

## M u d L u s c i o u s I s s u e O n e

[ words by Joseph Goosey, Janet Thorning, Jeff McCrory, Jack Martin, Earl J. Wilcox, Bryan Fox, Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, Adam Engel, Christopher Woods, Corey Mesler, & Jonathan Montpetit ]

### A Hot Night by Joseph Goosey

I remember a time last February when I was really doing my very damndest to cheat on my girlfriend. I mean, really trying. You could say that it mattered to me. But I just couldn't pull it off. Not because of the soul, no Jiminy Cricket business here. The air conditioner was broken and even though it was February I was drunk as a brick in a wood village and after all we were in South Florida. In addition, I had plopped my rag-tag thing called body onto my twin bed wearing a sweater and a knit hat and she chose to wear her leg warmers. We couldn't even gain enough friction to get things going due to all the liquid salt in between us, probably about an inch worth. I don't know about her but I didn't sleep 5 minutes because of the unreasonable amount of Fahrenheit degrees present in the room. When the sun came our way through cheap plastic blinds you can imagine it was all this amplified times two. We got out of the twin sheets and didn't speak of any of the night. It was as if we had slept the past seven and a half hours. Then we went to a garage sale where neither of us bought a damn thing.

### Lost Shoes by Joseph Goosey

A woman came up to me today: I've lost my shoes! She said. Can you find them for me?!? No. I told her. How am I supposed to find your shoes? JUST FIND THEM! Clearly this one was not to be denied. (Her husband does some sort of offensive construction work around town and they drive around in an electric golf cart.) I walked into a dark room and stood there for 25 seconds thinking about the woman's tit job and how it was a novelty at best and that led me to thinking about her Harvard educated plastic surgeon and why he couldn't produce much more of a masterpiece for the public eye to consume. When I finally remembered I was supposed to walk out of the closet I walked out of the closet. There she was, tit job and all standing there in white tennis shoes. I FOUND THEM! She told me. Good. I said. She walked back to her car. She was off to drink tea or play tennis poorly or purchase gift wrap or whatever it is folks like that do.

### As The Saying Goes by Joseph Goosey

Shit or get off the pot. But sometimes you don't have to take a shit. Other times you really just desire to stay locked in the bathroom for a while whether or not you've got to take a shit. Has anyone ever knocked on the bathroom door while you're taking a shit and said "HEY WE NEED YOU TO COME OUT HERE AND PULL THE WEEDS"? Of course not. That would be considered rude within our contemporary societal structure. Well, tonight I received a rejection letter from a poetry editor. No news there. Especially considering I drink white wine then red wine then do the writing then drink more white wine then send out the work and in the morning I haven't the slightest as to where it has been sent. But what's curious is that this is the 6th rejection letter I have received within only about a year of submitting work that tells me; "We decline publishing this work, However we will tell you that we love your sense of spirit and urgency." Or something to that effect. Is spirit and urgency part of a form letter? I feel as though it is not because each of these editors uses a synonym and their sentences are a bit different. Why my spirit and urgency? If you like my spirit, canonize me. If you like my urgency, please reject me much more quickly.

### Love Song by Janet Thorning

Mommy has been dead for twenty four hours. Her favorite song is playing on the radio-how much is that doggy in the window. She used to sing it every morning-gray sky or blue, while she was making breakfast. Daddy hated it- hated it so much he walked around the house with his fingers jammed in his ears until she was finished. The funny thing is, when he died, she stopped singing it.

Four Swallows by Jeff McCrory

I don't want the mashed potatoes.

Yeah okay.

I don't want the mashed potatoes.

I heard you. Try this. It's sweet.

Her caretaker held a spoonful of applesauce under her nose. He touched her lips with the spoon. A daub of the applesauce hung from her upper lip. He expected her to lick it off, but she only looked at him with her astounded, blue eyes. Her face was immobile. The applesauce dripped onto her chin.

Open. C'mon, open up.

She parted her lips a little. He pushed the spoon past her teeth and dumped the applesauce on her tongue.

It was cold and raw. She let it settle to the bottom of her mouth like thick spit.

Swallow.

I can't.

Yes, you can.

My throat is swollen shut.

You can swallow. You just did. Here try some of these.

He lanced a pair of green beans with a fork and put them in her mouth. Her mouth watered against her will. She chewed the soft flesh of the beans.

Swallow.

The mash went down in one gulp.

I'm going to choke.

You're not going to choke.

My throat is swollen shut.

What next? Meat or potatoes?

Her chair was tucked tight into the round table. The nurse had said to get her near the food, make her smell it. Put the plate right up to her face if you have to. The smell makes them hungry. Her hands were tucked

up against her belly. She looked as if she were frozen in the act of pushing the plate of food away. Its ceramic edge touched her fingertips.

The portions of roast beef and potatoes were conservatively splashed with gravy, while the green beans were drowned in butter sauce. A pat of margarine sat atop a dinner roll. The roll looked like the heel of a foot.

The man across the table writhed in his wheelchair. He couldn't sit still for a moment: the effects of Huntington's disease. His caretaker, a pretty Filipino with a mouth like a sad child's, shoveled his pureed dinner into his toothless jaws as fast as she could manage, and still it wasn't fast enough for him. He was hungry!

More. More.

He sputtered flecks of potatoes when he spoke. They landed on the table, not very close to her, but close enough that she noticed. She turned away from the writhing man.

Her caretaker was a handsome brown man. He had Freda Kahlo eyebrows, big muscles and large, strong hands. He cut the meat with the fork and a butter knife. The utensils were plastic: no good for cutting meat. He tore a frayed chunk of roast beef into three parts and fed her one.

Chew it up good and swallow it.

The meat was salty. It felt foreign in her mouth. She sucked the gravy off of it. When she chewed, the meat juice filled her mouth. Her stomach grumbled in ecstasy.

I can't swallow it.

Swallow.

The meat was a gummy mass. It would never go down. He put a cup of ice water to her lips. She sipped.

Drink a little more.

She sipped again. Her throat convulsed and pulled the meat down. The swallowing was hard and made her ears pop.

He opened the carton of milk. She drank from its paper spout. She loved milk. Before they had imprisoned her behind locked doors and high walls, she had drank buttermilk everyday. It was the only thing that soothed her swollen throat.

I don't want the mashed potatoes.

Try one bite.

He put a big helping in her mouth before she could protest. The potatoes were warm and lumpy. She pressed them against the roof of her mouth with her tongue.

Swallow.

She didn't want to. She would choke. Her throat was swollen shut. The fat nurse who weighed her everyday didn't believe her, either.

Nothing's wrong with your throat. I don't want to hear anymore about that. If you keep losing weight, you're going to die.

She was already an old woman at fifty-four. Her hair had gone gray. All of its body had been siphoned away. Now it hung in a lank pleat. She was going to die soon anyway, but she didn't want to choke to death.

I don't want anymore.

A little more. You haven't eaten much.

No more.

The potatoes were slimy, and she could feel the grainy spuds floating around her mouth. White liquid began to seep out of the corners of her mouth.

Swallows those potatoes.

She wouldn't.

Swallow.

She gulped them down. It made her wretch a little.

Her caretaker was shaking his head at the Filipino. He'd had enough, so he picked up her tray. She grabbed the milk carton before he took it away and drained it in a long swallow.

The writhing man's bowls of baby food were scrapped clean. He pointed a wobbling hand at the skeletal woman across from him.

Milk. Milk.

My throat. It's for my throat.

Drink it. Drink mine.

He barked the words desperately and writhed so violently that his caretaker had to pull him back into his wheelchair.

#### World Hunger Solved by Jack Martin

After the second or third apocalypse, some of the remaining military scientists built several chicken catapults. The idea was to reinvent flight. The medium was meat.

Arrangements were made, and a first chicken was launched. As it hurtled upward, the chicken squawked as if begging for answers. Another chicken and another. Soon the sky was full of pleading chickens.

It was discovered that on re-entry the chickens would cook, so the military scientists covered each chicken before launching with butter and paprika. Because of the chickens' begging, scientists also affixed gags on the chickens.

Where each chicken landed, the impact marked the soil. Tender meat littered the vicinity of what came to be called “the Chicken Pocks.” Some of the meat lay on the dirt and grew hard. Some of the meat acted as seed and grew into gagged, pleading chickens.

Southern Sunday by Earl J. Wilcox

...for Elizabeth...

It was the spring after you had been to China, where you first ate eel, snake, dog, and hundred-year old eggs. Snapped on a Sunday after a lunch of quiche or the other family favorite, chicken, the picture blossoms with a background of azaleas festooned against a latticed wooden fence our neighbors built to ward off the likes of us who play Beatles, Bono, or Bach at all hours, laugh with the heartiest, look happy in photographs.

In the picture, our sons and I wear tee shirts you bought in Hong Kong or was it Beijing where you dashed with friends to a KFC for wings and soggy veggies you would never touch at home because you had lost weight from not eating food served in a dingy Outer Mongolian hut or on the trains from the large cities to the tiny hovels with TV sets, where gaunt Chinese exist in places guide-books fail to mention. Southern men, we look overfed.

The two boys squat behind me, like a pair of baseball catchers waiting for the pitch---perhaps a screwball or a knuckler nobody can catch much less hit. We all look much younger than I can see in my mind's eye now: robust, smiling, happy faces caught in a spring snapshot brimming with sass which you had sense enough to notice. Bright red, Chinese logos on our tee shirts date the picture which remains timeless.

Avian Architects by Earl J. Wilcox

For once, then, I'd like to be sitting on the edge  
of the off-white cornice  
of the post  
on my front porch  
to watch the two of you build your nest.

After you finish hatching again this year,  
I will piece together clues about your architectural design—  
the intricate ways in which  
you weave and paste and excrement together  
the straw and feathers and sticks and lespedeza tendrils and other riff-raff  
which the two of you espied  
in the yard,  
fetched furiously but placed

with ample aplomb  
on top of the antique light fixture  
near the northernmost side  
of the door,  
a scant two feet  
from the edge  
of the off-white cornice  
of the post  
on my front porch.

Early Spring by Bryan Fox

A 62-degree January day brings couples out of hibernation like so many dormant squirrels. Arm-in-arm they take the city by stroll.

New York is not a place to be alone when so many other people here are not. Peals of shared laughter regarding jokes I'm not in on are forks streaking across the blackboard of my lonely mind.

Being single, there are so many restaurants I can't eat in. So many comments left unsaid while strolling through the Guggenheim on a Wednesday afternoon. Countless witty things nobody gets to hear.

Somebody's missing out.

Valentine's Day is in 20 days. Maybe I'll leave the country.

In the Union Square station today, I was buffeted by an attaché-wielding power suit as she rushed past in the pre-rush hour scramble. I scowled, and scowled deeper when I realized she didn't even notice. People in this city don't even have time to be rude.

I am single because I don't know when to lie. At least three times, a lover has asked me, "Do you think I've gained weight?" At least three times, I've replied "Yes, but I don't mind." Why ask a question when you already know the answer? Just because you don't want to hear it?

Springtime in January and everybody rejoices, as if snow were the fourth pillar in the Axis of Evil. I like snow in winter. It means the planet hasn't given up yet completely. I've been in this city for twelve months, and we've had the biggest snowfall ever, the hottest day ever, the warmest day in January ever, and the coldest day in January, ever. Fortunately, the conservatives tell us global warming doesn't exist. Otherwise

I wouldn't be so sure.

A fly buzzes past my face, confused. Probably he's wondering why he's alive now. Something we have in common.

It's disorienting when you've been single so long you don't even know what someone's touch feels like anymore. When discomfort becomes comfort again. Like when you're hungry, and you don't eat, and after a while, you're not even hungry anymore. And when someone tries to give you food, probably you could refuse it.

All physical contact eventually becomes abhorrent when there is no romantic physical contact in your life for long enough. I haven't even hugged anyone since I don't know when. It's becoming hard to embrace family members.

When I jerk off, I feel like I'm raping myself with my own hand.

A few weeks ago in a loft in Bushwick, I ended up giving my phone number to a girl I'd chatted with at high volume for about 10 minutes while trying to suppress a coke grimace with little success. If I could remember what she looked like, I might answer her calls. If my friend Ray hadn't been laughing when she'd walked away.

If he hadn't said, "Drinkin' some tonight, huh?"

Any port in a storm, but I remain lost at sea. With bitter fascination, I pick absentmindedly at the hangnail of my discontent, praying the wound will fester.

A New Year's Resolution: If I haven't met anyone by the time spring comes, that's it.

I don't know what 'it' is, but that's still it.

I'm going to stop thinking I'm an artist. Or maybe write poetry. But to who? To whom?

I'm going to exercise more. Or maybe let myself go. But from what?

I'm going to stop drinking. Or maybe become an alcoholic.

I'm going to change something. That much is certain.

Something's about to change, for better or for worse. I need it.

A few nights ago, I attacked my hair with a pair of scissors and cut and cut and cut until I was standing in a furry brown pile in front of the bathroom mirror. The next day, two of my students told me my new hair cut was nice. Why do other people still care about you even after you've stopped caring about yourself?

Passing by the Virgin Records on the south side of Union Square, I learn that Snoop Dogg now has a new album, and a goatee. The goatee is flecked with grey. Time passes for everyone.

On New Year's Eve, I joked to a friend "The only pussy I got my hands on in 2006 had whiskers and a tail." Passing out that night at 5AM in a fit of coke sweats, I masturbated until my arm hurt but couldn't come because I kept thinking about his reaction.

"And you're happy about that?" he'd said.

But I'm winning the small battles. Four weeks into the new year, and I'm still doing my push ups every morning. Not keeping chocolate in the house. Or pot. Only smoking when it's offered to me at parties.

I'm being a pretty good boy, for what it's worth.

What's it worth?

I walk past the art vendors in Union Square to see what people think is good enough to sell. Once I'd stopped in front of a table where the artist had made shadowbox scenes full of disassembled watch parts.

"How much?" I'd asked, pointing at a small one.

"Four hundred," he'd replied.

"Dollars?" I'd asked.

"Yes," he'd smiled.

"Why?" I'd said, putting my headphones back in and turning to go buy a loaf of bread in the Farmer's Market.

Today, it's the same offerings as usual. New York photos, kitsch art, jewelry. Watch parts in shadowboxes. Things for tourists to buy so they can say they bought it while they were here. Nothing worth breaking stride over.

Then a table of simple oil paintings, chunky, stark in the chiaroscuro of their chromatic contrast. I pause.

The swathes of color fight each other for space on the canvas. I take the headphones out of my ears so I can hear myself talk.

"These are, really good," I say, without looking up.

Then I do.

Her hair is pigtailed and dyed day-glo red. An open-mouth smile reveals a tongue ring behind the lip ring dangling from the side of her mouth like a semicolon, separating the rest of her face. She is slender, wearing a red Puma jacket and jeans. Red hair over a red jacket – it doesn't match, but she wants it that way.

"Thanks."

"Did you do all of these?"

"Yeah."

"They're a bit like Rothko, but, more, visceral. More bold."

"Maybe even bolder." She smirks.

She just corrected my grammar. I am without reply.

"Do you like Rothko?" she asks, to break the silence she's caused.

"No, actually, I think he's – I, no, he doesn't do much for me. But I like these."

But I don't buy art, I think. "How much?" I say.

"Well, the 16" by 24"s are \$150, but that's negotiable."

"I like – negotiation."

The breeze stops. Someone turns off the background noise.

"I'm doing an exhibition at a little bar in Soho at the end of the month, it's nothing special, but you should come!"

Should I? I think.

"Should I?" I say.

She laughs. It doesn't sound like a fork on a blackboard.

"Definitely. Here, take this card – the opening is on the 27<sup>th</sup> at 7PM." She hands me a glossy flyer off the folding table. I take it graciously, like Sunday mass and she's giving me the communion wafer.

"Thanks –," I lead.

"Moirra," she follows.

"Thanks, Moira."

"You're welcome,"

"Sam." At least I got that right.

"You're welcome, Sam."

"Well, maybe I'll see you there." I hold up the flyer, toasting her with it.

"Yeah, maybe you will," she smiles. She licks her lip ring, just a little.

Almost I need to hold onto the table for balance.

Crossing past Strand Books on 12<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, I am nearly run over by a car while studying the flyer as I turn it over and over in my hands.

It happens again on 9<sup>th</sup>. Then I put it in my pocket, after it's been committed to memory. "Confessions of a Dirty Palette – An Exhibition by Moira Jane."

Around 7<sup>th</sup>, I notice a girl smiling at me broadly as she passes by. Then I realize that she's just reflecting back the grin I'm now wearing like a badge.

Perhaps it doesn't take a lot to change a lot. Promise doesn't even need to be fulfilled. Just having it there is enough. I think about that for a while, and unzip my jacket, to let the warmth in as I continue my walk downtown.

#### Tales of Departure by Tammy Ho Lai-ming

##### I.

My sister's friend knows a friend who knows someone whose job was to locate missing people. For a few years, she was confided to many inside stories of moderately rich families and she retrieved teenagers and adults alike from dire or humiliating situations. She enjoyed an odd sense of satisfaction mingled with hatred whenever someone thanked her for unearthing the precise location of a lost soul in the sunset of everlasting disappointment. One day, she was gone. Nobody knew where she went. Perhaps she wanted to be found by someone like herself; and the two of them could be best friends, sharing strategies and evil secrets. But no one seems to care about her enough to take the initiative to consult a detective. And therefore she is free. Somewhere between this world and the next.

##### II.

If a man claimed that she did not know her life was approaching its end, he was lying. She knew, oh of course she knew how her inside was rotting at a great speed. She felt by day she's wearing her inside inside-out and by night she was really coughing her inside out. That night, wrapped in strings of plastic waterproof battered light bulbs, she jumped into the sea. From afar, her body was transformed into moving fireworks igniting the curiosity of billion sea salts.

### III.

A very dear friend of mine (he called himself Joshua Burdette, which is really a made-up name) liked quoting lyrics. Once, when I was telling him about my family background, which was (and is still) not privileged, his bearded face twisted a little (a sign that he remembered some relevant lyrics), and then he's reciting a song by Stevie Wonder, "Living Just Enough for the City". Joshua spoke words that I have never spoken; but afterwards I found that he spoke my heart; and he's much more prolific. A lazy afternoon, we sat on a bench next to a rusted iron fence without enjambment. We were chatting like birds of two different species, complaining about other animals' foodlore. Suddenly he leaned forward (and downward as well, for he's a great deal taller than me) and kissed me on the forehead. In his unique mumbled fashion, he told me he will leave the town and fish for a lifetime. I have never seen him since; but I hope he fishes well, and fishes much.

#### Bomb! Bomb! Bomb! Go! Go! Go! Get Groovin' To the War by Adam Engel

Pumped bodies. Faces taut with grim determination. Diets optimized by scientific know-it-all know-how proven by computer-assisted scientific method. Belief systems built on strong foundations of clinical experimentation repeated for accuracy under stress-increased conditions, peer-reviewed.

Hard labor builds hard selves.

Trainers, experts in the chemistry of lean architecture. Human form. Pills, shakes, powders, injections; natural herbs; synthetic wonder molecules. A method. Many methods tried and true. Ergonomic machine-designs for comfort in distress. The latest in physical physics. Electric power pull tension for maximum results. Employees would stay firm and young forever.

Ubiquitous nutritionists, physicians.

Men and women in accord. Sex, sweat, hope. Pure mist of ideal.

Entrance to Valhalla decorated with potted Bamboo, Palms, Plants of Paradise.

"Faith, purity, mastery. Mind over body, strength of will," said a passing trainer.

Treadmill biking rowing; walking pedaling boating; nowhere; nowhere; nowhere.

Overhead screens pumped music and The War into their sweating heads. Imagined themselves in jets, roaring fire up the beastly asshole of that damn rogue Enemy of The Nation! Bomb his demon progeny. Bomb the sandbox. Bomb the swing set. Bomb the schoolyard. Bomb bomb bomb!

Pause watch listen. War thrum beat of pop music. Work it, work it, work it out. Tension, release. Minds abandoned pain-wracked bodies to soar among the bomber jets and scream raw lust at stadium crowds. Dancing, loving, worshipful masses. Imaginary famous and adored.

"That city's been around since Time began," said a Trainer, looking up briefly at the carnage.

(Strange indeed to see the Enemy's capital city, which had stood for three thousand years on the same land, where exotic generations had lived their unrecorded lives, the same city, through history ancient and modern, reduced to shards and rubble in a matter of days.)

Executive thighs and buttocks pasty-white in shorts. Health premiums reduced significantly and productivity increased when workers spent lunch-breaks in the gym watching The War set to pop music on giant overhead TVs; left cold sweat cubicles for clean hot muscle action.

Hour-a-day mental space to press pump cycle soar with sexy dancers grooving to the War.

#### How I Love Her by Corey Mesler

I knew of no way to get to her, no secret passage to her heart of hearts. She is what she always was, my enigma. Earlier, yes, I remember, she was warm like the blood of youth. Yet, even then, there was something walled-off within her, something she did not show me, did not, really, show the world. And, I beat my head against that wall, God knows. Her indifference. That is what I grew to call it, as if in the name she was not only defined but somehow captured. I wanted to capture her. Did I talk to her, you ask, about her indifference? Did I make it clear that it was somehow a barrier to a deeper knowledge of each other? I tried, I did. She was kind, very kind. She would place a comforting hand on my forearm and look at me with eyes wet with compassion. She would call me her martyr. I did not know quite what that meant. As the weeks went on, and our ardor certainly increased in the bedroom, the space behind her eyes grew wider, more expansive, as if opening out into a not inconsiderable blank arena, or a public space so empty that human involvement did not figure into its history, its future. Even as she grew to know my body and what made me wild with passion she retreated. Can you understand this? Yet, I loved her. I loved her then and I love her now. She is my challenge—no, a better word is needed here. She is to me what the maze was to Icarus. You ask then: do I reach for the sun? Do I want indeed to escape, to fly away? I do not. Nights when she and I are alone, when the house is as still as a heart that beats no more, there is between us something I can't yet define. It is a sweetness, yes, but it has to it a tang like a sour aftertaste. Perhaps a sour fore-taste, if that makes sense. Her indifference, I say to myself sometimes. Is it still there? Is that the spell we are living under? I don't know. We are under a spell. She says, I love you, as readily as any lover. She is kind, sweet to me. When I am sick she is a wonderful nurse. When I am sad she can awaken me with a little dance, or a snatch of song, one of the old songs, when we sang together. Still, you say, there is something missing. And I answer, there is always something missing. There is always a breach, a crack. Do you really believe it is a flaw, perhaps a fatal flaw? I say to you, she is all that I have ever wanted. Even now, she waits there at the end of every day, a complex geometry. And I say to her, Lover. I whisper to her, Lover, come with me now. Let's finally do what we were born to do, what our coming together signifies. Let's walk out into the future, a bit stronger for being together. And she smiles the way I have seen her smile these many years, and her eyes say that she is mine, and yet deep within her, I sense it, there is that tiny black fortification, the one I have learned to live with, and the one, finally, that will defeat me, that will come just shy of destroying me, and I will be ash, just more ash. I hold out my hand now. I am as happy as a ghost. I am light, light as a rustling foot on last year's graves.

#### Cleveland Impromptu by Christopher Woods

Mary, will you never get out of bed? So many hours have passed now, fading into days. And you won't get up. Surely you have things to do, errands to run. Your duties in this world go unattended, and it's so unlike you. As though you don't care that your mother waits hungry at the nursing home. You know full well she will not eat unless you are there to feed her. How even her voice disappears for a week when her daughter isn't around. So unlike you, Mary.

You don't even bother to answer the phone when your boss calls, begging you to help with inventory at SUPER SHOE OUTLET. You know how Frank depends on you.

Here it is, seven in the evening, and you are still in your nightgown, soiled and caked. My, you've changed. For shame, Mary.

In the kitchens of neighbors meals are being prepared. Shepherd's pie, meat loaf, good old Sloppy Joe's. Children wander home at dusk, laughing and still fighting, twitching from energy or drugs, who can tell. Families gather in kitchens, dream of better times in every crock pot and microwave dinner. Everyone knows night is coming. Wheel Of Fortune blares from countless televisions. In their hearts, they all believe that Vanna White will live forever, just like Jesus.

Your own television screen is now black, and that too is odd. You with all your soap operas, reality shows, the sacred shopping channels. In short, all the important things in life. Why are you ignoring all this, as if you are suddenly too important for the flash and jolt of the video midway? Mary, have you lost your religion?

In bed, you appeared poised and waiting, but for what? A change of attitude? His? Your own? For time to reverse itself so that you are a young bride again, your nipples erect, for John on your wedding night at Red Roof Inn? Just what are you thinking, Lazy Mary?

Oh, this must simply be a front. You must know by now that John won't be coming to bed. That the television will remain mute and dark. Night seeps through curtains. It blankets you in your bed, crawls slowly across the floor, then hurries down the hall to the kitchen, where John still sits ramrod at the table, his eyes unblinking, piles of unpaid bills spread out before him on the table, his brain scattershot on the blue wall paper and across the sea of cocoa puffs, his pistol still dangling from his trigger finger.

#### Being Frank by Jonathan Montpetit

Frank puts his copy of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* back into his briefcase before entering the television station. The receptionist is old, white and friendly. He tells her he likes the broach she has pinned to her shawl. She gives him mail from the Canadian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society. At his desk, Frank checks his messages. The station manager is bald.

"Hey Frankie!" he says pointing at Frank with handgun fingers.

Frank waves back and looks at the clock. He reviews the forecast he prepared last night, making sure nothing has changed. Quickly, Frank determines the bulk of the system is the same. The anchorwoman is ageless.

"Hi Frank," she says in the barely audible whisper she uses whenever she's not on-air.

Frank looks up from his script and smiles. It is a million-dollar smile, according to a local newspaper whose reputation has been in a freefall lately. But the paper's decline and its conclusions about Frank's smile are coincidental. Frank believes the paper's quality has suffered precipitously in an age of consolidation of media ownership. He believes city newspapers have become mere advertising vehicles for conglomerates. He believes such business models don't allow city papers to respond to the needs of local readers.

It just so happened that his smile increased in value at a time of concentration in media ownership.

Yes, the bulk of the system has remained the same and Frank will make a quick stop in make-up before heading into the studio. His weather forecast will cover the Greater Montreal Area, along with parts of Eastern Quebec and Western Ontario. Following the noon broadcast, he will prepare a weather report for Toronto. The conglomerate which owns Frank's station is based in Toronto and has affiliates throughout the

country. Frank will prepare two pages of copy for the National Weather Presenter, a younger better looking version of himself. The National Weather Presenter will read but two lines of Frank's report on the National Broadcast tonight. More people live in Toronto than in Montreal, the bald station manager once explained to Frank, they don't care about the weather in Montreal.

"You're right," Frank had said in the same resigned voice he uses to warn of flurries in April. "Only Montrealers care about the weather in Montreal."

There are times when it takes Frank nigh two hours to get home from work. But this doesn't bother him because he considers time in his Ultimate Driving Machine well spent. Frank lives in Laval, a suburb north of Montreal. His neighbor on one side is Greek, and on the other side, also Greek. There are three well-dressed black men in the car to Frank's right. They too are stuck in traffic. A Muslim woman looks down at him from the crowded bus that has stagnated to his left. She recognizes him from the news and smiles. Exhaust and asphalt burn under the late evening sun. The bus is insufferable. Frank's windows are up and he is sealed tight in his Ultimate Driving Machine. The sightlines are impeccable. He is focused on the car ahead of him, driven by a Caucasian mother and filled with her mostly Caucasian children. He is waiting anxiously to slip the Ultimate Driving Machine into second gear. In the meantime, he enjoys the pitch-perfect hum of its air conditioning.

He removes his copy of *Madness and Civilization* from his briefcase as he settles on the deck that overlooks his allotment. His wife Trina is playing with their four-year-old son, Andreas Nathan, in the backyard. He reads about security systems against the "violence of the insane and the explosion of their fury" while sipping lemonade. He looks up into the greying sky. He thinks the system will change overnight.

It is all too easy for Frank to overlook his allotments. There is no history of heart disease in his family. Laval is the administrative region in Quebec with the highest personal income per capita. Trina has a tattoo of a fish in the soft spot near her left pelvis. But the weather in the Greater Montreal Area is a fickle bride, and Frank knows you cannot always sit calmly, overlooking your allotment. There are times when you must huddle inside, away from windows, close to heaters and loved ones.

The Ultimate Driving Machine is burning oil. Writing and Difference is in the mail. The Andreas is for his father, the Nathan is after his wife's stillborn brother.

"Frank," the station manager likes to say, "is a character."