,” her mother said when they were both younger, out picking berries with their minds still waking up. Her father had looked back at her mother like she was crazy. “They aren’t from the ovaries,” she qualified.

“A fruit’s a fruit,” he muttered.

“It doesn’t develop in the same manner as other fruit, Jules,” her mother continued. “So that’s what they call it. False fruit.” Her mother seemed to speak over her father in a note that somehow implied condescension.

Julia considered walking back down the steps until her mother poked her head out the charcoal door, the name *Timothy* engraved on the doorknocker.

“Oh finally, some help,” Rose Timothy said, rushing back into the house. Julia followed her mother. “Come in, come in.” Julia felt the weight of her bag drop and thud against the ground, and she sauntered into the kitchen as her mother hit a rocks glass filled with ice against the kitchen table, poured in a capful of rye. “Drink up,” she said.

“Hello to you, too.”

Julia was coming home to this: a past of fruit and doors that changed colours, and a house at the end of a lake, surrounded by open, empty, unkempt lots. It would be a house full of other people tomorrow, family and friends wearing black despite her grandmother’s insistence that they wear anything but. “Black is too de-pressing,” her grandmother would say between sips of white wine. They’d stand around and chat. Some attendees might laugh unexpectedly. Julia hoped her uncle had changed his mind, that he’d concede to have the luncheon catered at a hall. Take the load off her mother.

Rose had an entire set of commandments. Use bay leaves in broth. Don’t overcook your beans. Wear a scarf when it gets cold out, and do your jacket all the way up. Drink milk at dinner, wash your hands, floss your teeth. Buy good shoes.

“Never begin a conversation until every party involved has a drink in hand, and don’t trust anyone who doesn’t drink unless they’re an alcoholic or a recovering one, and don’t embarrass an alcoholic by refusing them alcohol, especially if it’s in front of other people and especially if they don’t realize they are, in fact, an alcoholic. And don’t swear too much, it’s

unbecoming,” her mother would say. Rose’s small wisdom burning up and out, like alcohol set on fire.

Julia watched as her mother sat down beside her, drink in hand.

“I told you he was an ass and you didn’t buy it,” Rose said. “Not right for you.”

“Owen’s not an ass,” Julia said quietly. “You never liked him.” Owen was Julia’s live-in something or other. Husband, technically, but Julia had always had a hard time letting the word slip off her tongue.

“Nothing to like. Now drink up so we can get to this cooking. I’ll get Carlinda to help you draw out the divorce papers before you drive back.”

“Thanks.” She took a sip of the drink at her mother’s insistence, felt the rye burn her throat and the ice cubes clank against the backs of her teeth.

She took a deep breath and sat back. Rose looked put-together; she usually did. Eyes lined perfectly in black, eyebrows filled in. Her skin was flawless: nothing in her appearance betrayed her. No dark circles to speak of.

“You aren’t sad at all, are you.”

Her mother looked her straight in the eyes. “About what?”

“Grandpa.”

“No.” Rose sipped on a rye and ginger, filled to the brim. “Doesn’t help anyone to mope around.”

“Jeez, he passed away yesterday,” Julia said, raising her voice.

“Calm down.” Funerals don’t make Mrs. Rose Timothy sad. What was it like, Julia wondered. Rose told her that she had watched him die. It stormed throughout the night and lightning struck into the dawn. Her clothes stuck to her body as sweat wept down her face. Rose and her father had sat around listening to a cassette of Johnny Cash. He’d been a large man, Jim

Rutherford. He'd been a large man who walked into bars in the city, and later in Toronto, and then in Mexico, and would buy a round of beer for anyone who listened to him speak. Rose had always had a photograph of him hanging in the living room, one where he was sporting a sombrero and playing the guitar. Marie, his wife, and Julia's maternal grandmother, is sitting in the background smiling. She's on the sofa, shy, soft brown curls collecting around her face. Julia resembles her the most. Rose watched him die, watched him die on the fourth floor of Grace Hospital, tubes in his nose and unable to speak. His body whittled down to his bones, carved like a tree, revealing lines and curves that hadn't existed. He'd been energetic the night previous to his passing. The two of them weathered the hours and they whispered about who knows what, and he sang along with the music as well as he could, and Rose sang along with the music as well as she could. He cracked the occasional joke and asked for a cigarette a dozen times, refused by Rose each and every one of them. His large body had become but five discrete roots under the sheets, feet covered in cold cloths. The day he died, Rose heard him mouth something almost entirely inaudible.

“You love them,” she repeated, looking at him. Loved his granddaughters. Julia's heart sank to the bottom of her lungs as her mother told her slowly from the seat beside her.

Marie Rutherford had been on a quest for the perfect coffin ever since her husband died. Not because she loved her dead husband – which she did, despite her unsuccessful attempts at resistance – but because she cared about what went down into the earth, because she was funny about death. She didn't approve of cremation. Her husband, Jim Rutherford, had never been a good to her, but she cared how he went into the ground. It meant something. In his life, he had worked to avoid her, ignored their children, had left Marie for another woman, and spoke afterwards something terrible of Marie to all of their mutual friends. But she would've hated to

have been punished for carrying out whatever cruel thoughts had entered her mind. Nevertheless, she found the perfect coffin for Jim after hours of searching: a beautiful cherry wood, with an engraving of wheat on one side and corn on the other.

“It’s perfect, Mom,” Rose had told her as Marie drew her fingers across the embossments.

“I’ll show you what I’ve got planned, Jules,” Rose said, hoisting herself off the chair. “You can peel the potatoes while I tell you, so we don’t waste him. Wine’s downstairs. Get a bottle for me, would ya? Then at least I can pretend like this is happy hour.”

This house felt different now, even if nothing in the interior had changed. Everything felt like re-living a memory instead of forming a new experience. She wondered if there was a limit to how much you could experience in one place. If she, perhaps as a child, had somehow reached the threshold a decade ago. Everything was stable now, stagnant, as if her parents had become all they were ever going to, and had spent the last ten years repeating the days that came before. She knew where to find the potatoes, where her mother kept the spatulas. Out with the paint on the door, gone were the strawberries. No one grew strawberries around here anymore. Houses went up quickly where the fields once were. The only way to get a metric pint of the miniature red fruit was to walk into the supermarket, let the air conditioning freeze your toes. Strawberries in plastic containers, piled on top of each other like waste.

“You’re getting too thin,” her mother remarked when she cut around the neck of the bottle with a Swiss Army. “Way too thin. Eat more.” Owen had been telling her the same thing. She wasn’t eating enough; she was working too many hours. Forgetting to taste.

“Don’t usually have time.”

“There’s always time. I gave you that crock for Christmas. Should use it.” Julia poured her mother a glass, twisted the bottle with her wrist for a clean finish. “You should try some of this, Jules, it’s good.”

Julia had an affair with pickled vegetables. She ate them until they were gone, and then ventured to the store for more when she had devoured the last of them. Nothing else sated her. She wanted nothing else. Pickled vegetables in those tiny glass jars, the colours like pastels. She felt nauseated at the sight of oven-roasted chicken, wanted nothing to do with sautéed mushrooms or sauce made with vine-ripened tomatoes. Not even a simple piece of dry toast, not a bowl of cereal, not an omelette or a bowl of soup. Pickled vegetables and silence. She peeled the potatoes and then the carrots; Rose prepped a couple of chickens for the following day. Julia cut the vegetables; Rose rolled the dough. Julia browned beef and boiled lasagne noodles, just slightly, until they turned tender, and assembled pan after pan with noodles, sauce, vegetables, ricotta, noodles, sauce, vegetables, ricotta. Crumbled meat in half of them and layered spinach and zucchini in the other. Rose drank wine; Julia poured it.

“How many we expecting, anyway?”

“As many as your uncle has certainly invited.”

Julia looked up for a moment, up at her mother with the crazy brown ringlets and soft eyes that had hardened with time. “Ma?”

“Hmm?” Rose looked up to meet her daughter’s eyes, taking the opportunity to get another sip of wine in.

“Oh, nevermind.”

“Just spit it out.”

“Do you think...you’ll miss him?”

“Like a toothache. Be serious.”

“Really.”

“Maybe. You know me.”

“I kind of miss him.”

“No, Jules, you don’t. You miss what he was like with you girls, that’s what you miss.”

Rose put her glass down and continued chopping. “You miss the way you could mention one word and he’d go on about it for an hour, tell you all about it. Tell you stories from back when he was a millwright in Mexico, about the big glamorous Toronto life and all of his friends.”

“I don’t know.”

“Nobody knew Jim Rutherford and Jim Rutherford liked it that way. Can’t miss someone you don’t know.”

Rose spread her moistened fingertips over a pan of bread dough – to crisp the loaf up in the oven.

“Not sure about that. What about when you and Dad lost – ”

“That’s not the same sort of thing. Not at all. My father is separate from me, I’m not a part of him.”

“Maybe.”

Nobody did know Jim Rutherford. He didn’t like people getting to know him, to become intimately acquainted with flaws he would have rather denied all the while himself. He and Marie were going to a party that evening years ago, before he left or was thrown out. Marie had found the perfect heels to wear, but she hid them in her purse and found another pair to wear outside instead. She didn’t want to ruin the good pair. She put on perfume the way she always did when she dressed carefully: one spray on her wrist, one behind an ear and one on her chest. She curled her hair and applied her makeup gently, so as not to smudge. They had never had any money.

Marie had never had any money. But she tried her best to fit in with the rest of the neighbourhood wives.

There are photographs of her back then, drinking with Jim, laughing with him. Throwing pillows at him. She looked beautiful in all of them. There's one from when they first started going out. One of her arms is propped up against the hood of a car, and she's smiling a giant smile, wearing a heavy black pea coat. The photograph was in the pile to use at the funeral. Julia and Rose had gone over all of them, sorted through all of the images. Half of Jim's life had gone missing somewhere between Christmases. There were ones of him with his guitar, some of him in Mexico. A few with his children, when they were small.

Marie dressed up the night Jim left her. It was well over thirty years ago and Rose barely remembers to tell it. Marie wore an old favourite: a navy dress with lace trim. She made sure her nails were adequately manicured. She let Rose smell the perfume. Rose saw the heels in the bag, the beautiful pair made of Italian leather, bought on sale.

"It's great to be a size six, Rose. I hope you're blessed with small feet," Marie told her daughter when she caught her glancing at them. Rose just wanted to be in her mother's presence. This glamorous, beautiful woman, who worried her shoes would ruin in the rain. Rose glanced outside and watched as a puddle collected in the pothole in the middle of the street while Marie applied mascara at her vanity stand.

"Where's your brother, Rosie?" Marie asked her, wand still in hand. Rose remained mesmerized by the rain. "Paul?" Marie yelled. "Paul?"

"Yeah?" he called from down the hallway.

"Your father home yet?" Marie thought he might've snuck in, grabbed a beer.

"No," Paul yelled back.

Marie looked into that makeup mirror and felt the rage burn up in her body, the fire surging through her wrists and fingers. Her throat dried. Jim had wanted to name their second daughter Margaret. He liked the name; there was something about it. Marie wouldn't have it. She liked the name Anne, had liked it from the very beginning. Paul, Rose and Anne. It was the meeting between Marie and the real Margaret, *Marguerite*, a woman who wore long trench coats and travelled, who was younger and adored Jim Rutherford, which sent Marie into a tailspin. Easy to fall in love with Jim Rutherford; this much Marie knew. He didn't even have to try. Marie got off the bench and walked over to glance into the crib where Anne lay sleeping. "Marguerite," she muttered to herself. She knew where Jim Rutherford had gone. She walked back over to her vanity and sent a flying, angry fist through the mirror, leaving her knuckles bloody. The shoes stayed in that bag. .

"No money, no letter, no nothing. He took off, what else is new." Rose stirred a bowl of custard.

"Nothing?"

"I don't know. This is according to Marie. You can't believe much of what she tells you. He left or she threw him out. One or the other. We saw him at Christmases and that was it. Paul tracked him down years later when he went to Toronto to find work in advertising. Knocked on Dad's door one day and wasn't he surprised to find a whole new family living there. A wife, a boy, and a little girl, an entirely new family. Who knows how many other families he had and left." Rose deserted the custard momentarily to glance through the oven window.

"Maybe marriage is overrated. Commitment."

"Got nothing to do with it."

"Well I don't know then."

“You just should’ve listened to me before you got married.”

Julia sighed. “Fine, he’s an asshole. Drop it.” Rose smiled back at her daughter and passed the wine over to her.

“Gotta stop acting like happiness is the goddamned Emerald City. Like there’s going to be a day when you’re just happy and that’s the end of your misery and you’ll never have to work for it anymore. Like recipes, Julia. Sometimes they turn out and sometimes you follow them accordingly and they don’t for whatever reason.”

“I don’t think it’s the Emerald City.”

“You do. You walked down the aisle looking radiant. You did, you looked radiant. Thought the anger and the uncertainty would dissolve. Jim was the same way. Thought marriage would save him from his own neuroses, probably.”

“You think he loved her?” The words slipped from Julia’s lips.

“I think he loved my mother but I think he loved himself more. And I think those who love themselves more than they could ever love anyone are bound to do most things for the wrong reasons.”

“I don’t. I’m just – ”

“It’s fine. You’re safe, it’s fine. It’s over. We eat, sleep and begin again.”

Julia remembered when Jim came to visit them at the house at the end of the lake. Came to visit her and her sister for an entire week, stayed upstairs in the guest room. He helped the two of them pick strawberries, back when the door was still green. Back when Rose tamed her hair and didn’t let the curls spring so loosely. He bent down and picked an imperfect strawberry from the patch. It had ripened unevenly so that half of it was spoiling.

“Interesting, ain’t it?” he muttered, lit cigarette between his teeth, thick-rimmed glasses over his dark eyes.

“That’s not a good one,” Julia told him. “Not bright red all around.” She remembered the conversation with unusual clarity.

“Nah, it’s perfect. Kind of pretty, isn’t it?”

“Mom calls strawberries false fruit. They are not made the same way as other fruit.”

“Nothing false about this one. Not trying to hide anything.”

“I guess not.” He smiled at her and gently tucked a few stray hairs of hers behind her ears. “Got eyes like your mother, you. Those brown eyes, like me. Like your aunt and your great-grandma, too.”

“Mom loves strawberries.”

“Hmm,” he took a drag. “Bet she does.”

Julia felt herself relax in the chair of her mother’s kitchen. She cradled a glass full of wine, and tilted it back and forth, watching the tannins appear and dissipate. Rose continued to fiddle around in the kitchen.

“Do you think he cared?” Julia asked softly; Rose didn’t hear her. She felt the wine flood through her body like blood. She had plucked strawberries from a field that was now a development. Had made the trek back to that lake, where no one bothered to venture, where no one came. Left a green door and returned to a charcoal one, painted to match the siding. She took a strawberry from a glass bowl full of them in front of her, bit into it, sank her teeth into it and felt sick to her stomach.

“They’re coming over tomorrow, right after. There won’t be much time, really,” she could hear her mother mumble. Julia could remember what it was like here – quiet all the time, and still. She sat there at the table, drinking wine, and finished the bowl of strawberries until she beat the sickness, juice running down her face.

FISHER, SEAL AND FOSSILIZE

It's seal season on the Eastern coast. People from the Rock go out and club the seals, the furs of the animals having just changed from white to gray. There's blood on the ice and skinned bodies float around the water like icebergs. Cass O'Grady's father is a fisherman, but not a seal hunter. His mother guts and de-bones cod until every part of her smells like the sea. The Newfoundland government approves the hunt, his father explains to him.

"They make money off it. They won't ban it. It helps too much with overfishing." His father sits back in his chair, leg propped up on the dinner table. Cass's mother makes mussels and has a stew going on the stove. They'd soak up the juices that night with fresh soda bread and his father would drink mead, thank the honeybees. "I like this province. I like it," his father would continue, staring straight at the back wall. "Even if I don't always agree with it, I like it." The government had just implemented seal hunting regulations a few years before.

Caleb O'Grady slams his mug hard on the table so that liquid slithers down the glass, and Cass's mother takes it out of her husband's hands and gulps a long sip herself, licking her thumb as her thin hair falls in front of her face. Everything is made from scratch; all of the recipes are from the Old Country. They never mention Ireland anymore. It is the Old Country, although Cass isn't so sure Canada is the New One. Skinning seals alive and leaving the beaters on the ice, their warm blood left to cool in the freezing Atlantic waters, seemed barbaric to him, especially given his eleven-year-old sensibilities.

His father would sometimes tell stories from his childhood, tales which seemed to grow better as the hours wore on. Sneaking out at night to drink with his mates at the cemetery and trying to climb fences and failing miserably. Monsters that crept up on him while he was sailing. Beautiful women with dark eyes and copper-coloured hair that mouthed his name like a song.

Cass rocked back and forth in his chair, listening intently, until he fell backwards and smacked his head on the floor.

“Serves you right,” his mother would say. “Now enough.”

His brothers couldn't wait to leave. They wanted out of the house and away from the Newfoundland. They charged through the back door at six o'clock from the backyard and consumed their mother's meal quickly in order to return to playing baseball, while Cass stayed and watched his father helping, observed as his mother scrubbed the dishes wearing globs of dishwashing foam over her fingers as if they made a pair of gloves.

“Come dry,” she said, and he picked up the plaid dishrag from the knob on the maple cupboard. His mother was certainly not a beautiful woman. None of the copper-coloured hair his father talked about. She definitely couldn't sing. She was not necessarily a good woman, Cass thought, the way other mothers were called good women, but she put up with him, his father. She was a fisherman's wife and she provided for them, and she managed somehow to get them all together for dinner every night regardless of how little discussion went on at the table. She wanted them to eat together.

“You never know what can happen. Your father could be dead tomorrow. Cod might be gone tomorrow.” His brothers were not smart boys but they realized the importance of things. His mother would slap any of them on the side of the head if it suited her, if she thought it would make her sons into good men. She was strong, Cass knew that much. She was strong and made long, elaborate meals, ensured her sons were bathed and fed and educated. Drying the dishes, he could still smell the sea on her even after she had taken a long, hot bath. Lily seemed like a mistaken name for his mother. He and his mother, washing dishes. Her knuckles were cracked and bloody. It made him think about the seals and the ice.

O'Grady's relatives out in the valley tried to get his father a desk job. Lily's parents tried to get the family to move out to Ontario, where the auto industry was picking up. Caleb showed his appreciation for their offers by returning to the sea. He wanted to do what his father had done, what his father's father had done: live by the water and fish until the water took them, whether whole or in ashes.

Cass got up that early June morning and went with his father to the pier, felt the weight of his sneakers' rubber soles thud against the hollow, rotting wood. His steps resonated like those of a Gaelic dancer. Thump, thump, thump. He bit into an apple and felt the juice spit against his cheeks. Sour at first, and then sweeter. Every first bite is an introduction. The mouth forgets and then remembers.

"There's something to this," his father said, and while Cass had no idea what his father meant, he nodded his head in agreement anyway. "Fish as free as they'll ever be."

Cass knew his father wasn't trying to be funny, but he laughed despite himself and looked down at the dock to conceal it. Caleb glanced at his son with the apple core in his fist. It was early and Cass could barely keep his eyes open. The smell of fish and salt. Cured, smoked, poached, baked, fried, grilled, greased, buttered, battered, tossed, oiled, seasoned. He could smell fish and salt everywhere and everywhere smelled of fish and salt.

"Here, feel this." Caleb took the core from the boy's hands and threw it into the water. He delivered a scaly fish into his son's hands pulled right from a rod, the fish still wiggling. His father was a large man. The life of the party, Lily called him. Fished since he was thirteen. He'd bought his first car with fishing money and played pool with fishing money, he'd bought property and built a house and married with fishing money. Caleb would get his guitar out and have everyone around him sing along with a beer in hand to whatever he felt like playing.

“What do you think we should do with it, Cass?” But the fish had already manoeuvred its way from the boy’s hands and flipped back into flustered waves.

Two dozen bodies clad in black with their heads bowed watched as the coffin was closed on Caleb’s leathery face. His casket was lowered into the ground on Cass’s twelfth birthday, even though the bunch of them knew well enough Caleb wanted his ashes thrown out over the sea. He had wanted to be spread over the beach, stones like broken dinosaur toenails. But instead Caleb was buried, like his father and like his father’s father. Cass had never owned a pair of dress shoes before and Lily had to take him to the city to find a pair.

“Cheap ones, because he’s still growing and there’s nobody after him,” his mother informed the salesperson. He hated the shoes his mother bought for him, and so on the day of his father’s funeral he lifted loose grass from the mud with his feet, turning the tips of his black shoes gray. The rain started just as the coffin hit the bottom. Cass imagined the seals, blood spread over the ice, the rain stirring it up. Lily spent twenty minutes getting the mud off those shoes. He imagined fish wiggling in the sea as the drops came down hard.

It took a mere two weeks for Lily to pack up their belongings and move the boys to her mother’s house in Ontario. Lily started Cass at a public school situated on top of a Native burial ground. Cass’s new classmates would play ball after school, but he never joined them. He thought it was probably rude to run across a graveyard. Lily didn’t understand, of course, why they were playing ball in the first place. School was for learning, was it not? School was for acquiring. Cass remembered his father’s stories. His mother smelled nothing like fish since the day it rained. He could remember looking through the glass panes of his old house the night his father died and watching rainwater slipping through fish bones piled high in a wooden barrel

outside. Imagined his father's coffin seeping further into the ground until it hit the center of Earth. His father was probably going stir-crazy in that coffin.

"He's six feet under, that's where his body is," Lily told her son. "None of this middle of the planet. He's not in the middle of the planet."

"The center of the planet," he corrected her. "In the center."

"Whatever. Even if he was – what are you going to do with it, Cass? Nothing you can do with it now. It's done," and then, "where are your brothers?"

"Outside. Playing ball."

"Well you can help me then. Add a tablespoon of honey to that dough sitting over there." She pointed to a large metal mixing bowl on the counter across from the island. He found the jar in the cupboard and turned the cap. The golden threads mesmerized him.

"Don't be all romantic about it. Get yourself another spoon to scrape it off. Shimmy it in." His mother grabbed a beer from the fridge and flipped the lid, emptied the neck of it in a gulp. "Lord, I miss him," she muttered. Cass thought he saw his mother's eyes well up, but she covered them with her cracked hands, cracked knuckles, and the fish became all he could think about. Fish, and seals, honey, and salt.

"You see this?"

Cass stared straight at the girl with the blonde pigtails and green eyes. He couldn't remember her name from class. He thought it might've been Rebecca.

"It's a fossil. From the dinosaurs." The girl seemed convinced of her answer and continued to dig into the sand with her plastic pink shovel.

Cass nodded. He wasn't sure if the dinosaurs were ever here. He felt the stone in his hand, scrutinized the white lines on the gray object. Looked like a bird's skeleton imprinted on it.

“I don’t think so. There weren’t any dinosaurs here.”

“Yes, yes there were. These are fossils proving it.” The white lines seemed to disappear if they weren’t held up to the light properly.

“I guess.”

“Hmm?”

“Guess it’s a fossil.”

“Sure is.”

“How are you so sure? Maybe it’s just a stone that got hit too many times.”

“Nope, it’s a real fossil. I know because you can see the lines. Dinosaurs existed and now they are *extinct*.” She seemed particularly proud of her ability to pronounce the word. “Mrs. Elliott said it was a fossil, too. Remnants of the dinosaurs, because dinosaurs were here.”

“Remnants.”

“Whatever. People killed the dinosaurs. What’s your name?”

“Cass.”

“I’m Katie. I’m the only one in the class with a K name. Where’d you come from?” She didn’t look up from the digging. Busy looking for more fossils, he figured.

“Newfoundland.”

“What’s that?”

“Well.” He re-tied his shoelaces and felt the sand against his fingers. “There’s water everywhere and we fish for money. Smells like...salt. Smells like salt and fish guts.”

“I hate fish. My mom makes fish every Friday and I hate it.”

The school Cass attended is no longer there. It was moved across town, to a field where corn used to grow. The old one, with its two hallways, was too small to house more than two hundred students. The new one is fully equipped with all of the latest technology. Nothing happens at the old one anymore. It's been broken into twice just for kicks, since there isn't anything there now to steal except bits of chalk and a few yellow plastic chairs. Lily re-married when Cass turned seventeen, and she moved out West. Cass went to school and kept going to school. He was the son of a fisherman and never wanted to learn how to fish. He wanted to preserve the past, jar it like jam that would never be eaten, because he couldn't stomach it. He couldn't stand the blood. He wanted to remember his mother's knuckles after all the gutting and the cleaning and the cooking and the dishes. He could remember the way her veins emerged from the backs of her hands from all the work.

He told his mother he was going to school to study fossils. He sent his mother a cookbook by Julia Child for Christmas and a biography on M. F. K. Fisher. For a while, he considered marine biology. He considered dropping out and taking a spot on a tanker. Then he heard all about a commercial vessel having gone down in the early hours of a frosty fall morning. All on board drowned, or froze to death in the water before anyone could get to them. He began to wonder about bodies and what happened after people died; he wondered whether bodies simply decomposed and decayed isolated in their coffins, or whether, somehow, cells had the ability to sink through the wood and into the ground. His brothers didn't think about cells or sinking. They went into carpentry and Cass took to studying insects. He heard there was work becoming available in entomology.

She couldn't tell at first. It had made a plot in the snow. When Emilia bent down, she realized it was a person, a man. She dusted the remains of the weather off of him, sifting icing

sugar. She removed her mittens and shoved them deep into her down pockets, carefully touched the skin of his face with her sweaty palm. She'd never felt someone so cold before. Winter had rushed over from fall without warning, the first snowfall hitting the ground just after the leaves crinkled. She could see her breath in the air. She noticed the man's crow's feet and sunken jaw. She removed her wool hat and let the wind flip through her hair, rustling her scalp. She felt completely paralyzed by this man she had come across by accident, a man who carried a briefcase made of buttery leather. Emilia dug her phone out of her bag and called. She opened his briefcase and found a stack of papers nestled between books. It was an article written on the destruction and loss of honeybees. "It's Dr. Cass O'Grady," she told them, glancing at his frozen body, his gray hairline stained with bits of hardened blood.

In the first grade, she was sitting around in the school courtyard when a wasp stung her in the ear. She wondered why they existed, wasps. She grew up with them. Everywhere, there were wasps. Her mother had a series of oft-used phrases that were declared over and over to the seven-year-old Emilia: Beware the wasps. Need a cold winter to kill the wasps. Don't hit at them, don't try to kill them, you'll irritate the wasps and they'll sting you. Emilia wondered why they existed, wasps and hornets and bees. She felt something on her ear, and when she felt for it she found the inside of her ear was tender and painful to the touch.

"A yellow jacket crawled in your ear, Emmy," one of the girls announced nonchalantly.

Emilia spotted a yellow jacket over on one of the dandelions as her classmates picked at wildflowers, pulling at petals to see whom they'd marry. She charged over to one of those dandelions wearing her patent shoes and stomped on the yellow petals, removing her shoe to reveal a tiny crushed body on the sole of her Mary Jane.

She kicked at an old dandelion and white parachute seeds exploded and floated upwards. There were hosts of dandelions and wildflowers in the courtyard, yellow and white, which spread across the area like a quilt. She stood alone, and returned her gaze to the squished yellow jacket. She pulled it off her shoe. The wings pressed against its lithe corpse, which budged ever so slightly in the cool air. Emilia pinched it between her fingers and brought it up to her face; it was such a small thing. She tripped while trying to sit down by the roots of a tree and smacked her lower back against the trunk. Somewhere in the falling, she lost the insect, and she couldn't seem to retrieve it from anywhere. From where she lay, she heard the yellow jackets buzzing in the hive above, spotted the nest at the top of the branches: flying dots spinning around and parading around a globe. She wondered where they went in the winter and how they kept warm. At first she felt proud; she had killed the invader. Yet losing its miniscule insect body made her feel like she hadn't stomped on it and killed it at all, like she could simply forget.

Her friends shrugged at her vindication.

"It's just a yellow jacket. So what? It's not like it's a *real* bee. Real bees are bigger. Those little ones don't count." Emilia hated this girl. It was a real bee. It had a stinger and everything. She iced her throbbing ear when she returned to class, but could not stop thinking about the tiny bee that wasn't a real bee. How something so small could yield that much power. She had killed it, stomped over it like a patch of fluffy snow, had pounded it into the ground. Ms. Elsmere watched as the little girl with the light brown pigtails and green eyes approached her at the end of class, patent shoes slowly clacking against the floor.

"Ms. Elsmere, I killed a bee."

"Well Emilia, you shouldn't do that. They feed us. They help make fruit you know."

For years, she went around that courtyard on the lookout for insects. Trying to keep the bugs alive. When a group of boys swatted at a yellow jacket, she told them to cut it out. Stop angering it. They caught the yellow jacket in a glass jar and swung it around to one another as if playing catch.

“What do you think we should do with it?” one of the boys asked his friend.

“Let go of it,” Emilia said quietly, trying to pry the jar from one of the boys’ hands.

“No, what are you doing? We caught a bee.”

“You caught a yellow jacket. Let go of it.” She grabbed hold of the lid and pried the jar from the boys’ hands with all her force. The insect flew out quickly as soon as she managed to untwist the lid.

“Look what you did. It’s gone now. I hope it stings you,” one of the boys said to her.

“I hate bees,” another answered.

She shrugged, took an apple from her bag, and let the sweetness sit on her tongue before swallowing.

When she told her mother about the boys swatting at the bees, she remembered her mother looking down at her and asking her, “Well, Em, what are you going to do about it?” and she had no idea, no answers.

Cass O’Grady came upon bees by accident. It was thought that he would pursue law, or medicine. His mother, phoning in from her oilman husband’s house using a calling card, urged him to take up engineering; she heard it was a profession that was going places.

“I hear it is great. Everyone is finding jobs these days in that field. You will find out the hard way.” She had stopped speaking in slang since getting together with Richard. He wasn’t a

fan of nicknames. Cass could hear her raspy voice on the other end and imagined cracked skin on her knuckles, though he doubted they bled anymore.

“Are you there, Cass? Are you there?”

“Yeah, Ma. I’m here.”

“Richard and I are going to Virginia for a few days, but we should be back by Sunday. Check out that engineer programme, will you? I hear it’s one of the best. You need a good job in life, Cass. You don’t need to make things hard like, well. You don’t need to make things hard.”

He smelled the rye in his glass and took a long sip alone. “I’ll look into it.”

“Okay. Make sure you do it soon, though, all right? I would hate you to lose an opportunity. Oh, Cass, the card is running out. I’ll call you when we get back, okay? I love you. Look into that programme.”

The four years Cass had ultimately exhausted at the university had made him ill-equipped to deal with life at sea. Yet he didn’t wait to return to pursue some other degree his mother had set her heart on him pursuing. He knew, admittedly, little outside of books and transparencies, and knew nothing of what his father had valued. What his father felt was as natural as eating or sleeping or dreaming. His father had woken up at five every morning, had a bowl of hot oatmeal with raisins and brown sugar, a strong cup of black coffee, and would get out to the docks by sunrise. Cass sat and drank until he could no longer think or feel or taste anything but metal in his mouth, and he remembered the Monday his father took him out to the pier and put a fish in his hand. What do you think we should do with it? Cass remembered thinking he had never felt something so alive before, and he felt instantly why his father loved fishing and the water. The way people loved whatever it was they loved. How they got to know the things they came to love. The fish slipped in his soft hand sprung back into the water. “You need a firm grip, Cass. Firm grip, next time,” his father warned him. Cass glanced out his kitchen window from his

drunken state and realized the leaves were changing colours. From the top branches the leaves descended like amateur dancers, aimless and optimistic and performing for no one but the spying observer. He could still feel the fish in his hand. He remembered the rain that rushed into the wooden barrels, rendering the fish bones clean of their blood. He recently read that they weren't allowed to use large vessels to hunt seals anymore.

Cass had been invited to a dinner party by a classmate. His friend had even sent him the menu: roasted lemon chicken with asparagus spears; prosciutto and Kalamata olives; goat cheese and butternut squash risotto, a honey cheesecake for dessert. He turned it down.

"I'm too busy with term papers at the moment, sorry," he told the guy. "Maybe next time." Cass drank his rye and relaxed in his chair. Perhaps he should've gone. He had no real reason not to. He had finished his papers over a week ago; he wanted to be finished early. It came down to the fact that he couldn't face all of those same faces he had endured for four years. He could not see them try to wipe smirks of success off their faces. Some had received early admission to programs; others were guaranteed jobs when they graduated. He envied their confidence, their conviction and their plans. Some were married with children and just happy to get out, to get that piece of paper. He glanced around at the kitchen full of empty pizza boxes and frozen dinners, take-out containers and empty bottles. He watched a special on television documenting the state of honeybees. The state of honeybees, as if they were part of a country. Bees, he thought to himself, bees. His father loved fish and maybe he could like bees. He remembered his father's mead, the fish bones and the rain, and for the first time in years he thought back to his old playground and the girl who was convinced she had found fossils, and he remembered the bees that hummed and buzzed up in the trees.

Emilia had lived in this city all her life without having to get to know many people, and preferred it that way. Her parents wanted her to go into nursing. “There’s jobs in that,” her mother said. Her parents had worked factory jobs their entire lives. They had grown up together in this town and had made something of themselves in this town. She picked up her biology books and daydreamed about Matisse and Monet, Picasso and his still-lives. She wanted to paint the inside of diagrams. She considered Fragonard and the lady in pink, swinging scandalously. She wanted to be a part of that garden.

“What use is there in art?” her father stated bluntly. “Can’t make a cent from it. Those artists you like so much were important, sure, but now they’re just people in history books. Don’t get yourself so worked up. Do something practical. Spend your money on something that will pay you back in the end, Emmy. You won’t have to work so hard.” His argument seemed so logical to her at the time, discussing beauty and paybacks.

“Goddamn weather,” she muttered to herself as she came into town after classes. Her parents were gone for a couple weeks. They were driving to the East Coast; they wanted to whale watch.

She looked down at the man in the coat and sat there silent and still and worried, and grasping onto his briefcase she tried to wake him up. People walked by bundled well for winter. They carried their bags and books and laptops, talking on their mobile phones, and stared. Just wake up, she thought to herself, half expecting him to answer. She pulled her hat back on her frozen head and noticed his black shoes, the toes worn out. Her ears stung wildly from the cold and her eyes burned. She heard the sound of the ambulance and felt relief rush over her. Cass’s gray hair whispered in the wind. Her parents were out whale watching. It’ll be coming up on seal season in a few months, she thought, gray bodies left to die, bloody, on the ice. She tried to touch his face but she pulled back, pulled away, and she let herself cry.

THE DABBLERS

She couldn't remember why she set the alarm that morning. She opened her eyes to the white popcorn ceiling that stared back at her in the glare of the dawn sun. Her head was propped up on a pillow and her legs were folded under the sheets. She tilted her head to the left and glanced at her nightstand: 10AM Judith, on a yellow note. "10AM Judith," she mouthed, lips gelled together with eight hour's old saliva. When she was young, she slept with stuffed animals. She was tucked under the blankets with at least two in hand. She lifted her hands to her face and examined the fingers for dirt. The pale pink tips of her nails cut the still air as if they were pulling apart orange sections. She ran her fingers over her skin.

Moving her limp body, she crept to the bathroom. The light was so bright it blinded her temporarily and her eyes stung. "I think I will wash my hair," she said, to no one. She saw herself in the mirror but did not see herself; she failed miserably at trying to erase her wrinkles by stretching the skin out around them with her hands, and rubbed at a trace of jam edged in the corner where her lips met, sticky and smudged. "Better," she thought. She removed every article of clothing slowly and let each item dangle for a pause and slip. The water was cold this morning. She had to push the lever over completely to the left side to get to the steam.

"She'll be here soon," a woman yelled from the other room. The woman's name might've been Angela. Miriam couldn't remember. They were introduced once but it had slipped her mind and she felt too embarrassed to ask for it again.

Miriam towel dried her hair and let the wet, gray ringlets fall over her shoulders. "Make sure Helen makes it to school on time. She's always late getting up in the morning," Miriam told the woman. "Make sure she eats breakfast. She likes to skip." Miriam sat on the sofa and waited. A sparrow parked itself on the railing and waited. She focused on it through the window, its brown and gray body and dark feathered face. Winter was waking up all around them but the

sparrows remained. The woman whose name might've been Angela traced Miriam's gaze to the bird.

"It's an Old World sparrow. A true sparrow. Some people confuse them with finches, but sparrows have another bone in their tongue."

It seemed Miriam hadn't even registered what the woman had said. She sat there observing the sparrow, her body still even when the woman whose name might've been Angela crouched down beside her, long, pale brown strands framing her face. Dark eyes and thin lips.

"How do you know?" she asked after several minutes had passed. The woman had almost forgotten what she had just said.

"Oh, I like birds, I guess. Used to be a bit of a bird watcher you could say."

"They are," Miriam began, distracted by the sparrow's pecking, "fascinating." Her mouth surrounded every word, smoothing her tongue over the syllables like golden threads of clover honey.

"I used to take pictures."

Miriam tried to envision this woman clutching a camera between her thin hands, and couldn't.

"Long ago?"

"Not very. I like the sparrows best," Angela said.

"They're a good bird. Reliable bird." Miriam seemed to speak to no one in particular. She looked out the window and, when she'd finally rest her gaze on something or other, would flip to another object. She was preoccupied with another world. Re-constructing the past part-by-part, locking in puzzle pieces. "I remember feeding the birds when I was a child. With my father. He took my brothers and me down to the lake. And one of them came right up to me, real close. You

see animals all the time in the newspaper, in magazines, photos. It's different being so close. Different seeing them up close like that."

"You don't like sparrows?"

"Oh," Miriam said, disoriented. "Oh. I do. I'm just more interested in the rare ones. The fast ones. Hummingbirds. I'd like to see a flamingo up close."

"You should check out the zoo."

"Maybe next summer." The woman – Angela, Miriam called her Angela – thought back to her childhood, the fake sparrows her mother wedged into the green garland over the staircase railing. They woke up to them on Christmas Day, she and her sister, as they flew from the top of the stairs. She gazed at the street as the silver car reared into the driveway, sending gravel flying. "Judith's here," Angela said.

The silver car needed new paint. Angela could remember when she and Judith were in their twenties. Arms reaching through the sunroof. Bursts of strong, hot air. She lost one of her rings doing that, once. It was just a costume piece, a size too big. The wind pulled it right off her finger. They'd reach their arms up, feeling as though they were flying while sitting down, forearms like wings, sleeves flapping. Judith never did trade it in. "Would never get good money for it," she said dismissively. "Might as well run it until she gives."

Miriam gathered herself and pulled up her black socks until they reached mid-calf. She peeked her head into the open closet and shuffled through various pairs of shoes. "Where are my shoes?" She pulled out a patent red sandal and threw it back in. "Where are my shoes?"

"Well calm down, they're around somewhere." Angela got off the couch and crouched down to look. "What pair are you looking for? Your flats are by the door."

"Where are my brown flats?" But Miriam was no longer looking. She stood up straight and stared aimlessly into her other world. "Where are my brown flats with the green trim?"

“They’re by the door. Just by the front door.”

“Oh.” Miriam slipped her feet into the shoes, careful to mind the stack of magazines beside them. Angela got up and yanked a sports coat from the closet and took hold of Miriam’s arm before she ducked out the door. “Don’t forget your coat. It’s cold today.” Angela tossed it loosely over Miriam’s shoulders, and Miriam grabbed the ends with her fingertips. Miriam took one step at a time. Judith rolled down the window and waved, her red nails visible from the porch.

Judith pushed the passenger door open from her seat and Miriam crouched her way down into the beige vinyl. “Morning,” she said.

“Good morning.”

Miriam glanced at the pale-faced woman. She looked familiar, but she couldn’t recall her name. She watched as the green signal light blinked three times and Judith took a left into the road.

“My mouth tastes like metal.”

“You could probably use some water. You don’t drink enough.”

“Whose daughter are you?”

Judith’s eyes left the street. “Your belt’s not done up.”

“I can’t figure this out.”

“You’ve got it all tangled up.” Judith tried to help her while keeping one hand on the wheel, eyes back on the road. Miriam fumbled until it clicked. “Yeah, we’ll get you some water when we get there.”

“You should say ‘yes’. ‘Yes’ is proper.”

“Well then.”

“Where are we going?” Miriam asked as she watched the sun hover over the water. The short, quick waves bobbed and vanished. The geese were out, tiny offspring behind them. It had been a while since she saw the water that blue. For weeks, it had been covered over with a thin sheet of ice that spread all the way to the island. The whole world was frozen over. It had been gray for most of the fall, and it rained down hard. Miriam had said that it looked like forks were jabbing at the water.

“For an early lunch. At this local place that still makes everything from scratch.”

“My mother used to bake bread. And homemade soups. I remember that.”

“You used to make soups,” Judith reminded her.

“I think I did, yes. A couple of times. Pumpkin soup. And potato.”

“Red potato with smoked cheddar. Heavy cream and bits of crisp bacon. Cheese from the place on Elm.”

“From the Elm?”

“*On* Elm. The place on Elm.”

“Course not. We got all of our groceries from Luke’s.”

“Well alright then. I could be wrong.”

Miriam paused for a moment and looked out again. “I would like a bowl of homemade soup.”

“You can have some today.” Miriam noticed the crow’s feet forming at the ends of Judith’s eyes.

“Do you think they have pumpkin? I would like pumpkin.”

“Not sure. Maybe. Might be root vegetable. You like beets.”

“I haven’t had pumpkin in such a long time.”

“Could be pumpkin.”

“I don’t remember the last time I had pumpkin soup. Must have been – must have been years ago.”

A pack of geese flew through the sky, shaping themselves into a V.

“Odd to see them here, now.”

“Spring must be coming,” Judith offered.

“Spring. Already. And under all of this ice. Did you know geese stay with their mate all their lives? Like humans.”

“Something like humans.”

“But did you know that? Last year, your Uncle Bill and I took Carl to see the geese. We were feeding them and watching them swim out. He got too close and the one hissed at him. I said to Carl that the goose didn’t mean anything by it, it was likely just trying to protect the babies, but Carl wouldn’t have any of it. He was so taken aback by that hissing goose. I couldn’t get him to go back there.”

Judith parked the car up against the curb. “We’re here.”

The spot was deserted with the exception of a couple twenty-something girls who were gossiping in the corner over heaping bowls of greens, drinking tea out of vintage mugs. An oversized, outdated map hung on the red-bricked wall. “It’s red lentil.”

“I’m not sure if I’d like that,” she told her as she removed the slung jacket from her shoulders. It seemed out of place.

Angela cleaned up. She scrubbed the dishes; she washed the floors; she vacuumed the carpets; she bleached the teacups; she polished the coffee table until it gleamed. She changed the linens and made the beds, she did four loads of laundry and ironed the dress shirts, she folded clothes for the Salvation Army, and she put down ant traps. She dusted the desks and dressers

and the picture frames that hung on the walls. “Maybe it’s better that you don’t remember,” she thought to herself. A photograph of them at the lake, her and Judith, Mom and Carl. Her father was away. Carl kept falling in the sand. His legs were giving him a hard time. “Just keep on, Carl. Just a few more steps,” Miriam said. Miriam was smiling her crooked smile. Angela had her arms over Judith’s shoulders. “Maybe it’s better that you have forgotten,” she thought to herself. She held her cold hands to her face and ran them over her eyelids, soothing them shut.

“Go take a seat and I’ll order you a sandwich,” Judith told Miriam.

“With cheese on it.”

“With cheese.”

Miriam did not recognize this place, a red velvet blanket on one wall and artwork covering all empty spaces. She liked the view to the outside, though, and took a seat in the corner by it, able to watch any and all passersby. There was a draft. The chairs were uncomfortable and the table unbalanced, tilting as she leaned on it, but no other spot appealed to her as much. Judith appeared in the room and walked over to her, hung both of their coats on the large hanger behind them.

“Where’s our food?”

“They’re making it. The girl behind the counter’s gonna bring it over.”

“Going to bring it over.”

“Going to.”

“Alright then.”

“Do you like it?”

“Like what?” asked Miriam.

“The place.”

“I think so. I like the window.”

Judith waited, sighed. “I know.”

“The girls in the corner looked at them as a tall bespectacled girl came towards Miriam and Judith and dropped off two tall glasses.

“What are these?”

“Smoothies.”

“Oh.”

“Thanks,” Judith said to the girl.

“You should say ‘thank-you’, Judith. That’s –”

“The proper way, yes.”

“What are – what are – *smoothers*? I don’t know if I will like this, Judith. I might not like this.”

“Everybody calls me Judy. Call me Judy. And it’s fruit mixed with yogurt and milk. Maybe a little honey. Just try it.”

“Judith is much nicer than Judy.” Miriam cringed.

“I ordered you strawberry banana.”

“I love strawberries.”

“I know that.”

“What’s yours?” Miriam asked as she brought her lips to the straw of the glass, leaving behind lipstick marks.

“Fig.”

“I think I might like this. What did you say?”

“Fig. Fig and blueberry.”

“Pardon?”

“Fig. F-I-G.”

“Oh. I don’t believe I like figs.”

They drank in silence. Judith stared outside as a squirrel scurried up a nearby Maple.

“How’s Helen?” Judith asked.

“Oh, she’s fine. She’s doing fairly well in school considering. Everyone thought she would fail, you know, because of the *dyslexia*. But I knew she’d prove them wrong. Helen has always been bright. Even before she entered school. She was reciting the alphabet at two and a half. And she learned mathematical equations much sooner than the majority of her classmates. This year she’s excelling in all areas. We might have our first M.D. yet. Or mathematician.”

“That sounds great.”

Judith watched as the girl behind the counter came around the corner with two plates and deposited them on the table. “Enjoy, ladies,” she said easily. Fresh-faced, hair up in a ponytail.

“What is this, Judith? Did you know, I always liked the name Judith. Bill didn’t, though. He felt it was too old-fashioned. I wanted to use it. I suppose I’m guilty of loving Carl too much. I loved him too much, the day we went to see the geese. The day we fed the geese. He loved it. When we first got there, he was so excited to see them. Then the one came up to him and he was so petrified. He thought the goose was going to peck at him. The goose was just protecting her young. Nothing to do with Carl at all. I loved Carl. Some accused me of loving him too much. I loved him too much. Then he fell down, right as he was running away. He fell down.”

“The sandwich is ham and cheese. You said you wanted cheese.”

“That sounds fine. What’s this in the corner of the plate?” Miriam asked as she looked at the alfalfa sprout, carrot and red cabbage medley.

“A salad.”

“There isn’t any lettuce.”

“Not a traditional one, Ma.”

Miriam looked at Judith, confused, and took a bite out of the sandwich, letting the creaminess of the cheese sink into her mouth and the combination of it with the ham overflow her taste with sea salt. She knew immediately that the bread had been baked recently as she dug her teeth into its soft dough.

“You’re mine. You’re – aren’t you?” Miriam said, putting the sandwich down and scratching the back of head as her eyes watered. She felt disarmed. She thought of Helen, long pale brown strands of hair and thin lips. Not especially pretty. Nobody called Helen a beautiful girl, but perhaps it was her sense of duty, her loyalty, her foolish, unquestionable devotion, that made her somewhat remarkable.

Judith pursed her lips and looked down at the table. An ivory, swan-like neck.

“I don’t remember,” Miriam said. “I don’t remember. I don’t, do I? How do you remember? Why do you get to?”

“Finish eating your sandwich. You need to eat.”

Miriam took another bite and thought of the geese. She could still feel Carl in her arms when she pulled him from the sand and cradled him. She felt the warmth of his body escape against hers. She felt her insides tug. Her stomach churned. Her mouth tasted like metal, like iron. Judith and Helen were on the other side, feeding. They were smiling and laughing; they were enjoying themselves. Helen kicked up the sand with her brand new school sneakers, bright pink. Carl fell down. Fell down running away from the hissing goose. She envisioned she had scooped him up. Scooped him up and saved him. Consoled him in her arms. She could still feel Carl in her arms, and still long after it had flown away.

ICED OVER

She knew well enough, in her mind, that there were two types of mothers: those who taught their offspring to cook, and those who did not. Though she recognized her own failings at domesticity, she attempted to rectify these problems in her son. She was not one to separate her wet ingredients from her dry, though she'd heard such a step was important; it was not in her to follow recipes (in fact, more often than not, she conjured them from memory or from a television programme she watched while falling asleep or preparing lunches); she did not measure her spices, opting instead to shake the bottle a couple of times until it seemed about right to her; she usually forgot to whisk her egg whites; pots overflowed with ingredients that slipped over the sides like boat passengers fallen overboard: boiled red potatoes, jewels at the bottom of a lake. The water overflowed, simmered and smoked on the burner's even heat. That's what Ethan saw, red jewels. He enjoyed the markings on the potato skins, would trace them with his little fingers before Carmen plopped them into the copper pot. "Check the time," she said. "Now let's count thirty minutes from that."

She killed the basil growing in the window by overwatering it. She burnt the turkey one Thanksgiving after having spent weeks convincing her family that she could put on a worthwhile spread complete with homemade tapenades, casseroles and crème brûlée. Carmen advocated feasting for no reason in particular. She liked it, the preparation. She washed the spinach gently so it gleamed. She observed as a smile crept across Ethan's face when she plucked the potatoes from a paper bag. She rinsed the roast, cut the carrots, sliced celery. She salted water and stirred soups. Burnt mirepoix and over-seasoned her chicken stock with too much thyme and too many bay leaves. She wanted to remember things. Carmen hoisted her son onto a wooden stool, brushed her hand against his brown corduroy pants. He hovered over a white glass bowl.

“You know what we’re going to do?” she asked. He shook his head. “Well, we’re going to make a cake. You know what to add first?” He shook his head again. She rolled an egg in her palm to heat it, showed him how to crack it as best she could. Its shell came in contact with the dull edge of the bowl, and it chipped in the middle. She pried it open and let the yolk fall into a pink ramekin, whites attached like phantom limbs.

“Break it into a separate bowl, to make sure it’s a good egg. Make sure it’s a good egg before it gets whipped into the other ingredients and ruins the cake.” She beat it, for volume, but overdid it so that the whites took the appearance of dishwasher foam. He was six now. She knew in a number of years he’d be too old to care for this. She’d make his sandwiches and bake cookies and he’d thank her briefly before jetting out the door to catch a concert. There would come a time when this would not matter at all, the two of them cooking together, baking together, until it mattered again. Until he remembered. She’d conjure these moments from memory.

She envisioned her own mother: voluptuous, voluminous, making her way around the kitchen, her slippers rubbing against the carpet. People always seemed confused about the blue carpet in the kitchen. Carmen knew her friends had tile, had ceramic. Her mother loved the carpet. Kept her feet warm, she said, despite the fact that she wore slippers regardless of the weather. Her mother was too preoccupied, had never taught Carmen or her sisters how to cook. She had certainly never bothered with her brother. Carmen didn’t know how to make a simple macaroni salad until she turned twenty-five, and still she cut her celery into irregular sizes, used too much mayonnaise, overcooked the noodles so that they were no longer al dente. But she wanted it, the knowledge. She felt it was important to know what she was doing so she could pass it on, so she could build a relationship with her son. She wanted him to be able to look back and remember their time spent together. Carmen wanted to know how to craft a meal and put on a

spread as if it were as simple as breathing, not, potentially, coming across it by means of dumb luck. She wanted to perform, as her mother had seemed to, with complete ease.

When Carmen was an adolescent, the cool mothers were making vats of Kool-Aid or dissolving frozen cans of pink lemonade, they were revealing rows of sandwich cookies from packages and setting them on coffee tables. Her mother stuck to old recipes, did not believe in modern day conveniences.

“They’re for the lazy,” she said. “*Absolument pas.*” There was fresh grapefruit juice, hot tea, coffee. Carmen knew her mother was in the kitchen, and often, but she had no recollection of what occurred there. Cooking, baking and cleaning, she knew, but she had never sorted out the details.

“Let me in, let me help,” she’d ask.

“You’re pestering your mother. Pester your siblings,” his father replied in his thick, Québécoise accent. She could recognize the smells and identify the source. But what went on in that oven, in the mixing bowls, what all of those powders and flours and spices did was foreign to her. She felt displaced, uncomfortable; the kitchen was her mother’s room and her family had no place in it. Her room was the yard: a sandbox in the shape of a bear, the swing-set her father built them when she was younger.

Her mother had been a seamstress. Carmen liked to observe as strangers would come over and stand on a step stool in the living room as her mother pinned their pants and dresses, prepped the items for tailoring. She knew her mother collected historical fiction by the volumes alphabetized in the corner, dust film collecting on the top of each work. She attended church every Sunday and followed the Bible when it suited her. She read how-to instructions, manuals, was diligent about keeping her copper polished. Yes, Carmen’s mother took good care of things,

took good care of her family, but Carmen remembered so little of her mother – as a woman beyond all of this – that she felt her heart pang and burn in its chamber.

“Show me how to cook,” Carmen pleaded.

“*Parle Français,*” her mother replied. Speak in French.

“Don’t bother your mother so much, Carmen, she’s had a long day.” Her father liked to shout from across the room whenever it pleased him. “Go bother your siblings.” Recipes and accepts and learning how to transcribe.

Carmen had once considered a big family, wanted it desperately, but it never materialized. She envisioned several children of both sexes, taking them to the park for a pic-nic or teaching them how to ride a bike. She imagined telling stories to them before they went to sleep and concocting them as she went along. There was Ethan. If she could do right by him, perhaps that would be enough. There would never be a need for anything more. She inched the roast into the crock-pot, put the setting on high.

She did not wish for Ethan to grow up to be like her. She was far too sentimental for her own good; nostalgic, her family had informed her while she was growing up. She was hopelessly sensitive and neurotic, and, in her mind, had overly large feet for her short stature. Her son would be different; he would learn to do things correctly the first time, he would know things when he went out into the world. She hoped he would turn out like either of her parents, disciplined and born into this life knowing more than they’d ever learn, or perhaps like her husband.

“You want to toss that flour in over there? In that purple cup,” she said to Ethan. He nodded. “We’re making a lemon cake. Your father’s favourite.”

“Is it his birthday?” He stared straight at her, wide-eyed. He looked so very focused.

“No, sweetie.”

“Whose birthday is it?”

“Oh, nobody’s. We’re just making a cake. Sometimes people just make cakes.”

“With candles?”

She remembered the extra set she bought that she had hidden away in the cutlery drawer.

Just in case. “We can do that.”

When she was nine, her mother had made her this enormous cake. She had drawn princesses out of icing, castles. The dessert was so elaborate the various guests – mainly friends of her mother – had made her pose for a dozen pictures with it.

“Look at that,” one of the women had exclaimed. After the cake was cut, passed around on paper plates and devoured, slice by slice, she hid in the lower shelf of a cabinet, slung her arms around her calves and rested her head on her knees.

“Why you out here for?” her father had asked when he found her. “You just disappeared, *ma chère*.”

She shrugged.

“Well, come back.” It seemed so simple, re-enter the world. She stared at her father’s long pepper beard and tiny brown eyes. He was much older than other fathers. There had been years between her father and her mother. They had met growing up in their rural hometown when he went back to work for her parents. There was nothing miraculous or particularly fascinating about it. They had just met, the way people do, and had agreed to marry each other as if deciding on what tea to have with breakfast, how much grapefruit juice to drink.

“No, it’s okay. I just want to sit here for a while.”

Hours later, when all the guests had left, her father pulled her out of the cabinet, as if plucking one of those potatoes from a bag.

“This is what they call zest,” Carmen informed Ethan. “Lemon zest, the skins. There’s more flavour in the skin than there is in this whole lemon.”

“Zest.”

“You want to add it in?”

He took the bits and tossed them in the bowl as well as he could. Tiny bits of lemon stuck to his soft fingers and Carmen pulled at them with her fingertips, rubbing them off.

“I think your dad will like this one. He likes lemon cakes.”

She had never done anything special for Ethan’s birthday. Each year looked similar to the last, complete with a basic cake and a few presents. No birthday parties, no family visits, no slumber parties. She didn’t invite any of the neighbourhood kids to come over, although there were plenty. She made a meal, like this one, and she baked a cake and let Ethan ice it. She had discussed with her husband future potential birthday parties for the boy. They had discussed all sorts of things regarding their son. He attended a local private school and they fed him organic food. They made sure his face was always washed and that, of course, he rarely ate cake.

Carmen had never baked a perfect cake.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said, looking down at her son and his wild eyes. Her mother’s eyes. “If there’s any icing left over after we ice the cake, you can have it.”

He smiled, ears perking up. Carmen could smell the roast cooking in the crock-pot, layers melting. “Oh dammit.” She hadn’t added enough liquid and the stewing meat was beginning to burn. She added stock to the pot and returned the lid.

“You want to taste the batter?” she exclaimed, spinning back around to face the boy. He nodded his head and they shared a spoonful. She imagined other mothers were unlike her, that they bought cakes in plastic containers from the supermarket, perfect muffins inside tins, cookies in bags. Who would spend a morning with their child, baking a cake, for no reason? A cake, she

figured, that wouldn't even taste good. Even though her mother certainly baked, it was never a shared occasion. The passion for it had not been immediate. There were mothers who taught their children how to cook, how to bake, and those who did not. Although Carmen did not do most things properly, or all that she would like to do, she made the attempt.

When the cake cooled enough, she creamed the butter and sugar together. It didn't smooth out, clumping instead into tiny bits.

"Homemade icing, Ethan. None of that store-bought container stuff. The real deal." She mixed; he added food colouring. It was still clumpy and she whisked faster trying to get it to a creamy consistency. She blended; he observed. He tasted it. Yellow icing. She gave him a spoon and he dunked it in, plopped it on top of the cake. She took a knife and spread it over, clumps like craters across the surface.

"This is how you ice a cake. You make sure that it's even. A little everywhere, so every inch of the cake is covered in yellow. You see?" he nodded. He'd be a great cook, she thought.

When she finished, he snuck a finger in, tasted the icing again. She remembered the elaborate cake with all of the princesses. She had stuck her finger across it the night before. The icing had tasted faintly of blackberries. Ethan glanced up at her, looking almost ashamed, and for a moment she forgot herself. She stuck her finger in.

"Good icing."

He nodded, smiled. He looked at her and smiled, leaned to put his gooey hands around her neck. Her face flushed and she reddened at the moist touch of his hands.

THE SWEETNESS BARRIER

There are rows and rows of corn in Angus County. The Darlington's have grown corn for decades, since my father was a kid growing up here. He's told my brother and me that every summer. My parents have walked over to the stand each spring looking to pick up a couple dozen ears, pay for them under the shade of the aged wood. We knew the Darlington kids, grew up with them like we did with the corn. It was the August before eighth grade when I sat on the picnic table at the back of our house and finally bit into an ear of Peaches and Cream, coated thinly in melted butter and sprinkled with sea salt, for the first time. I had previously crinkled my nose at the sight of it, at the mere mention of it. My mother gave me that ear, slippery and salted, and said, "Here, try this. You might like it." My teeth crunched against each kernel and they oozed a sweetness I had never found in a vegetable before. Suddenly I couldn't get enough. My parents boiled cobs, barbequed them in the unbearable late summer heat, and we savoured each bite alongside small mounds of rosemary potatoes and slices of roasted chicken, seasoned skin still on. I can remember running from the dry plants lashing against us, our bathing suits still damp from jumping into the cold lake all morning. The unfortunate teens stuck detasseling hated us, and stood there stewing, scowling. I had never thought of corn as anything else, as anything better than a ride, a chuckle, a gathering spot. Angus County corn, Darlington corn, and the simmering summer that seemed to stretch on for months. When my brother, Alex, and I returned to school that fall, the sweet corn left my lips swollen and I wanted another kernel, another ear, butter soaking into the crevices.

Angela abandoned me when the girls came to envy her, envied her because the boys realized she was beautiful and therefore important. She matured sooner than the rest of us and everything she wore the last year of grade school had become skin-tight, her noodle legs replaced by long, lean limbs and formed muscles, her skin tanned from being out all season. I'd follow her

around at recess waiting for her to look over at me, to speak to me, and she'd turn away, preferring to eat her lunch with the popular girls we'd just made fun of last spring.

"You're a dork, that's why," Alex said in a huff of frustration when I sat there on the living room sofa, stunned over being neglected. "Angela Darlington's hot, she doesn't want anything to do with you."

"Alex, stop acting like your father," my mother yelled from the other room as she sewed lost buttons back onto blouses.

"I didn't say anything," he shouted back.

"I can hear you from over here. Now zip it."

My father stormed around the kitchen one evening before dinner, muttering Wellington this and selling that. Wellington had scrutinized the Darlington field, tested it for their patented seed, and the results came up positive.

"Got that damn farm wrapped around their fingers, Diane," my father says to my mother, as if I weren't even there. I was setting silverware and my mother was chopping carrots, tossing them into a large plastic bowl over a bed of wilted baby greens. "Soon they're going to get their hands on the whole world." He stood there over the countertop, scratching at his head. It was like my father to feel so impassioned about something.

"Quit being so dramatic," my mother replied to his final statement. "I just don't understand how that seed got in there. They were just re-using seeds and stuff, weren't they? Just regular seeds."

Wellington was trying to sell them seeds, seeds with the promise and lure of perfect corn, even better than any of the farm's previous yields.

“Well it’ll be the end of that. That’s for damn sure. Wellington’s making sure the corn will never be the same again. It’ll be goddamn Wellington corn.”

I had never heard of Wellington, felt ignorant listening to my father’s conversation. I only knew of the Darlington farm. I knew corn that grew there and tasted close to candy, I knew homemade popcorn tossed lightly in butter or olive oil and coated in cumin and chili powder. I had known Angela Darlington, whom I had swum with and laughed with and run with, whom I’d had sleepovers with and whom I’d spent entire summers with. We played spy games together out in that field behind her house with her brother, Patrick, and in the wooded area behind my house, just before the construction company came in and tore down the trees. We caught butterflies out there, admired them, and set them free. We looked for toads and found homes for lost worms that came out when it rained. There had been no mention of lost corn.

“What’s happening to the farm?” I asked, grabbing a glass of water and taking a seat at the table.

“Darlingtons are going to be forced to grow those damn terminator seeds. Guess change happens everywhere.” My father put his lips to a glass of white wine and took the chair across from me.

“Oh,” I said. I looked at him quizzically. “What’s a terminator seed?”

“One that terminates,” he responded easily. “Gotta buy ‘em every year, they don’t grow back.”

“I heard they were growing some great corn this year. It’s what Angela Darlington said.” I didn’t tell him that I’d been the last to know, that Angela Darlington had informed a small group of her friends who had then spread it to everyone else. Somehow the knowledge mattered. Whatever Angela Darlington said became priority news. I tried to remember the way she was when we were seven. I tried to picture her in my mind but the image wouldn’t sit still.

“Don’t know why she’d say that because it isn’t rue. Can’t eat that corn, it’s no good.”

My father picked up the newspaper resting on the chair beside him.

“Don’t dirty the table with the newspaper. The last thing I need is ink smudged all over,” my mother warned. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Can’t eat it?” I said.

“No, it’s for corporations. Isn’t the same as real corn, Janie. They’re probably going to make some kind of crazy chemical or what have you out of it or something equally preposterous.”

“Your father, the great conspirator.” My mother set the salad bowl on the table.

“Oh,” I said.

I imagined rows and rows of corn growing there behind the Darlington house. I could see the golden kernels dissolving in my mind. Golden kernels that would be ground up. I was trying to imagine it, how the rows of corn would somehow transform into tiny grains. I wondered what had been wrong with the Darlington corn to begin with, I wondered how the seeds flew from one field to another and impregnated the land. Everyone loved that corn. People came from the next county over to buy it because of the rumours. As soon as the Darlings set up the stand, they had a steady business that lasted well through to the end of summer.

“I guess it’ll mean more money for them, more money for when the kids go to school. I guess I can’t entirely blame ‘em for that, but the damn practice isn’t sustainable.”

“How can one person’s corn belong to someone else?” I asked.

“‘Cause, Janie. Everywhere people get greedy they’ll find a way to own whatever it is they think they can keep.”

We ate in silence that night, an autumn meal and no corn to speak of.

It was raining the day I ran into Patrick Darlington for the first time in several years. He had changed; his carrot-coloured hair had somehow faded into a pale brown, and he had filled out. We had both been riding our bicycles in the rain, him on one side of the road and me on the other. I waited for him to brush me off as Angela had found it so easy to do, but waved instead and shouted “Hello” from across the street as it poured. I sped up to catch him, hair and clothing soaking wet. Later I’d walk through the garage door of my house, into the laundry room, and my mother would yell at me for tracking water through the house.

“Hey!” I yelled. “Hey! Patrick, how are you?”

He turned to look behind and stopped, circled his bike around to face me.

“Hey, hey, good, fine. Yourself?”

“Pretty good.”

“How’s school coming?”

“Well you know, I fucking can’t stand high school.” I never swore and the word came out awkwardly.

“Yeah, yeah, I did too. Just try to survive it. Everything gets better after it, I’m telling you.”

I felt the water wash against my cheeks.

“Last I heard you were going to the university.”

“You heard right.”

“Are you going to take over the farm?” I tugged my wet bangs away from my eyes.

He laughed a little at first. “Oh no. I don’t think any of us are going to. It’s why we kind of let Wellington take over. We’re selling our corn for big bucks, we’re going to be just fine. That’s why my parents are saying anyway. I know not everyone agrees, but fuck it. It’s none of their damn business.

“Yeah, my dad doesn’t like the terminator seeds.”

“Your dad,” he said. “Remember when you used to come over and leave with all of those bites on your arms? You and Angela were nuts. Your dad would yell at my parents for letting you guys get so rowdy.”

“Yeah.”

“Courtney’s sick, you know. She’s got leukemia so we need the money.”

“I remembered Courtney and her raven hair. She had such a different look from the rest of her siblings. She’d try to participate in the conversations between Angela and me, until Ange would eventually grow annoyed and kick her out of our space.

“Oh my god, really?” I wondered how it happened, how someone seemed to get sick overnight. It probably hadn’t really happened that way.

“Well, yeah, she’s been sick for a while, Janie. So there’s that.” He seemed almost indifferent to it but his eyes betrayed him.

“I don’t know anything about seeds,” I said. The rain began to let up.

“You plant them and shit grows. Simple really.”

“I mean the terminator seeds,” I said defiantly.

“GMOs,” he said. “They’re going to grow corn that isn’t real corn, but that doesn’t matter. There’s still real corn out there.”

“GMO?”

“Genetically modified. Scientists have changed the formulation of corn, Janie.” I thought about the ears of corn my brother and me indulged in on that backyard picnic table, gobbling it up until it was gone, licking our lips of salt and melted butter in the summer heat, our bodies warm and our skin peeling.

“Oh.”

“Listen, it’s not the end of the world. I’m going to school and everything’s being looked after. It’ll be fine. But listen, I’ve got to get going, told Mom I’d – ”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry about Court,” I said.

“Well thanks. I’ll tell Angela I saw you.”

“It’s okay.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I’ll see you.”

The following day I walked over to the Darlington house, something I hadn’t done for years. There had never been a reason to ever since Angela had decided she would stop talking to me. I was going to see Courtney, I decided, going to see what the corn would look like now. It was springtime and the buds were beginning to form on the tree branches, slowly but surely. They were there just the same. I knocked once and, when no one answered for a long while, I began to trudge back down the gravel.

“Oh hey, hello Jane, nice to see you.” Mrs. Darlington clad in a long green sundress, hair pulled back. She looked younger than her age might suggest.

“Nice to see you, too,” I said.

“Can I help you with something? Here to see Angela – ”

“No, I’m here to see Courtney.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh. Well that’s okay.”

“I mean, she’s not here today, Jane. She’s gone back to the hospital.”

“Oh.”

“Angela’s home, though. You can talk to her about it. I’m sure she could use the company, get outside and stretch her legs.”

I was about to tell her no, that it was all right, that I should probably head over to the grocery store and grab the loaf of bread my mother asked for, but she was already calling Angela from the bottom of the stairs. I watched as the girl herself came running down, shiny blonde locks skimming her shoulders.

“Hey,” she said awkwardly. Mrs. Darlington turned her back toward the kitchen and walked away.

“Hi,” I said. “Um, I heard about Courtney.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’m sorry about it. I guess that’s really all. I came to see her, but I guess she’s not around.”

“No, she’s not.”

Of all the things Angela Darlington bothered to mention, her sister hadn’t been one of them.

“I guess I’m gonna go,” I said.

“Patrick said he saw you yesterday,” she answered. “I’m sorry about things, Janie.”

“Oh.”

“It’s too bad the way things have been.”

“I know,” I said.

“We should maybe go for a walk or something when midterms are over.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks for coming by to see Courtney,” she said. “Everything still good on your end?”

“Yeah, yeah, things are fine.”

“Good. Well I’ll see you, Janie.”

I stared at the corn in the fields. It looked no different, but it was, it was different, and things had changed. Perhaps there was no remedy for the corn. Perhaps there would be no corn in Angus County anymore the way there had been before. But there had been other change, real change. I imagined Angela Darlington and I from the summers before, eating corn and letting the butter run down our faces, and watched the whole scene melt.

STRANGE APPETITES

Deep within a freezer skulls were discovered cracked in two with hands and feet stuffed inside. Long after the murders, a chain-linked fence was erected around the grass, so that animals could be kept again. This is the soil where a chipped tooth was found. Skinned cows hung from the ceiling of the slaughterhouse the afternoon the cops entered. Pink, marbled mammals were revealed, hooked by metal rods, causing blood droplets to spiral toward the straw-lined, muddied floor. Toward the back, by the dilapidated wooden door, there was a pile of bones in assorted sizes stacked like firewood. There were massive bones and tiny bones that might have been larger once, before time devoured them. There was no meat left on any of them. Stripped raw, slivers of bone gleamed in the crack of sunlight that squirmed through the barn wall. Oscar had appeared from one of the pig stalls and waved. It still stinks here: manure, decay and old blood.

When the police come to interview him, Davis can't remember how he came to live at the farmhouse with his brother. He lived in Manitoba once but came back to help his brother out once their parents passed. It would've been too much for Oscar, all of those animals.

"Nope, don't know nothin' 'bout no murder," Davis says to the police. Standing on the slaughterhouse steps, he's taller than both of them. "No murder's happened here and if it did I'd a'known 'bout it." He married his sweetheart right out of high school, down at the local church. She carried daisies from her parent's garden and the bridesmaids wore pale pink gowns that stretched all the way down to their ankles, courtesy of Sandra's mother.

Oscar never married, but he liked to check out women. Stared cashier Clare Kansas down at the grocery store every time he came in looking for apples or oranges. Truth be told, though, he was more interested in acquiring product that would not rot. He liked to see it build up. He built that stack of brown bones and they collected there. It's how Oscar kept track of his animals.

“You best be honest with us, Davis. Sure you don’t know nothing?” One of the cops is eyeing him. Stray red hairs stick out from beneath Davis’ ball cap.

“I’m no liar. You should know that. Now, git. We’ve got work to do here.”

“Hey, hey, take it easy peasy, we’re leavin’,” the first one replies. The two mosey toward the car in the driveway. Davis doesn’t own a vehicle; he sold it for more cows once.

The car reverses down the driveway and Davis walks back toward the farmhouse with his eyes stuck to the road. He’s still staring at the driveway when Sandra appears from her bedroom and tucks a hair behind her ear. She looks straight at her husband’s back. He’s wearing his old faded overalls and a simple white t-shirt, his ball cap on. She’s still in her pink nightgown. There is something wonderfully comforting about his back, she thinks. There is something wonderful about things that don’t change.

“What’d they want, Davis?” It seemed as if she had been standing there a while before the words came out. She hadn’t meant to stare.

“Don’t worry yourself about it.”

She whisked her bangs away from her eyes and crossed her arms.

“Well?”

“Don’t worry yourself.”

“Hmm,” she replied, relenting.

“Don’t worry yourself. Just Oscar.” He turned to look at her now.

“Oh,” she said, meeting his eyes half hidden beneath the caps’ rim. She is looking too fail, he thinks.

“It’s got nothin’ to do with us, Sandy.”

“I’m not worried.” She shivers despite herself.

Helen Ashfield was last seen on Vancouver's downtown East side smoking up with Maggie Denver. Denver isn't Maggie's real last name, but it's the one she's gone by for the last six months. It seems to suit her. Some of her friends like it and think it sounds cool. They think it sounds sort of punk or rock'n'roll. Other people mock it by pretending to confuse it with Beaver. She doesn't care about the other people because they aren't often the ones paying for beer. Helen doesn't generally smoke up and she doesn't give a damn about her last name, never really gave it much thought. What was the difference and what did it matter?

The day Helen goes missing her mouth tastes like metal and grass mixed together. She wants a drop of draught and a cheeseburger. One of her front teeth is filled in silver from drinking too much cola during her teens (that's the reason her dentist gave her at the time, anyway). She's fond of it in a way, the filling, likes how it gleams slightly. Helen and Maggie have known each other for five years now, ever since they met that slow Sunday and got a bite to eat at the diner. They drank black coffee until they grew nauseous and Maggie showed Helen her tattoo, one of a cat clawing at a couch.

The day she goes missing Maggie says, "You know, I could go for a real meal. I want a roast beef dinner."

"I could go for some of that."

"We should do it. Maybe next week?"

"Soon as rent's paid. It's gonna be tight this month." Helen lights a cigarette.

Oscar rolls up in his beat up blue car and smiles a toothy grin at Helen. He looks sweet enough.

"Helen, wasn't she Greek?" he asks as she gets up and walks toward the vehicle.

“Beats me.” Helen seems to float into the passenger seat. There is nothing awkward about her. She moves as if she were made of something more pliable than bones. He continues to smile at her, and she opens her mouth as if beginning to smile back. She retracts it but shines him her filling.

“Cavity in the front, eh?”

“Yup.” She’s disinterested and turns her head to roll down the window to exhale.

“Must’ve hated getting that one.” He turns away from her and puts both hands on the wheel of the car, presses his foot hard against the gas. He’s staring ahead at the road now while she takes another drag, picks at her cuticles.

“At first, maybe.”

“Not anymore?”

She finds his questions irritating and sighs loudly despite herself.

“I like it,” she says. “It’s different. Let’s just drive.”

“You seem kind of different,” he says in a way that sounds flirtatious, but isn’t quite. Sex sits on the top of his tongue like rainwater but it doesn’t drain.

“Sure,” she says. “Why not.”

He thinks she looks a little like Clare Kansas, though Clare doesn’t move so easily. Clare’s a little timid and has no cavities that he’s aware of. She has no cavities that he’s seen.

“Mind if we drive a little ways?”

“Not as long as you drop me back off here. I’m not hitching any rides back from any boondocks.”

When Helen gets out of the car, she sees the farm, the gravel and the slaughterhouse. It’s cold out here, she thinks, and she’s starving.

He gets her to sit down on the cement by carrying a .22 calibre revolver. She moves so easily it's a breeze. When he thinks he's got her tied tightly to the pig stall, small dirtied wrists wrapped several times around, dead pigs lying side by side on the bench behind her, he bends down to her level and pries her jaw open with a wrench. He pulls on the silver tooth hard trying to extract it, and then gives up. He knocks it out.

Her pants come off easily. They were a couple of sizes up for her, likely. Her lavender camisole is ripped open and a blade is drawn down the skin of her stomach as Oscar opens her up like a present. He runs the blade again, now across her abdomen, and pulls apart each section of skin as if it were plastic wrap. Her flesh is re-shaped and re-sized; her bones go on top of the sack, in the mud, in the pen. Nobody knows if Helen was Greek, much less that she had a body at all.

Davis is standing at the doorway of the farmhouse when he notices that Oscar is painted red.

“Whatcha doing out here? Thought we was going to grind them pigs tomorrow.”

Oscar approaches Davis from the shadows and walks out into the sunlight just enough that it shines on half his face, exposing his wrinkles and long, sullied hair. He squeezes the tooth between his fingers, his lucky charm.

“No, Davis, it's too much to do it at all at once. Better to do it in stages. You don't want to do it all at once, you'll compromise the quality.”

“Oh. Well, guess you're right.” He removes his hat, glides a greasy palm over his hair and puts the cap back on. “Anyway, Sandy's got lunch on. Ya better clean up before you come in, she'll howl at ch'a for bringing pig's blood in. Just washed the floor and all.”

“Probably damn peanut butter sandwiches knowing that woman,” Oscar says. “Leave it to you to have settled on the first damn woman you saw. Not like it surprises me.”

Davis tucks his hair behind his ear, fixes his ball cap.

“Shouldn’t surprise me at all. You’re a damn dog, you two are suited to each other. Both dogs.”

Davis stares blankly at the back wall and blinks once.

“Lunch is on. So you know.” Davis turns around slowly and Oscar watches the man’s back until he disappears behind the slaughterhouse door. The tooth is thrown into the glass jar already holding a couple stones, toothpicks and a transparent retainer.

There is a case that the chief thinks about a lot these days. It is a shame about Anonymous, he thinks, while sitting propped up in his office chair. It is a shame. Oscar can’t be tried for her death because there is no information. Her disappearance is a completely irresolvable Rubik’s cube. There’s no name to attach her to. They haven’t figured out how she went missing or how she got to Oscar’s grounds. She went missing and she has, had, a name. There’s nothing to try him for in regard to her death because there are no real events. A real woman died and there are no real events to speak of, because there are only bits of the puzzle’s exterior. There is no evidence that leads to a frame. Anonymous might have had some kind of family. Perhaps she had children. The chief is well aware that people become invisible, that their lives can turn to ashes before they’ve died. He knows people become invisible, and so he knows how deaths can become invisible, too. If there isn’t anything to fill the x’s with, the equation equals nothing. The equation equals anonymous.

Long after the cops have left that day, Sandy mumbles to her husband from the kitchen.

“Lunch’s on, Davis.”

He trudges slowly to the little room at the end of the house.

“Lemme guess, peanut butter,” he says. It’s the same day they were questioned by the police.

“Mm-hmm.”

“He doesn’t know if he ever thought Sandy was beautiful. He was interested in her glass eye. “What’s it like to have a glass eye?”

She turned away from her cutting board, where she was slicing off sandwich crusts, to glance at him. In all their years together he had never asked about it. It was something they had each always accepted and never questioned. “What makes you ask, Davis?”

She was beginning to age, to really age. She had looked like a child for most of her life. No one ever managed to determine her age accurately. Now she looked haggard. He knew she didn’t sleep well these days, woke up gasping in the middle of the night. She still seemed the same to him, though. In all their years together, she had never really changed.

“Nothin’. Just wonderin’, that’s it.”

She took a seat at the kitchen table, mug in hand, and took a long sip of coffee while looking him in the face. “It’s fine,” she started. “Really. Nothing else to say about it other than it’s fine. I don’t know. I see the full world out of one eye and none of it in the other. Even if I don’t see it all the way, in the way that you might, I see enough.” She clasped the green mug and took another long gulp.

“Just wonderin’.”

He turned around as if beginning to leave.

“Grab your lunch before you go,” she said. “It’s on that plate up there.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“Those cops are going to come back for us thinking we know something.”

“We don’t know nothin’ and I’ve been tellin’ ‘em we know nothin’. It’s the damn truth.”

He held his plate with one hand and ate with the other, standing up. Sandy looked deep inside her mug.

“Do you think he – ”

“He didn’t do it, Sandy. Couldn’t have done it. When did any women come ‘round here that you know of? Never saw any women ‘round here, did you?”

She shook her head, still looking in the mug.

“But I saw a bra once in the guest room that didn’t belong to me. I don’t know where it came from.”

“Mighta been from years ago, you don’t know. Before we got here. Maybe it just took that long to turn up. Why didn’t ch’a ever say somethin’ to me about it?”

“I didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know where it came from. I thought maybe teenagers had broken into the place once while we were out. Not sure what they’d be looking to steal.”

“I never saw any women ‘round here. Do you think – ”

“Can’t ever be everywhere at once, Davis. We can’t see everything at once.”

“But we never saw no women ‘round here. Oscar was just tendin’ to the pigs and cows out there. That’s all he did. He just tended to the pigs and cows.”

Sandy finally looked up from her mug. She was still wearing her pink gown despite the fact that the clock struck 1PM.

“Well, when we find out more, we’ll know how to act. We can’t do anything until we know more, and then once we know I guess we can’t ever go back, either way. Either way we can’t go back.”

He nodded his head.

“Thanks for the sandwich,” he said.

Maggie Denver wears her hair held up with a stocking on the downtown East side. She’s sitting down on a curb smoking a cigarette. She doesn’t remember exactly how she came to live here. She remembers part of it. She was a week into classes, on scholarship, and she ran off with her boyfriend. They wanted to really see and explore the world. They hitchhiked throughout North America and subsisted on single sized packages of corn chips and cashews. Her boyfriend dashed the hell out on her as soon as she got pregnant in Saskatchewan, and a couple of widows who lived together in a house too big for the two of them agreed to take Maggie in until she had the baby. The shelter was just too full. She left the infant behind with the women; she thinks they called the baby William, or Andrew. Maggie was still Maggie Everett back then.

Soon a beat up blue car will come rolling and pick her up, and she’ll stroll in sporting a pair of acid wash denim jeans, kicking up street dirt in her silver stilettos. He’ll smile. Her DNA is found all over Oscar’s revolver. Nobody calls her Maggie Beaver. Nobody calls Maggie anything at all but Case #58967320. Long after she died, when the cops seized Oscar at the slaughterhouse, there was a rumour going around that her remains were fed to the pigs; that the remains were fed to people. There are bones stacked like firewood, and Maggie Denver’s are probably in there somewhere amongst the others. The police never find Helen’s, but they do find a glass jar at the back of the slaughterhouse.

“I know Oscar’s guilty as all hell,” says Gregory as he storms around the office glaring at the chief. “The whole thing’s fucked.”

“Wait a goddamn minute. Stop thinking like that. Fuck, Greg, we’ll get him. There was evidence found all over those grounds. We’ll get him for good.”

“His brother must know something.”

“Ya think? They all lived together, the wife and the brother and Oscar. Wouldn’t be surprised if they all knew what was going on,” the chief continued.

“You think the woman knows?”

“Sandy? Probably. She’s not a half-wit.”

“Old Davis does for sure.”

“Even if he does, probably won’t speak. That man’s impenetrable if only because he’s so damn reserved. Can’t stand being bothered. That’s what my dad says,” Greg continues. He’s stopped shouting.

“Well if he won’t speak on his own account we’ll get the story out somehow. The court will get it out.”

Greg grabbed a bottle of water and took a glug of it. “Chief, how many women do you think...?”

“Raped, gutted, sliced, hung, maybe even eaten. That man’s done it and lots of it, and I don’t want to think about it more than I already got to.”

“Rough estimate.”

“Maybe thirty, forty. I don’t know. They found all kinds of bones and dirt and blood all matted together at the scene.”

“He’ll die before he gets convicted.”

“Maybe. Maybe someone will do him good and shoot him on his or her own accord, Greg. Sit down, you’re making me nervous walking around like that. Sit down.”

Clare Kansas brings a bottle of water whenever she goes to work. She likes to keep hydrated; the water keeps her skin looking clearer. People used to make fun of her name and ask her where her red slippers were. Her managers will say she is superbly perceptive; she has caught several sneaky customers trying to get by with stolen goods: back ribs, T-bones, Rib-eye steaks. They've tried everything from pints of blueberries to a bunch of plantains and she has caught all of them. She's a good employee like that. She knows Oscar because he comes in several times a month buying produce and non-perishables. Nobody seems to particularly care for him, but they can't pinpoint why. Sometimes he slips around the corner of an aisle and slides his things right up Clare's black belt so they're touching the scanner. He eyes her until she squirms.

"What grade are you in this year?" he asks her.

She is taken aback initially. She's not accustomed to him speaking to her at all. Mostly, he just looks. "Twelve."

"Doing well in school I'm sure."

"Trying to. It's hard." He's gone completely gray and his chin sticks out far more than that of anybody else she's ever seen.

"What's the big plan after all this?"

"None right now. Just thinking about it."

He begins to pick up his things from the other side of the belt and loads them into a plastic bag. She can feel his breath on her.

"There's gotta be something that interests you. Anything at all."

"Well, I'm a ballet dancer. I want to dance."

"You should try for it. Bet you'd be real good at it. You're probably a wonderful dancer. I bet you're extremely graceful." He watches her glossy mouth as she takes a sip of the water.

"I guess," she says, embarrassed, her face flushing bright pink.

“Well thanks,” he says, and then glances down at her nametag even though he already knows her name. “Clare.”

“You’re welcome.”

He begins to walk and then retracts, turns his head around. His arms are carrying a few plastic bags of groceries.

“Say, your parents from town, Clare?”

“No. They live in Albany.”

“You sent away, Clare?”

She shivered. The grocery store was always cold and they weren’t allowed sweaters.

“Nothing like that.”

“Wouldn’t lie to me, would you Clare? You know I just like to make sure everyone’s got everything sorted out.”

“No, I’m not lying.”

“Well good,” he said as he walked through the glass doors.

One day Oscar goes into the slaughterhouse while chomping down hard on a soft apple. He throws the core out into the dirt and watches the body hanging on the hook like a cow. She reminds him of Helen, he thinks, especially because her body is so lithe and seems to float. When he shoots her, right in the middle of her forehead, her hair flies back and the blonde strands explode like a firework. “Nobody will ever know you like I do,” he says to her.

A figure wearing pink gown stands in the doorway of the slaughterhouse, blocking the light from entering. She feels the pungent smell of the slaughterhouse press against her body as she slowly turns away and moves back toward the house.

THE FLOWER EATERS

He slowed down when he came upon her. At first she was only a small speck of red in the middle of the road. She looked like a tiny flower from far away, but he was surprised to find she was a real, whole person. The winter sun lit up her plaid coat and she sat in the middle of the road atop a suitcase, toes clicking against the concrete. Red Mary Janes mimicking the sound of galloping horse hooves.

He rolled down the window of the blue Corolla. "Going somewhere?"

She hesitated for so long he thought she hadn't heard him, until she said softly, "I think so."

The girl looked almost like a china doll up close. Her skin looked even paler next to her red coat.

"Well, where?" Elijah didn't know how old she was. He decided she couldn't be any older than eighteen but it was impossible to tell for certain. She appeared young. Not too young, just young. Her nose was relatively small. Was she even out of high school? He tried to envision her in a history class with forty other students clad in jeans and t-shirts. Or kilts and dress pants. But then something about her made him think she wasn't in school, that she didn't care to attend classes at all. He felt goose bumps grow on his arms when he opened the car door.

"I'm not sure yet. I haven't decided. Know of any good places to rest your feet?"

Elijah had never met anyone before who sat on a suitcase in the middle of the road. She began to click her toes against the concrete again and looked up at him inquisitively, seeking an answer. Like a child, he thought. He ran his fingers through his short hair and shrugged.

"Where are you going?" She asked.

"Home."

"So where's that?"

It was a house with a large sunroom and a wide, open porch. Hyacinths grew there in the springtime. “How do you like your eggs in the morning?”

The girl thought of the eggs her father made her, hard yolks and browned edges, specks of pepper that exploded from the pan’s heat. “Scrambled,” she said, but she wasn’t entirely sure she was right. Sunny side up, over easy, scrambled, poached. She got lost in the translation from sight to sound.

“Well, where is your place?” she asked.

“You’ll have to see it when we get there.”

“I’m sure I’d recognize the city. I aced geography. I’ve been all over.”

“You wouldn’t know this place.”

“Why’s that?” she wondered. “And I still don’t know your name.”

“I live in a town with one stop light and one postal code for everyone. It’s off the map. And Elijah, by the way.”

“Then I’d like to go there, then.”

The drive back to Charlemagne was slow and monotonous.

“What’s your name?” he had asked her, awkward and fumbling.

“It looks like it’s about to snow,” she had replied, her voice muffled by the wind. “Snow.”

Her name was Snow. He felt it was appropriate, at least for a girl he felt could disappear from the world all together. She was so small she could vanish, hide in a box and get carried off accidentally. Elijah smiled and looked ahead, his cap casting a soft shadow over his eyes.

She had been all over; she had been to Vienna and Paris before her sixth birthday. Her parents left for Japan when she was in the seventh grade, pulling her out of the North American school system and taking her with them. She might benefit from the experience, they figured, and perhaps she did. She hated the entire year and made no friends, and the next year, when they left

for Portugal, she convinced her mother to have her homeschooled and there she learned three languages and two year's worth of chemistry. He had lived in Charlemagne, or just outside of it, his entire life. His parents met at the high school here. His sisters went through the Charlemagne school system, as he had, and married people from Charlemagne. They had children in Charlemagne, who entered into the Charlemagne school system, and took jobs in Charlemagne. He was married, once, to a woman from Charlemagne. Her name was Charlene. It was his only source of amusement for the four years they were married, and when Charlene – whom everyone called Char – wanted a child, wanted four children, and wanted to name them Charles, Charlotte, Chase, and Chandra – he felt perhaps he had made a mistake. He had never planned for this to happen. Char still lived in Charlemagne, had re-married to someone else from Charlemagne that the both of them had gone to school with, and three years after the divorce, was already on Chase.

Elijah had never left Charlemagne for any great length of time. He had heard about Africa's beautiful landscapes and the sweetness of her oranges. The Māori of New Zealand and Egyptian pyramids and volcanoes and the changing of the guards, but he had never felt so passionately, as Snow seemingly did, about all of it. About seeing the world in its proper place, as she phrased it, as opposed to in photographs or magazines. Experiencing a place was about tasting its salts and learning its cultures, about sitting down with its people and listening to its stories. It involved drinking its water or its wine or its tequila, as her parents had told her, and taking part in cultivating your own history. He had never felt anything like that, but Snow's face was so white he thought she looked as though she were wearing a hockey mask. She wasn't anaemic, she said. It was just in her genes. He thought he might like to taste real Italian wine and consume fresh pasta dressed in homemade tomato sauce. He thought he'd like to take a bite of a large, thin-crust pizza, straight from the wood stove, let the mozzarella stretch for hours. Snow told him they cracked eggs on top of the pizza there. But he liked Charlemagne, liked his sisters,

liked his parents, and liked the life he lived, and so he put the thought on his mental shelf and forgot about it as quickly as it had come to mind. He felt acid build up in his throat and his mouth grow sour, and he rolled down the window with his left hand as he held the steering wheel with his right just long enough to spit outside the car.

“See that pond over there?” he said, pointing to a body of water at the side of the road. She appeared disinterested and pulled at her coat buttons instead.

“Yes,” she answered, but she didn’t look up.

“That pond here is called Crow’s Lake. I don’t know why, but it’s always been that way. Since I remember it.” She nodded. “Although there aren’t any crows that live around here.”

“How come a pond is called a lake?”

“I don’t know. It just is.”

“And why did you never seek out the answer?”

He looked ahead at the long road that seemed to stretch into oblivion. He knew he’d be home in twenty minutes, they’d be home, and he would relax on the couch with the newspaper and a cup of lukewarm coffee.

“Never interested me, I guess.” He didn’t think it mattered much at all. “Why were you in the middle of the road, anyway?”

“Hey!” she exclaimed. It had been as excited as he had seen her since they met. “Your leaves are still green here.”

“Yes. Just haven’t changed yet I guess.”

She looked over at him for the first time since they met. “I was just resting on my suitcase. I just meant to rest for a minute, and then I got tired so I shut my eyes. Then you stopped.”

“Why didn’t you rest off to the side of the road?”

“No one would have stopped for me there, goose.”

“Oh.”

“Why did you stop anyway?”

“I would’ve run you over with my car.”

“Psh. Could’ve just beeped at me. I would’ve moved.”

“How was I suppose to know that?” he asked her, indignant. She was beginning to annoy him.

“I’m not a head case, you know. I got cold.”

“Why were you there?”

“Traveling.”

“Your parents aware of this?”

“I don’t think I will mind it in Charlemagne. I think I will be okay there. What’s your place look like?”

“I told you. You’ll see when we get there.”

“How much longer is that? This road goes forever.”

“In a way. We’re not far off. Ten minutes, maybe.”

“Do you have trees there with green leaves?” She grinned.

“No. We didn’t plant trees. Just white hyacinths to match the door. Char didn’t like the idea of trees. She was worried the roots would get too big and uproot the house.”

“Not if they’re planted far enough way. What a silly thing to think.”

“She thought it was reasonable enough. I guess some kids in her neighbourhood had a pool when she – well, we, I guess – were growing up. Nobody had a pool back then. They still don’t. So everyone loved swimming there. One day she got up and changed into her bathing suit. She walked over to the house with her brothers to go swimming with the kids who lived there,

but they couldn't. The kids told them the pool had been destroyed by the trees in their backyard, that it had to be repaired. Char's been anxious about trees ever since."

"That's the most ridiculous story I've ever heard. She probably just didn't want helicopters in her front lawn."

Children called them that. The fruit of the maple. He thought about the flattened wings, the way the keys would dizzy around. Bee's early nectar.

"Trees are destructive."

"I think the damn pool was probably more destructive than those trees ever would've been. What happened to them anyway?"

"Cut down, probably. They built a new pool."

"A pond is a lake is a pool around here. Who's Char anyway? Your wife?"

"Didn't I already tell you? You weren't listening."

"What do you mean? I've been listening this entire time." She paused momentarily. "I take it she thought you were dangerous?" Snow was playing with her buttons again.

"I feared for my life, more like it."

"Elijah and Char. I suppose it goes together."

"She re-married. Char and Michael, now."

"Bites fierce, probably."

"Sorry?"

"Probably bites. Her being re-married."

"I'm here, aren't I?" he asked.

"Barely."

"How old are you anyway?"

"It doesn't matter."

“Sure it does.”

“Old enough to know enough.”

“That means nothing to me.”

“Just keep driving. These shoes are killing me.”

“Why not wear sneakers? Or boots?”

“I like these. I feel a little like Dorothy in them.”

“But you don’t want to go home,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Nobody said anything about that.”

The little blue car huffed up the gravel driveway until the white door was in clear sight. The salmon paint on the wood panels was splintering off. The white door stood proudly between two tiny windows, the shutters worn. Snow saw the mounds of dirt around the front and knew there’d be hyacinths there come April.

“I like it.”

“You do?” he sounded almost surprised. “I’m surprised.”

“... You didn’t think I would?”

“Wasn’t sure.”

She opened the passenger side door and lifted one leg out, trying to get a better glimpse of the place. She felt she could come to love the small town. She envisioned walking down that gravel driveway and into town every Saturday. She’d pick up a coffee and a newspaper that would ink her fingertips black. Her prints would smudge the paper. Elijah would make them eggs the way each of them preferred and they’d look out at the garden, waiting for hyacinths to happen. He would ask her to talk about her past and she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t ask him to talk about his past and he would. He’d volunteer almost anything without prodding. He would point out favourite spots of his, take her to his favourite restaurants and cafés, give her a guided tour of

his high school, introduce her to his old coaches, show her his yearbooks. He'd play his old albums and get her to memorize the lyrics so she could sing the songs to him when he wanted to hear her voice but not necessarily what she was thinking, because Elijah grew up in a small town and did not want to feel like this had impeded him in any way. He was successful here, he would remind her. He was successful in this town and people liked him in this town, and he had family in this town that loved him and it was a town in which everything mattered. All right, she'd say. It matters, she'd say.

"I'm not good at remembering," she said as he gulped back a soda pop, purchased at half price.

The house was cozy enough. It was evident to Snow by now that Elijah had probably never altered the décor since he and Char lived here together. The living room walls were painted cherry blossom pink; the only bathroom was an unfamiliar shade of green. Plain Elijah lived inside an artist's palette of colours, mostly pastels. "It's a work of art," she said. "She must have been something of a Monet."

"It's not so bad, I guess."

"I feel like I could grow old in here. Feels like the outside crept in and made its home here."

"We hired painters when we first moved in. Char wanted a beautiful house."

"It's a beautiful house."

Elijah served Snow eggs for dinner. They were scrambled, but so greasy they left tiny puddles on the plate. They smelled off and tasted similarly, as if they had been sitting in the fridge, rotting for days. Snow ate them to stave off hunger but felt so nauseous after dinner she slept on the brown sofa for the remainder of the evening. She found relief for her fever and aching head against the cool leather.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t cook very often. First time in probably six weeks.”

“What do you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do you eat?”

“I go out a lot. There’s all kinds of things you can buy at the grocery store. I don’t like cooking.”

The next morning she took a walk to clear her head, bundled herself up in the plaid coat and put on her red shoes that contrasted starkly with her black stockings.

From afar it almost looked like an odd shaped stone. She did up her coat as she moved closer towards it, short miniscule gray hairs blowing in the winter air. It was a rabbit, and tiny bits of gravel stuck to its face where part of its skin had been punctured. Blood as bright as a poppy was gelled to its ear. When she told Elijah, he seemed disinterested. He kept his nose in the book he woke up early to read. “A rabbit’s dead on the curb.”

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it. I’ll clean it up later.”

“It’s a rabbit, Elijah.”

“I know that, Snow.” He caught himself just after he’d said it, and hoped she hadn’t heard. He hadn’t called her anything yet. She hadn’t told him her name.

“I’m not Snow.”

“I don’t even know what your real name is.”

“You never asked.”

“Well?”

“No point now.”

“Just tell me.” He closed the book and looked straight into her icy blue eyes.

“Chloé.”

“Not Snow.”

“No. Is your name even Elijah?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a rabbit, Elijah.”

“I told you already. I’ll take care of it. I want to keep reading.”

“What’s the point.”

“I want to see how it ends.”

“You already know.”

“How do you know? Maybe I don’t.” He sounded like a child to her.

“It’s a classic. Everybody knows how it ends!”

“Well maybe I want to go back and read it again.”

She left Elijah to his book and went into the bathroom, turned the knobs on the large Jacuzzi tub. She hadn’t even realized she was still wearing her coat, and unbuttoned it, stripped down to her white underwear. She waited for the tub to fill halfway and lowered her body into it. To her right was a vase of flowers, but when she reached for them, she felt silk. “Nothing’s alive in here,” she mumbled. She thought of the cheeses her mother liked to serve after a meal. She tried to taste them on her tongue, but she couldn’t remember them. The green walls seemed so odd and out of place to her. They weren’t moss green, or forest green, or bright green, or even neon green; they were an eerie colour, an odd colour to paint the bathroom, as if by mistake. She figured Char wanted to make it look natural. The flowers, the green walls, the rose-shaped toothbrush holder. Maybe there is no home, she thought, for some people. She poked the tops of her feet through the warm water and looked straight ahead at them, spreading her toes until they looked like petals.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

THE LAST BITE

“Our home food dispenser broke and I had to wait 20 seconds at the check out counter, such inefficiency.” –Jane Jetson

“There is nothing very machinelike about the human eater, and to think of food as simply fuel is to completely misconstrue it.” –Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food*

“[T]here is communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk.” –
M. F. K. Fisher, *Gastronomical Me*

While trying to finish this project, André Narbonne asked me: is our basic need to eat the scourge of humanity or the thing that saves us, that makes us worth knowing? Depending on whom you speak to, it is both. Although French gastronmist Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin proposes that taste “invites us by pleasure to repair the losses which result from the use of life” (18), the inherent complexities in taste render his conviction slightly one-sided and perhaps underdeveloped, especially considering the issues afflicting present day food culture. Taste may indeed repair the “losses” Brillat-Savarin speaks of. After a funeral, we feast. In North America, we meet the end of a hard day’s work by sitting down to a table of food and socializing with our friends and families. Happy hour, a time of recovery and recuperation, necessitates a dirty martini garnished with a trio of olives. And many of us are emotional eaters, who attempt to fill a void or ease the pain by devouring a bag of Frito-Lays or a column of Chips Ahoy.

While taste may aid in our recovery, eating is not a socially neutral act. Eating is simultaneously as satisfying as it is violent, as healing as it is destructive. A North American

obsession with thinness has led to the development of dozens of diets, diet books, serums, bars, shakes, and other miscellaneous items marketed to weight loss and maintenance, a way of “eating” our ancestors would hardly recognize or comprehend. Eating disorders, which are in no way a new phenomenon, continue to permeate, leaving the body sick and ravished. We have also separated good eating from success, as we opt for fast food drive-thrus or microwaveable meals so we can “get it over with” – eating, that is – before having to attend the next board meeting or to write the next test, ignoring the relationship between healthy eating and brain power. Eating is as much the thing that saves us, that rescues us, that makes us worth knowing, as it is the scourge of humanity that leads to dramatic consequences socially, environmentally, economically, artistically, politically, and personally.

Food features prominently in literature. Consider the number of food references in the Christian Bible, the sheer volume of cookbooks and food magazines found *en masse* on bookstore shelves, and the utter ubiquity of food blogs covering everything from conventional baked goods to vegan soul food to whole foods and natural cooking. Shauna James Ahern, Heidi Swanson and Clothilde Dusoulier have all become best-selling authors who began their careers as bloggers. Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway exerts tremendous energy in preparing a dinner party in *Mrs. Dalloway*; Tita’s cooking reflects her longing for Pedro in Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate*. Who can forget the excitement Anne Shirley is overcome with when she tastes ice cream for the first time, or the moment she is scolded for serving Diana Barry “raspberry cordial”? Oliver Twist is reprimanded when asking for more in Charles Dickens’ work of the same name, while Fred Wah deploys food to highlight his hybrid heritage in *Diamond Grill*. James Joyce nearly starves his characters in *Dubliners*, while people gather around the table frequently in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. In fact, Brad Kessler notes how the table “acts as a locus, not only for food, but for stories” (150) in the latter, engaging once again the connection

between taste and experience. *The Sweetness Barrier* contributes to this collection of what is, essentially, food writing, by navigating the dimensions of human relationships through consumption and illustrating the role of responsibility in eating as producers, consumers and writers of food.

At its inception, this project appeared deceptively simple: writer short stories on food. I operated wholeheartedly under the belief that eating real food is essential and should be preserved and protected. Yet eating is complicated because we are complicated; what we choose to purchase or consume speaks volumes about who we are. Anthropologist Amy Shulman argues, “virtually nothing else we do in our daily lives speaks so loudly of our sense of art, aesthetics, creativity, symbolism, community, social propriety, and celebration as do our food habits and eating habits” (Roberts 7). But food has also been complicated by fairly recent scientific developments that have resulted in a sense of confusion about food. Phoebe Newton indicates this in “Fields Ahead” as she

charges up and down grocery aisles in search of signs. Organic, but is it sustainable, or industrial? High-fructose corn syrup, glucose-fructose, aspartame, seven names for corn. Jarred or canned, fresh or frozen, pure or from concentrate, bad lemon crops raise the price, pomegranates – but how to eat one?, all-natural or conventional peanut butter, Phoebe is bewildered and a little perturbed. She wonders: free-range, conventional, omega-3, or organic? Grass-fed, grain-fed, no animal by-products, conventional, AAA beef. She is confused in all of this pink, red, brown, all of these strange cuts (9)

It is becoming increasingly difficult to know what to purchase from the aisles of a supermarket. Primarily, aside from any financial reasons, deciding *what* to buy is an issue in itself. Most frozen products are prepared and packaged overseas, including frozen vegetables, and then shipped to their destination. You will find that products made in Thailand, for instance, or Taiwan, will be labelled as “packaged for” or “processed for” to avoid stating the product was not in fact made in Canada (or the United States, for that matter). You are lucky to find the

nutritional information listed on a package of ground beef, nevermind what farm it originated from or what the animal was fed. Many so-called “healthy” cereals contain high-fructose corn syrup, some form of artificial sweetener, or grains so refined they are better known as sugar. Many snack foods contain monosodium glutamate (MSG) or unpronounceable chemicals. Choosing organically grown produce used to mean making an alternative choice and voting for the sustainable, economical and hopefully local, yet with the rise in industrial organic farming, the title “organic” bears a closer resemblance to conventional farming than to anything “alternative”. While we may debate over the merits of eating organic over fertilized, genetically modified and pesticide-ridden foods, we must also consider our food sources and become far more aware of the mistreatment of slaughtered animals. One of the problems is that we are left to choose between two options – organic or conventional – and neither necessarily takes into account the ethical treatment of animals. No wonder Phoebe Newton is such a confused consumer.

While literature may use food for various reasons, food serves at least one main purpose, even if not explicitly stated: survival. “The destiny of nations depends on the manner in which they are fed,” Brillat-Savarin theorizes (3). Part of surviving in the 21st century means deciding not only on the manner in which you wish to eat – standing up over the counter, sitting down with friends, driving back to work – but deciding what to eat. And increasingly, sociological studies are suggesting that what you eat may share a direct correlation with your ability to ward off illness and disease.

Early in the twentieth century, an intrepid group of doctors and medical workers stationed overseas observed that wherever in the world people gave up their traditional way of eating and adopted the Western diet, there soon followed a predictable series of Western diseases, including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer. (Pollan, *Defense*, 11)

What's more, the new North American "destiny" has been in the making since the 1970s, when the Food and Drug Administration threw out the 1938 Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act that required the word "imitation" to appear on any food that contained more than two ingredients not traditionally included in a product's composition (Pollan, *Defense*, 34). This has contributed to a widespread hysteria that embraces nutrients rather than food, and the adoption of "nutritionism" as an ideology by the FDA (Pollan, *Defense*, 36). And in this quest to fill ourselves with nutrients rather than to feed ourselves with food, to defer death and the effects of aging by stuffing ourselves with pills and serums rather than enjoying our meals for their own sake, how much life are we sacrificing in our attempts to merely "survive"? While getting an adequate amount of vitamins and minerals is key, compartmentalizing food in these terms suggests we view eating and, subsequently, food, as another form of work instead of as a source of pleasure.

The second issue, apart from deciding what to buy, is discerning the food's origins. A product "made in Canada" can contain up to 49% of non-Canadian product. Some items, like olives, are easy to spot, for Kalamatas are not grown in Ontario, while other items, like relish or soup, may be much more difficult to trace. Food production seems to be moving increasingly away from the individual and toward corporations. The diminished amount of food preparation allows us to forget that we are actually eating. In "Fields Ahead", Ella discusses this by claiming how "some people manage to get away from the animals: boneless wings and chicken nuggets, meat bought pre-cooked and pre-packaged for those finicky about coming into contact with raw porkk...Ella doesn't buy meat anymore, but many omnivores don't really, either" (5). Carmen also addresses the pervasiveness of pre-packaged foods in "Iced Over", as she bakes with her son to teach him the importance of mealtime and of making items from scratch.

Our food sources have obviously undergone many changes. In the 1960s, Japanese chemists "broke the sweetness barrier" (Pollan, *Omnivore*, 89) with high-fructose corn syrup 55.

Prior to HFCS 55, artificial sweeteners simply could not mimic the taste of real sugar. HFCS 55 transformed sweeteners, of course; it “enabled the food industry to increase portion sizes without sacrificing profits” (King), allowing – and encouraging – consumers to eat more for far cheaper and inevitably contributing to the obesity epidemic. As Pollan has stated, you would never think to top your spaghetti with sugar, but HFCS 55 is often added to tomato sauces so corporations can make their products more cheaply while still charging full price. Our diets are becoming increasingly sweeter as HFCS 55 is added to our food without us being aware of it, so that we are essentially ingesting far more sugar than our ancestors did and ballooning as a consequence of those changes. I opted to title this collection *The Sweetness Barrier* because I feel this groundbreaking discovery changed the face of food completely and can pinpoint, at least in part, when food and food culture began to alter radically. Many of the issues encountered in this collection arise due to the evolution of food culture. This collection stands in opposition to the confusion; it presents a new model, one which openly advocates sustainability, local eating, conscientious shopping, and playing an active role in one’s personal health and the wellbeing of the environment.

Although I certainly feel corporations, or the producers, need to take responsibility (perhaps especially larger producers), consumers need to take responsibility as well. “Fields Ahead” suggests that a little girl named Annie Adler dies because she was “lured through the wire gates” (13) of her school and therefore neglected by a supervising authority figure. More metaphorically, Annie, a symbol of the new model and possible change within the community – a return to sustainable, local agriculture and more humane, ethical practices – is murdered to illustrate the communal irresponsibility that seems to be arising within food culture. While the community we are presented in this story tends to stand for the new model – Jim and Harry are hyper-invested in their farm, Phoebe buys her meat directly from the Hawkings farm, Ella goes

vegetarian, Liz Adler purchases her groceries from the local market – we immediately encounter the conflict between the average shopper and the alternative consumer when Mike approaches Harry in the fields at the beginning of the piece. Mike’s claim that “everybody’s buying from the supermarket” (3) expresses his lack of concern for responsible practices. Its placement in the text – immediately after we discover where Annie Adler’s body was abandoned – signals that his attitude, likely shared by other mainstream consumers, has contributed to the death of a proposed ideal. Though responsible consumers are present in “Fields Ahead”, the work demonstrates the ongoing conflicts between technology and nature, and the utter passivity present within social consciousness.

“False Fruit” does not deal with food production issues to the extent of the previous story. Having said that, there are still several references to the fields where strawberries used to grow; when we meet Julia, the “fields had been parcelled off, sold in lots and the plants pulled out” (14). The story’s strawberries figure as a metaphor for the strained relationship between Jim Rutherford and his family. Unlike Jim Hawkings of “Fields Ahead”, who takes care of his farm and wants the best for his family, Jim Rutherford acts completely irresponsible in “False Fruit”. While the latter is generous, buying rounds of beer for his friends in Toronto, and seems to love his family, he denies his flaws, engages in an extramarital affair and neglects his children. Like the strawberries, Jim also dies.

Our first encounter with Julia occurs as she treks up to her parent’s house to help her mother prepare food from scratch for the following day’s luncheon. Unlike Jim Rutherford, Rose is responsible. The shingles are new on the house (14), which connotes upkeep, and she gives a list of commandments for Julia to live by in the same manner Liz Adler gives Annie hers. “Use bay leaves in broth. Don’t overcook your beans. Wear a scarf when it gets cold out, and do up your jacket all the way. Drink milk at dinner, wash your hands, floss your teeth. Buy good shoes”

(15) Rose states. Like Rose, Liz tells Annie to “watch for witches on broomsticks, monsters under the bed, do not talk to strangers, do not walk across the street without holding an adult’s hand, listen to grown-ups, clean up after yourself, eat your fruit, do up your jacket, hold on to your mittens” (9). These are women who act responsibly and try to teach their children to do the same. Unfortunately, society acts irresponsibly, leading to the death of Liz’s daughter and dysfunction in Julia’s life. Unlike “Fields Ahead”, where food is discussed but rarely consumed, Rose spends the entirety of “False Fruit” drinking – she greets Julia with a capful of rye and switches to wine soon after – and preparing food – chickens, lasagne, potatoes, carrots, bread. Julia never seems to eat or drink. She mostly pours the drinks and does not consume them herself. We are told that her “ribs are showing” (14), Rose informs her she is “getting too thin...way too thin” and Owen, Julia’s husband, has told her she is not eating enough (18). Although the only food Julia seems to crave is pickled vegetables and she feels “nauseated at the sight of oven-roasted chickens, want[s] nothing to do with sautéed mushrooms or tomato sauce made with vine-ripened tomatoes” (18), eventually she tries to “beat the sickness” (23) and take responsibility for her life. Though there has been a death, it is one that has re-united these women, who are now able to engage in conversation while putting together a meal. This contrasts with the death of Annie Adler, which tears a community apart.

“Fisher, Seal and Fossilize” advocates for responsibility as well. Immediately, we are informed of Caleb O’Grady’s position on the seal hunt. Though the government “make[s] money off it” and “won’t ban it” (24), Caleb “likes this province” (24). Cass also believes that while Ireland is the Old Country, he “isn’t so sure Canada is the New One. Skinning seals alive and leaving the beaters on the ice, their warm blood left to cool in the freezing Atlantic waters, seemed barbaric to him, especially given his eleven-year-old sensibilities” (24). Cass’s mother supports the new model by managing to “somehow...get them all together for dinner every night

regardless of how little discussion went on at the table. She wanted them to eat together” (25). Cass’s father is a fisherman, yet he seems to stand for responsible fishing (or is at least demonstrates awareness). There are issues with the fishing industry; however, we must acknowledge that this is way of life for many people, especially in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. Lily O’Grady is clearly aware of how precious the livelihood of her family is. “You never know what can happen,” she tells Cass, “Your father could be dead tomorrow. Cod might be gone tomorrow” (25). When Cass’s father takes him to the docks, the smell overwhelms him: “The smell of fish and salt. Cured, smoked, poached, baked, fried, grilled, greased, buttered, battered, tossed, oiled, seasoned. He could smell fish and salt and everywhere smelled of fish and salt” (26). The weight of the fishing industry and the importance of proper decision-making is further indicated when Caleb O’Grady asks Cass, “What should we do with it?”, referring to the fish (27), but also suggesting that we have a choice in how we treat animals. This is a question which occurs several times throughout the story and adopts a different form in every instance.

Though Caleb dies and Lily moves her family to Ontario, and, it seems, becomes somewhat indifferent to her previous way of life, the aforementioned question – what should we do with it? – continues throughout the story. One of the boys in Emilia’s section of the story asks, “What do you think we should do with it?” in regards to a captured bee, while Emilia’s mother asks her, “Well, Em, what are you going to do about it?” further down the same page when Emilia complains about how the boys were swatting at bees. Emilia’s first thought is to “let go of it” (33), referring to the bee. When Cass remembers what his father said to him toward the end of the work, he states how

he had never felt so alive before, and he felt instantly why his father loved fishing and the water. The way people loved whatever it was they loved. How they got to know the things they came to love. The fish slipped in his soft hand, sprung back into the water. ‘You need a firm grip, Cass. Firm grip, next time,’ his father warned him (34)

While Emilia advocates letting things go freely, she eventually has to take responsibility for the body she has come across. While Cass is encouraged to make decisions and hold on to them firmly, his inability to cling to anything, to decide on anything, coupled with his self-inflicted alienation lead to what we are to suspect is his inevitable death.

The following two stories, “The Dabblers” and “Iced Over”, both highlight familial responsibility. Miriam and her daughters have had to cope with the loss of their son and brother, respectively, yet Miriam does not have to in the same sense as she has lost her memory to Alzheimers Disease. Her daughters are doubly disadvantaged, for while they have to deal with their brother’s implied earth, they must also accept and work through their mother’s medical condition. As their mother regresses, they are left to cope with two great losses. They are seemingly able to surmount any difficulties facing them by relying on old memories; Angela glances at old photographs and reminisces, and Judith returns to the past by recalling the dishes her mother made when they were younger.

Carmen takes responsibility for her son by introducing him to real food made from scratch early on in his life. Although she was denied the experience in her childhood, as she was not permitted in the kitchen and did not get to really know either one of her parents, she tries to redeem this for her son; “although Carmen did not do most things properly, she tried. She made the attempt. She wanted Ethan to remember” (52). While we are not informed as to where Carmen purchases her groceries, she is at the very least encouraging her son to cook homemade meals. She makes an attempt to form a real relationship with her son, unlike the one she shared with her parents. By enjoying the cake icing together they are making memories Carmen hopes Ethan will remember and cherish in the future.

“The Sweetness Barrier”, the title story, highlights the responsibility of the producer. Janie’s family, in addition to the community, buy corn locally – people come from the next town

over to purchase “Darlington corn”. Janie’s father also figures as an advocate for local, sustainable agriculture, as he discusses Wellington dismissively. The community of people present in this story are clearly educated individuals. Though Wellington threatens to take over the Darlington farm and the Darlingtons seem fairly accepting of this, Janie’s father suggests that this is not a positive change; individuals should not have to choose between their health and medical care and the quality of their food. Wellington may parade under false pretenses and claim they are invested in the environment. However, it is clear that they are not by past mistakes (ie. Agent Orange) and by current problems (terminator seeds). *The Sweetness Barrier* as a collection calls for a far more balanced and honest approach to agriculture in a way Wellington does not engage. Corporations which purposefully undermine farmers and render them bankrupt and immobile are not working for the best interests of the people and should certainly not stand in charge of that people’s food source. Wellington needs to take greater responsibility for their actions. It is particularly troublesome when genetically modified corn is permitted to literally take root all over North America with insufficient research having been conducted. With so many questions regarding the future of food and the effects of genetically modified organisms on human consumption, it seems impermissible to allow for the continued planting of terminator seeds.

“Strange Appetites” witnesses an inversion of the food chain as Oscar treats women like animals. Unlike Annie Adler, whose death is contrasted with the death of cattle in order to highlight a collective indifference or ignorance to the beef industry, the women who die at Oscar’s hands are slaughtered inhumanely to illustrate how not all people are treated equally and how death and its subsequent response is altered by economic status or social position. Items or articles identify women in “Strange Appetites”; immediately we are informed “this is the soil

where a chipped tooth was found” and later that Oscar has a jar he throws Helen’s tooth into which is “already holding a couple stones, toothpicks and a transparent retainer” (67).

This collection ends with “The Flower Eaters”, a story which suggests a crumbling community as neither Snow/Chloe or Elijah can communicate with the other. We are left unsure of Elijah’s motives for picking up Snow, although Elijah’s dodgy character and the jump from Snow’s question, “So where’s home?” to “It was a house with a large sunroom and a wide, open porch. Hyacinths grew there in the springtime. ‘How do you like your eggs in the morning?’ he asks” suggests the situation is somewhat uncouth. Told in the third person, it is largely wedged in Elijah’s perspective and it remains entirely possible that while he believes Snow willingly joins him, he persuades her to accompany him. The disconnection in their conversations shows how the idyllic world (Snow) and the real world (Elijah) cannot meld.

Snow is very much the fairytale character. Her red shoes are reminiscent of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* who strays from home and journeys to another land. Elijah remarks how she looks “almost like a china doll up close” and he admonishes how he does not know how old she is. She is “not too young. Just young” (74). She spots a rabbit as if she were *Alice in Wonderland*, but the rabbit is dead and she cannot return through the rabbit hole. The food Elijah makes Snow is awful; the eggs are so greasy they leave puddles on the plate and they “smell off and taste similarly” (81). Snow remembers the cheeses her mother served, but she cannot remember their taste because she is so removed from a positive environment. While Snow inhabits a sort of fantasy world with her appearance and actions, Elijah refuses to grow up and take responsibility for his life. He imagines venturing off to foreign places, lives in the same house he and his ex-wife purchased together, re-reads his favourite books and keeps to the same geographical area. Although the house appears as if the exterior has been brought inside, Snow exclaims how “nothing’s alive in here” (83) – nothing is progressing, evolving or changing even remotely. The

story ends with Snow fairly resigned to life there, as she wonders if perhaps “there is no home...for some people” (83), and by that extension, community or social interaction surrounded by food and drink.

In an interview with *On the Page* magazine, Michael Pollan affirms, “the family dinner is rapidly disappearing. It’s more gone than people realize” (Peterson). While many may shrug their shoulders and claim that the extinction of the family dinner means little to their own lives, how will we, if we side with Pollan, socialize our children? Teach them manners? At a time when people are becoming increasingly atomized and isolated from each other, where individuals have replaced mealtime discussion with texting (if such a “family meal” even takes physical place), we are already living the life of the Jetsons without – despite its own problems – the Beaver Cleaver family dynamic. The dinner table may now be a relatively equal space in terms of meal preparation, but food is no longer an equalizer. Community matters, as Samuel de Champlain insinuated with the Order of Good Cheer in 1606/1607, because celebrating together has, theoretically, greater healing potential than conventional medicine. The cure to our “antinomian relationship with food” (Peterson), at least according to Pollan, mandates a more European perspective on mealtime or a return to pre-1970s perceptions of food.

In analyzing the relationship between food and community, taste must also be considered. As Brillat-Savarin proclaims in *The Physiology of Taste*: “tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are” (3). Eating relates very closely to experience; we need only look as far as the Christian Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Biting into the forbidden fruit results in their exile from Eden. While experience does not have to denote such negativity, it seems embracing food remains a social taboo in the Western world. While people can clearly savour food and eat for a variety of reasons, “like sex, the need to eat links us to animals, and historically a great deal of Protestant energy has gone into helping us keep all such animal appetites under strict control”

(Pollan, *Defense*, 55). Although the French believe eating good food, even rich and allegedly indulgent food, makes us healthier, the West has yet to subscribe to this ideology. If Brillat-Savarin was convinced that “the destiny of nations depends on the manner in which they are fed” (3), then clearly the future of the Western world is shaped by the food we consume and what we choose to devour. This applies equally at the microcosmic level, where our own victories and successes are linked to taste – the instrument, according to Brillat-Savarin, through which we experience all things.

This collection is composed primarily of realist, character-driven fiction. This project is especially timely considering the contemporary debates pertaining to the food industry. Although food and its multitudinous metaphors have been articulated ad nauseum through literature, my work deals specifically with responsibility. These pieces are grim and purposefully so; I make no apologies for the way in which these stories confront and work through death and tragedy. Death is a part of life, and food – plants, animals – die, too. I’m of the opinion that a writer should not dictate what its readers should do or believe, but instead should highlight pertinent details and issues. Some may walk away from the information I have provided unfazed, while others may attempt to play a more active role in their eating and food habits. Grow a garden, plant a tree, buy locally, purchase sustainable food: these are options available to us. It does not necessarily mean we must always choose the “right” choice, for such a choice does not exist. The way food is being manufactured, produced and considered calls for an artistic response, and my responsibility as a writer has meant delivering *The Sweetness Barrier* to answer it.

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