

(Imaginary) Boyfriend

by

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**Abstract**

(Imaginary) Boyfriend is a cycle of short stories that addresses the tension between stasis and locomotion. The eight stories feature characters who are addicted to motion, but paralyzed by anxiety. This theme manifests itself in both the internal and external spaces the characters occupy.

## **Preface**

As I was working on my thesis, I looked at other U of M creative theses for direction and inspiration. I found that the large majority of creative theses from the last few years are novellas and began to wonder about my chosen genre, the short story. My preference for this medium has to do with immediacy. While the novel's destination is a crisis, in the short story, the crisis is the story. In the short story meaning is more fixed and uncomplicated. Greg Hollingshead points out that the novel has to carry its meaning from page to page whereas in the short story the "meaning is not so abstractable, so portable...but is rather more tightly and ineffably embodied in the formal details of the text." Each scene in the short story moves deliberately towards this meaning whereas in a novel, the scenes moves outward, "looking not only backward and forward in the text but also sideways, outside the text, toward the material world [and] to that set of common assumptions considered ordinary life. That energy is centrifugal, opening out, not constantly seeking to revolve upon its own still centre."

Uniting all my stories is the tension between stasis and locomotion. They are populated by characters who are in transit – both literally and figuratively – but are also profoundly stuck. The characters are addicted to motion, but paralyzed by anxiety. This theme manifests itself in both the internal and external spaces the characters occupy. Their speed of thought is often at odds with their physical stasis. Relocation is used in place of closure. Unable to make decisions or face reality, the characters sometimes move to a new environment. Physical

movement is a substitute for emotional change. Over thinking keeps the characters rooted to one spot.

This tension is primarily found in the characters' internal space as they search, in a variety of ways, for genuine human connection. As introverts, they are reserved and more concerned with their own thoughts and feelings than with the external world. Though active thinkers and observers, they are unable to translate those thoughts into actions.

Externally, the stories are set in cities where the characters' struggle for emotional connection clashes with the hostile and anonymous urban environment. The characters cannot find what they're looking for in both familiar and unfamiliar places. They are unsettled whether at home or abroad.

Most of my stories are set in urban environments, and though the city is not always specified or a part of the narrative, the characters are undeniably city dwellers with that sort of expected street smart, metropolitan attitude. Many of the stories take place in Canadian cities, though differ considerably as to how they depict the city. "Effexor for the Win," which takes place in Calgary, is very vague in its setting. "Minor Injuries" and "Baggage," which both take place in Winnipeg, are much more obviously that city.

I didn't think of the implications of this until I started researching Canadian urban writing. As I mention in my afterword, there are scores of novels set in Winnipeg, but I could not come up with a single one set in Calgary. I suggest that because Winnipeg has been written about from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

other Winnipeg writers had a template for writing the city, whereas Calgary has not achieved that sort of literary critical mass. But I also wonder if it has something to do with Calgary as a city. I'm a native Calgarian and lived there for over 20 years, but still found myself more confidently writing Winnipeg, a city I've lived in for about three years. Unlike Winnipeg, Calgary has the money to keep reinventing itself. It's a city that is always changing. On a recent trip back, I discovered the new Encana building is almost complete and has changed the downtown skyline. The c-train is being built to another part of the city and new stations and tracks line once familiar streets. A bright red pedestrian bridge is being constructed over the Bow River. What was once a skuzzy, low-rent downtown street is now packed with \$300 000 condos and boutique shops. And so it goes. The city I lived in 15 years ago is a ghost of what exists today. This constantly changing cityscape is hard to commit to paper. But what about Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Regina? Though I haven't spent much time in those cities, they seem more stable than Calgary, and still, we don't often see them portrayed in literature. What is it about Winnipeg that has appealed to so many writers?

Another challenge, but also accomplice, to the characters' search for meaningful relationships is technology. We live in a world where people know immediately when someone contacts them. People talk about being addicted to checking their email or feeling naked without a cell phone in their pocket. Electronic communication is integral to my characters lives. It allows them to

communicate with speed and efficiency, from wherever they are, but it also keeps them emotionally distant from each other. This instantaneous communication also exacerbates their anxieties as there is no longer a delay between sending and receiving. They are always reachable, and if no one is trying to reach them, they know it. At the same time, there are advantages. I've thought about how much easier this situation would be over email. I could carefully weigh my responses. If I typed something I wasn't completely satisfied with, I could delete it and re-write. Electronic communication allows greater control over an interaction. We can dictate when to respond and how to respond. This is appealing for my characters who are hyper aware of their own feelings but reluctant to express them. Where face-to-face communication may leave them vulnerable, electronic communication gives them the time they need to present their ideal self to the world.

The characters straddle the line between participating in the world and observing it. Often, they resemble a flaneur, walking through the city, both apart from and a part of their world. However, the more I researched the flaneur, the less my characters resembled it. The flaneur desires something as he or she walks and in the process of walking, those desires are articulated and achieved. My characters desire, but are unsure of what they desire. While the flaneur engages with his or her world and that engagement inspires an outcome, my characters disengage and change very little from beginning to end. I started to think about other incarnations of the flaneur and came up with the slacker. Like

the flaneur, the slacker is more a thinker than a do-er, but is a more passive figure defined by his or her relationship to labour and leisure. My characters have dropped out of the world and do not actively participate in society. They bum around cities, are constantly on the move and refuse to participate in a system that “sanctifies work as moral, natural, and necessary, as being pretty nearly the only responsible option when choosing a life’s work” (Rotella 67).

The slacker is a figure who offers a “counter-cultural critique [that] subverts the dominant paradigm of the work ethic by exposing its limitations and excesses and offering idleness as an antidote and alternative” (Rotella 67). The term was popularized in the 1990’s by the movie of the same name and from then into the present, the slacker narrative in film has become tremendously popular. From *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* to *The Hangover*, the narrative usually concerns some loveable, if lazy, dudes who shirk real world responsibilities and make trouble for themselves and others. I instantly recognized that this is a very male dominated character and genre and began to wonder about the female slacker. While I did find some examples (Leliana in *Reality Bites*, the protagonists in *Ghost World*), the female slacker is much more rare and differs from the male slacker in that while the male slacker is often doltish and immature, the female slacker is intelligent and full of potential, but refuses to live up to that potential. She could do something with her life, but chooses not to. The female slackers in my stories feel the world is hostile to their existence so remove themselves from that world. To them, slacking is the only option.



Writing this thesis made me much more conscious of my writing and I feel that this awareness will serve me well. In discovering what and how I write, I feel I've created a foundation from which I can build on.

## Mobile

A September Sunday and each day shorter than the one before. After a weekend of sleeping in, the only way to wake up at 7am, refreshed and ready for the week ahead, was with a little blue pill. In apartments everywhere, bathroom cabinets were opening and Sleep-Aid, Unisom, Tylenol PM, diphenhydramine hydrochloride, melatonin and valerian were popped out of blister packs and washed down by a handful of tap water. Finn liked to take a pill, reorder his bookshelves, and then collapse into bed, savouring the heaviness of his limbs on the still cool sheets. But tonight the packet was empty.

He removed a small wooden box from his bedside table, sorted through the mess of dirty Ziploc bags, rolling papers, business cards ripped to shreds, and three paperclips bent out of shape. He emptied the box's contents on to his bed, unfolding and smoothing each empty bag.

Then he picked up his phone.

Finn's dealer lived in Outremont, on the other side of the mountain. Finn usually made the time to walk there, enjoying the steep climb and the greenery, cutting through the cemetery and emerging in the lush, stately neighbourhood. Brick and stone houses set back from the curb lined the wide streets. Occasionally a cat on a windowsill watched him walk by.

But tonight he was in a hurry. While he made arrangements on the phone, he grabbed his metro pass and checked his wallet.

Hanging up, he accidentally enabled the phone's video feature. The small screen lit up, showing a pixilated image of his living room floor. He had once recorded some fireworks to test the feature out. Canada Day at the old port. He had sat on a patch of grass by the water and watched, slightly buzzed, as flashes of coloured lights lit up the sky.

Now, he panned the camera phone across the living room, enjoying the soft dreamy quality the lens gave to his apartment.

With the phone filming, he propped it on a bookshelf, the camera facing him, while he prepared to leave. He picked the phone up and saw his doorknob and deadbolt on the small screen. He turned the lock and headed out.

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Gil's door opened. Finn placed the phone in the front pocket of his jeans, the camera sticking out of the top and filming surreptitiously from waist level. He had recorded his journey, surprised at the lack of interest it created. Most of the other passengers stared at their own devices, lost in their individual digital worlds. A couple of teenagers with skateboards had given him a sideways look, but it was possible he had imagined it. The only direct acknowledgement he had received was from a man asking for change at Berri-UQAM. As Finn transferred to the orange line, the man looked right into the small lens of the phone. He was holding a banana like a gun, pretending to rob commuters. Finn had smiled.

“Mercy buckets monsieur. I'll take a smile over a scowl.”

At Gil's apartment, Finn was greeted with a fist bump before entering the small, neat living room. Gil closed the door behind Finn and returned to his spot on the couch.

"It's late for you, no?" Gil asked.

"Sleeping problems," Finn replied.

Gil nodded and took a large bag from under the coffee table, shook it in Finn's direction, and then started carefully loading the scale in front of him.

"The best thing is to not force it."

"Sorry?" Finn asked.

"The sleep thing. It's no use lying in bed and staring at the ceiling. You just get frustrated that you can't sleep and that makes it worse. You've got to get up, do something, wait until your body tells you it's ready." Gil looked up from his work. "Sit down."

Finn sat on an armchair beside the couch. He watched Gil lean back to look at the numbers on the scale.

They didn't say anything for a while. The TV was on, but muted. On the screen, a serious looking woman was kneeling beside a child, her hand on his small shoulder. When Finn saw Gil sweeping the product off the bag and into a fresh Ziploc, he lifted himself, took some bills out of his wallet, and put them on the coffee table. Gil pressed the bag closed and flung it towards the armchair with a flick of his wrist where it landed on Finn's chest.

"You wanna stay," Gil asked, "or you have places to be?"

“I should get home,” Finn said, as he got up. “Try to sleep. Thanks though.”

“Don’t try too hard,” Gil said as he walked him to the door. In Finn’s pocket, the cell phone beeped. The battery was running low.

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Back at his apartment, Finn plugged the phone into his computer and uploaded the video while he prepared his goods. He opened a window and began to watch the recording. Finn observed himself getting ready to go, winding a turquoise and brown scarf haphazardly around his neck and leaving the frame to bend down and tie his shoes before picking up the camera. He sped up the footage, watching his walk to the subway, the decent down the escalator, and the wait on the platform. The camera lens softened the edges of the fluorescent lights set high up against the tiled walls. The screen darkened as he panned down capturing a few people on the opposite side of the platform sitting on orange benches, leaning against cement pillars, or staring down the tunnel.

Finn fast-forwarded and watched the images speed by while he blew smoke out the window. Something wasn’t right. He stopped the footage when he saw the sparks he had filmed from within the subway car. The yellow light of the interior replaced the darkness of the tunnel as the camera took in the advertisements by the doors, the metal poles for standing passengers, and finally, a teenager with a skateboard. Hadn’t there been two? Finn fast-forwarded again until he recognized Berri-UQAM station. The camera filmed his walk to the

orange line, lingering for a moment on a garbage can with a banana peel draped over its edge.

Finn thought he could hear the echoes of the space over his small computer speakers. The marbled floor pulsed and in the half-second before the train pulled in, blurring the screen in a flash of silver and white, Finn thought he saw fingers grasping the edge of one of the benches on the opposite side of the platform.

He sped through the next few stops and the short walk from the station to Gil's. He stopped when he recognized Gil's apartment. Everything was in its place: remote controls on the TV stand, throw blankets folded and placed on the back of the furniture, magazines in a rectangular stack on an end table. The perspective changed as Finn sat down and the camera took in an empty couch. The television was off.

Finn squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them. He stopped the recording, closed his laptop, and shut the window. Bed.

## Internets

As they stood in line, the sound of a wailing baby pierced the air. Ayla commented that it was absolutely inappropriate for the mother to subject the public to that sound and Cliff nodded silently.

It was their first in-person meeting. They had met through an online dating website. She was poking around for want of anything better to do, while he had been swayed by a bus stop advertisement that featured surprisingly attractive cartoons. He had come across her profile and was immediately drawn to the way she put “nihilist” under occupation and “agnostic Christian” under religion. Here she was in one picture, her hair blowing round and obscuring her face; here, another taken from a distance with her on a swing.

He had sent her a pleasant introductory message and they corresponded for months, Ayla not willing to make the first move to leap out of their virtual relationship, Cliff erring on the side of caution. He was turned on by her multisyllabics and the way her emails, though void of capital letters, were grammatically correct. She found his vocabulary adequate.

After a sufficient amount of time had passed, he decided to make a move, suggesting they maybe hang-out next Saturday afternoon.

Then they were there, in a strip-mall coffee shop, face to face. They sat down at a small table with their paper cups and he immediately wished they had decided to sit at the counter, or go for a walk. Their proximity was making him nervous. She was facing the window and watched the passing traffic, already

thinking that she could never be with someone who tucked his laces into the sides of his shoes.

He asked her where she grew up, she returned the question. He asked about her job, she asked about his. After he had finished explaining the plot of the historical novel he was currently reading, he took a sip of his tea, leaned back into his chair and waited. He watched some other patrons in the café, tried to read a poster on the back wall, and returned his glance to his date. He took another sip of his tea.

His online pictures showed rough red hair and colourful scarves, but now she noted locks slick with product and a collared shirt open at the neck and displaying a tangle of red curls. The confidence of his emails was lost under a slight mutter and she found herself having to lean towards him when he spoke, which she realized made her seem more interested than she was. He was slight, with narrow shoulders and an effeminate air. He had a habit of scratching his eyebrows which sent little flecks of dandruff drifting to the tabletop.

She was average looking, but not the beauty he had willed into the vague images. She had not been smiling in her pictures, and he discovered she had an exaggerated overbite and crooked teeth. Her hips were disproportionate to her otherwise small frame. She wore thick mascara, but no other make-up. She slurped her tea and sniffed frequently.

Time passed.

She made an exaggerated motion to check her wristwatch.



“Look at that. Three o’clock already. I have to get home and start defrosting dinner.”

“Were you interested in borrowing that spoken word album?” he said, unable to stop the reflex. “I live close by.” He inwardly cursed, but perhaps she...

“Oh, sure,” she said. The CD’s return would require another meeting.

His apartment was clean, for a boy, and decorated with B-movie posters. As he went searching for the album, she perused his bookshelves, happy to discover a good dictionary and the complete poems of Emily Dickinson. Returning to her side with the CD, he handed it to her, realizing how nearly impossible it would be to find a second copy. She looked up at him and he noticed the mascara residue below the lashes on her bottom lid.

“Track four is my favourite,” he said.

“Oh, right,” she said. She looked at the CD in her hand and then up at him. At least he’s tall, she thought, before finding herself on the floor with the CD digging into her back and his lips on hers.

She couldn’t decipher the buckles and buttons and zippers on his pants, he was perplexed by her bra which clasped in the front. Her hair got stuck in a buttonhole of his shirt. Eventually they were naked and he was on top of her.

When it was done, she stared at the ceiling for a minute before getting out of his bed and untangling her clothes from his. With her back to him, she got dressed and left.

He heard the door close and thought briefly of chasing after her before realizing that that would require putting on underwear and pants and a shirt, and by the time he did that, she would be out on the street and out of view.

Communication between them ceased. He would frequently check her Internet dating profile to see if she had been online that day. She avoided going online knowing he would be able to tell. Three weeks passed in this fashion until she was forced to send him a two-word email, "I'm pregnant".

A meeting in the strip-mall coffee shop was arranged. He was prepared to offer as much support as she needed for the abortion. He would pay for it. He would go with her to the clinic and hold her hand. He would attend grief-counseling sessions and nod sympathetically.

"I'm keeping it."

He proposed.

Ayla and Cliff were married at city hall, using two elderly men who were there to protest an electoral ward boundary bylaw, as witnesses. She decided to not take his name. They moved into her apartment, which was bigger and located near a good grade school. When their child was born, a boy, they named him Leander.

A few years later, they moved, piling their stuff into a rented van and emptying it at a bungalow on Keats Street. Leander went to the public school on Shelley. They bought discount patio furniture and on pleasant days sat in the yard, Leander wobbling among the shrubs.

She left overly detailed to-do lists on the kitchen counter. He returned her library books or watered the plants and then quietly crossed off the task. On performance review days, he found encouraging post-its in his shoes.

They went to Leander's piano recitals and sat at the front, his hand resting atop hers. Afterwards, they discussed civic politics with the other parents, sipping from plastic cups of rose-coloured punch.

She developed a crush on one of his friends, feigning drunkenness in order to dance with him at a dinner party. When she wasn't home, he worked up the courage to look for pornography on the Internet and then spent the next hour clearing the browsing history and visiting his regular sites so as to not arouse suspicion.

After her hair began to grey at the temples, she dyed it auburn. She let the grocery boys carry her bags to the car. He bought a blazer with elbow patches and drug-store reading glasses to keep in the inside pocket.

Leander graduated high school and went to Prague. Ayla put his postcards on the fridge in neat parallel rows. Cliff kept track of the time in Czechoslovakia.

She tried growing orchids. He tried getting into scotch.

They moved into a condo by the river. They went walking and fed the ducks in the afternoon. They won a cruise trip in a sweepstakes. In a deck chair, somewhere around St.Lucia, her heart stopped beating.

He decided on a non-denominational funeral. Leander drove him home afterwards, the copper urn with her ashes on Cliff's lap. Back home, he placed the urn on top of the television and turned it on.

There were commercials for a new chocolate bar, a fast-food restaurant, and an electric car. Then images of happy grey-haired couples walking through lush parks with a voiceover that asked why not take another chance for romance?

It took him three commercial breaks to write every number down and another twenty minutes to work up the courage to call. They put him on hold.

## Baggage

He had gone to meet her at the train station. She was taking Via Rail across the country, seeing old friends she had missed in her two years abroad. She was en route from Calgary to spend a brief layover in Winnipeg before moving on to Toronto, and he was to meet her at that hopeful little café in the main foyer; the one they had gone to that once, wanting to watch the flow of comings and goings. But it was a case of bad timing. No trains came or left in the two hours they sat, drinking weak coffee in paper cups.

He saw her before she saw him. She was sitting at one of the hopeful café's small round tables, a large suitcase at her feet. Her head was bent over a slim volume that lay on the table. She was wearing a short black jersey dress with a brown weaved belt around her waist and a green cardigan. Her hair was still shoulder length and the colour of sand, but now she had long bangs that fell in her face. She was wearing a pair of oversized black frame glasses, and, as she looked up and recognized him, he saw behind the lenses, a familiar light.

"Paul." She stood up and hugged him, then held onto his shoulders and looked at his face.

"Amelia," he nodded in return.

"You look great," she said, smiling, shaking her bangs away from her eyes in a small practiced movement of her head.

"Thanks. You too. You look the same."

They exited the train station and in the natural light he could see that she had aged. There were faint lines on her face and standing up he noticed that the curves of her body were more pronounced than they used to be. He stopped. He was being unnecessarily cruel. His hair had continued to thin and it was now apparent what he would look like bald. His t-shirts had started to bulge slightly at the stomach.

They walked to VJ's and ordered food. He paid, then wondered if he should have. They went back outside and sat on a curb in the parking lot. She tucked her dress between her knees and placed the grease-soaked cardboard box on her lap.

“So...?” she said, stabbing a fry into a pile of ketchup in the corner of the box.

“So,” he said. “Good trip?”

So they proceeded in this fashion for a time. She told him about her last few months in Korea, about the possibility of renewing her visa and going back, about the trip since the west coast, seeing their mutual friends in Calgary, the thrill of the uncertainty of the next few months. He told her about finishing school, starting to work, the brief trip to Egypt, caught her up on his sister and the two more kids she had, and, a little shakily, about the new girlfriend.

“What does she do?” she wanted to know. “What’s her story? Where did you meet?”

And he told her, leaving out any superfluous detail, trying to play down how much he loved her, being happy, but not overly so.

“Well, good,” she replied, and he remembered the exact day he decided he would propose to Amelia, suddenly aware of the jewellery ads that were everywhere, every woman’s left hand sparkling with a diamond. And when he asked her, there was that light again, and they had spent the next few months like they had just met, holding hands, having sex twice in a night, being especially nice to each other because now they knew it was going to be forever. And then when she was in her last year of school, she started talking about how much she wanted to see the world, dropping hints about how easy it was to get a job in Asia, and suddenly, she had a phone interview and then signed a contract, and soon she was filling boxes with books and boarding a plane. And he, left to explain to his friends, his parents, himself, what had happened.

They finished their food as the sun began to descend.

“Times Changed?” she suggested. “My train doesn’t leave for another hour and a half.”

They walked north a few blocks before coming to the small bar. She had some difficulty getting her suitcase through the door and he bent down to help. They sat down at the bar.

“We’ll both have whisky,” she said to the bartender then turned to him, “when in Rome.”

She had sent him an email months ago, when this trip was in the works, saying that she missed him, that she'd been thinking about how talented he'd been with his hands and that maybe they could pick up where they left off.

He didn't respond right away. He masturbated thinking about how her hair fell on his thighs when she was giving him head and then wrote back the next morning saying that sort of correspondence was inappropriate. He had moved on. He had a new girlfriend, though he wished her well.

She didn't flinch, wrote that she'd still like to see him, and then there she was. There he was. Sitting next to each other in a country bar.

"To now," she said, raising her glass. He picked his up and clinked it against hers then took a sip of the liquid. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had whisky. It made him aware of his nostrils in a way he'd never been before.

"I missed you," she said. "Especially at first. I wondered if I'd made a mistake, leaving." He stared into his glass, not knowing what to say. When she left, he hadn't been able to eat for a week. "I got over it, of course," she said. "What choice did I have?" And he wanted to yell but he took another sip of his whisky and let it lie. She finished the rest of her drink in one large swallow and signaled for the bartender to bring two more.

"So you really love her, huh?" she said and he nodded, though her head was angled down and her hair fell in her eyes, and she wouldn't be able to see him, so he said,

"Yes, I really do."



After the second drink, he walked her back to the station. It was now dark and a light wind sent leaves rustling down Main Street. At the doors, she turned to face him.

“Thanks,” she said.

“For what?”

“Thanks,” she said again. She smiled and walked away, rolling her luggage behind her. He called his girlfriend and asked if he could come by.

### Effexor for the Win

Kirby's eyes were red and glazed over and she smelled like Febreze. Suddenly, she turned her head abruptly, eyes wide and still.

"Wait. Did you hear that?" she loudly whispered. "Is someone behind there?" She motioned her head towards the one-way mirror that occupied most of the wall to her right.

"No, Kirby, we would tell you if there was," answered the steady voice of Therapist Anne.

"There was someone there *last week*," Maurice said, an *if you were here* implied. "A PhD student or something. Sounded like he left halfway through."

"That thing totally freaks me out," Kirby continued. "It's like some creepy voyeur shit. They can see us, but we can't see them."

"There's no one behind there Kirby," said Therapist Anne, her tone slightly elevated in an effort to be more convincing.

"Yeah, but there's the video camera or whatever. Like somewhere there's all these tapes of me."

Before coming to adolescent group therapy, we were required to sign a release form. The tapes would be used for educational purposes and be kept in strict confidentiality. It somehow made the sessions seem more authentic, like we were legitimately mentally ill and not just sad teenagers in a strip-mall medical building. We knew there was a video camera, though we didn't know where it

was or what it saw. I always made for one of the chairs that were parallel with the mirrored wall hoping that I'd be a profile or cut off the recording entirely.

No one said anything for a while. Kirby stared at a space somewhere a few inches in front of her. Maurice examined his fingernails. Bronwyn, our newest member, shifted in her chair. Therapist Anne chewed the left corner of her bottom lip. This was often how it went. Sometimes, we'd sit in silence for the entire hour and half.

Eventually, Thomas, a square-headed blonde with anger management issues, loudly hiccupped, his whole upper body traveling in a ripple upwards and then collapsing back down.

"Dude!" Kirby laughed. "That's the weirdest sound I've ever heard."

"Try holding your breath," Maurice said.

"You have to hold your left elbow for seven minutes," Kirby suggested.

"Hey Thomas," I said, "I'll give you five bucks if you hiccup again."

Everyone looked at me. "I mean it, I'll give you five bucks," I said, bending forward and pulling a wallet out of the front pocket of the backpack at my feet. I took out a blue bill and held it for all to see. Thomas closed his eyes in order to concentrate.

"C'mon Thomas," I goaded, "five bucks." Even Therapist Anne was intrigued, her cool indifference cracking under this recent development. She was there to supervise and not to moderate, to make sure we didn't hotbox the room rather than lead the discussion. Thomas' head was angled down and he was

focused on his breathing. We all watched him. The second hand on the clock behind him traveled all the way around. He opened his eyes.

“Fuck.”

I smiled and slid the five back into my wallet.

After the session we filed out of the room, through the waiting area, into the hallway and back outside, dispersing through the parking lot. Kirby lit up a smoke as she walked to the bus stop. Bronwyn headed towards an idling Honda Civic.

“Hey Naomi, that was pretty cool,” Maurice said, catching up to me.

“Thanks,” I shrugged.

He walked with me as I headed towards my car.

“You go to Central right?” he asked, unnecessarily. We saw each other in the smoke pit almost everyday. He hung out with the types who took Mechanics, guys who painted their binders with white out and appeared as question marks in the yearbook.

“You think I could get a ride with you next week? I have to leave class early in order to catch the bus and if you’re driving from school-“ My chest tightened. A fearful reverence surrounded Maurice Russell. He was taller than most of the teachers and had a small, handmade tattoo of a heart on his forearm. Sometimes, during his spares, you could find him sitting quietly in the cafeteria, staring out the window.

“You know what? It’s okay,” he continued. “I think Mrs. Buckingham likes me leaving early.” He gave a lukewarm wave and took off across the small patch of grass to the sidewalk. I settled into the tan upholstery of my Mom’s Volvo and watched him cross the street and disappear from view.

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When I got home, my Mom was marking papers at the dining room table, a mug of cold tea in front of her.

“How was group?” she asked.

“Okay, I guess,” I said, kicking off my shoes in the entranceway.

“You say that every week,” she said.

“It’s okay every week,” I replied. I went into the kitchen and opened the cupboard. “I go to school with this guy there.”

“Oh yeah? What’s he like?” It was early spring and I was in grade 12 and she was worried I wouldn’t have a date for grad.

“Bi-polar. Takes lithium. Makes him fat.” She looked at me, exasperated. “What? It’s true.” She flipped over the pages of a paper she had finished and added it to the pile on her left. She had the best intentions. It was her that had started the process that eventually led me to the group.

On my first day I sat in the waiting room, exchanging glances with the others. At four, Therapist Anne came and got us. We were led to a room the size of a walk-in closet with a circle of chairs around a little table with a box of Kleenex on it. On two of the walls were watercolour paintings of tropical birds. On the

third, a large analog clock whose second hand never rested, moving in a smooth circle from one number to the next. The fourth wall, of course, was the mirror.

“So what’cha on?” Kirby, a fellow depressive, asked, after everyone had introduced themselves. “Effexor? Zoloft? Prozac?”

“Well, I –

“I take Effexor and the occasional Clonazepam, but only when I’m having a really bad day.”

“Amateurs,” Mira, a dropout with a two-year-old who I was never to see again, spoke up. “I’m on Zoloft, Clonzaepam *and* Seroquel.”

I had since become one of the more senior members, familiar with the magazines in the waiting room and the workings and rituals of the group. A banging on the outside wall within the first 15 minutes meant that a late arrival wanted to be admitted. We started each group by asking “how was your week?” There was the exact number of chairs as group members, plus Therapist Anne, and when someone left, we would keep their chair in the circle until we felt ready to remove it. Mira’s chair was taken out after she was gone for two weeks, Thomas not even bothering to stand as he pushed it out of the circle.

“Goodbye Mira,” he said, giving the seat a final shove so that the back rested against the wall. We adjusted our chairs to close the gap, avoiding each other’s eyes.

•

On Monday during the 13-minute-break between second and third period, I saw Maurice in the smoke pit. When the bell rang, I escaped from my group and made my way towards him, making it appear that I was getting caught up in the flow of traffic back into the school.

“I’ll drive you on Wednesday,” I said, looking straight ahead as the crush of people corralled us back through the doors. Someone behind me stepped on the back of my shoe and I lunged forward, falling on to and then pushing myself off of the person in front of me. Though everyone was being jostled, Maurice walked with ease, unencumbered by the stampede.

“I’ll be parked in the Sev lot across the street,” I said as the door approached, “meet me there at 3:35.”

Maurice sailed through the doors, and I got stuck against the jamb, waiting for an opportunity to push myself back into the crowd.

After school on Wednesday I sat in my car, watching students stream out of the three sets of doors. By 3:40, the street was backed up with cars, pounding bass and giggling spilling out onto the street. At 3:43, Maurice strolled towards where I was parked. He opened the passenger door and sat down and I felt the car lower with his weight. Without waiting for him to buckle up, I put the car in reverse and pulled out of the spot.

“Hi,” he said, struggling with the seatbelt. I didn’t say anything. “You okay?” he asked.

“It’s quarter to,” I said quickly, “I’m doing you a favour, you could at least be on time.”

“We’ll be okay.”

I pushed my way to the parking lot’s exit and found myself stuck behind a car stopped in the middle of the driveway trying to turn left.

“Fuck,” I said as the car missed another small opportunity to get on to the road.

“You’re a bit high-strung, huh?” Maurice said. He had rolled down the window and had his arm hanging outside of the car. He caught the eye of someone he knew and flapped his hand lightly in lieu of a wave. I sank back into my seat and looked the other way. He turned his head towards me.

“I saw your name on the honour list in the Central Times today.”

“Yeah, so?”

“You do pretty well.”

“I do okay.”

“It’s just weird, you know? We’re all dropouts or in the remedial stream. Except for you.”

I glanced sideways at him but continued to monitor the flow of traffic, finally managing to get out of the parking lot and onto the road.

“You know,” I said when we had reached cruising speed, “just because I get good grades, doesn’t mean I have my shit together.”

“I just don’t get what you’re so depressed about.”



“Can’t I be depressed? I’m a teenager.”

“Sure, whatever.”

I pushed the buttons on the radio, trying to find something decent. Maurice opened and closed the air vents in front of him. He lowered the sun visor and put it up again.

“It’s knowing that other teenagers have similar problems,” I said at a red light. “It’s the knowing that helps.”

“The knowing that helps’? Isn’t that in the official group literature?”

We pulled into the parking lot of the Foothills Outpatient Mental Health Centre. The time on the dash read 3:55.

We walked into the waiting room. Thomas and Kirby sat next to each other reading the jokes in a Reader’s Digest. Bronwyn sat a few chairs down, absorbed by the screen of her cell phone. They all briefly looked up when we entered; we tended to save our chitchat until the session.

“Hey, thanks,” Maurice said, sitting down and sliding his bag under the seat. “I appreciate the ride.”

“Next time don’t be late,” I said.

•

“How was group? Mom said as I tripped over a pile of shoes by the front door.

“Okay,” I yelled, already on my way to my room.

“Naomi,” she said, and I stopped, backpack strap hooked onto my arm. I walked backwards to the kitchen where she was unloading the dishwasher. I stayed in the hallway. “Naomi,” she said again.

“What?” I said, impatient. She shook some water off a glass, wiped it on her pants and then slid it into an open cupboard above her head.

“I saw this blue silk dress at the Bay today.”

I rolled my eyes. “Gee, where could you be going with this?”

“At least consider it.”

“I don’t need a dress.”

“You know what I mean.”

I walked to my room and closed the door behind me.

•

“Fought with Shelia this week,” Thomas volunteered. “She saw that this girl had written on my Facebook wall and got all up in my face about it.”

We waited for him to go on. Thomas had been sent to the group after getting so angry with his sister that he had walked over to where she was sitting on the carpet and stomped down on her leg with such force that it broke.

“When it was clear that she wasn’t going to listen to me, “ he said, “I left. I was at her place. Just stood up and walked away with her yelling after me.”

“Good for you man,” Maurice said, “bitches be crazy.”

Thomas laughed and glanced at Therapist Anne who was still observing her shoes.

“Andrew and I never fight. It’s like we just get frustrated with each other and then all sulky.” Kirby was surprisingly reflective when she wasn’t stoned.

I had never had a boyfriend and was only familiar with the type of fights my Mom and Dad had every second weekend when he came to pick me up. At seventeen, my knowledge of love came solely from television and sex ed. My friends were reading Cosmo’s sex tips in the Sev during lunch hour and I had been kissed once by a distant cousin at a family reunion.

I always pretended to be lost in my own thoughts when the conversation turned to relationships. Temporarily re-focusing on the group, Bronwyn caught my eye and gave me a small, closed-mouth smile. I looked down and rubbed the back of my neck with one hand. It was silly to think that a boy liking me would validate my existence. I knew better than that.

•

The grade twelve’s were pulled out of fifth period and marched to the gymnasium. The guidance counselor had a projection screen set up. It was showing an image of comic sans text that read “How are you doing today?”

“We know this can be a stressful time of year,” she said, when the last class had filed in and the lights had been turned off. “After car accidents, suicide is the leading cause of death among teenagers,” she continued.

I sat up tall, turned around, and scanned the crowd behind me. The glow of cell phones lit up a few faces. A group of popular kids at the back looked deathly bored, exaggeratedly slumped over each other’s laps and shoulders. I

finally found Maurice, his teacher standing over him, arms crossed. I caught his eye. He shook his head and rolled his eyes.

•

“You’ll love this,” Maurice said to Therapist Anne, after our weekly update had faded into shrugged shoulders. “We were forced to go to this assembly for a suicide talk,” he looked towards me. “Naomi was there, it was total bullshit.”

Everyone looked at me and I diverted my eyes.

“There’s this big fucking ad at the front of the school issued agendas,” Maurice continued, “suicide hotline posters in every bathroom and all these bus stop PSA’s. Talk about overkill.”

“Overkill,” Kirby snorted.

“They say they’re worried we’re stressed out about classes and then they pull us out of class for this talk! It’s like, if we’re not thinking about killing ourselves, something’s wrong with us.”

“But aren’t we?” I said to the air in front of me. No one said anything. The clock showed quarter past four. I watched the second hand make two full revolutions. Anne licked her lips and pressed them together.

“Not so much anymore,” said Kirby. “Effexor for the win.”

•

I waited in the lot until 3:50 before speeding to group, going through a couple yellows and scraping the tires along a curb I took too tightly. I sped

through the waiting room and then knocked loudly on the wall. A few seconds later, Kirby opened the door and led me in.

“Sorry,” I said, out of breath from my dash in. “I was waiting for-“ I stumbled, “sorry.”

“Twice in a row Naomi,” Anne said in a tone of vague disappointment. I sat down and unzipped my coat.

“Before you got here, I announced that Maurice has left the group. As usual, we’ll keep his chair until we’re ready to get rid of it.”

“What?” I said.

“It was unexpected,” Anne said. I fell silent. Nobody else talked. I had seen Maurice in the cafeteria just yesterday.

“So I guess I’m the only dude now,” Thomas said.

“You’re the man now Tommy,” Kirby said, lightly punching his arm.

Thomas smiled. Anne had already zoned out and was pretending to not look at herself in the mirror. Bronwyn sunk down in her chair and stretched out, her limbs impinging on the space Maurice once occupied. I looked at the empty chair.

•

The afternoon of the last day of school was always reserved for free hotdogs and a celebratory dance. The fluorescents in the gymnasium were turned off and a disco ball was hung from the ceiling. I slumped against the wall

and watched some grade 10's make lewd gestures with their weiners. A bunch of girls in pajama pants were dancing in a tight circle.

I walked out of the gym, squinting into the bright hallway light. Students were sitting against the lockers, flipping through yearbooks. A few classrooms were occupied with people playing board games or drawing on the chalkboards. In the band room, an impromptu jam had started which the trumpets were winning. There were only a few delinquents in the smoke pit, the types who usually hung out there taking advantage of the free afternoon to go make trouble. As I walked back into the school, I almost ran into Maurice who was on his way out.

"Oh, hi," I said. He looked at his shoes. Three students with mustard and ketchup stained t-shirts walked by giving us sidelong glances.

"You could have told me," I said, "I waited for you in the lot and then was late and Thomas looked so pleased that I fucked up and-"

"I was in that group for two and a half years," he interrupted, "before Therapist Anne even. Went almost every week, took my meds, and then one lousy Social Studies mark..." he trailed off.

"Oh geez Maurice, I'm sorry."

"At least you're getting out of this place," he said, "doing something with your life..."

"Not really-" I started to say. I had missed the university application deadlines and was staring into an empty year.

“You start to wonder, you know?” he said. “Like whether you can really change who you are, inside.”

We stood there awkwardly. Should I put my hand on his shoulder, I wondered? Hug him? Tell him to come back to group?

“It’ll be okay,” I said, though I wasn’t sure what I meant. What would be okay? Down the hall, the throbbing of the dance music segued into a slower number. Maurice looked up at me.

“Wanna dance?” he asked.

I looked sideways and then back to him. “Sure,” I shrugged and smiled. We walked back through the doors and headed towards the gym.

### Minor Injuries

About seven metres away from the bench she stops skating, letting the momentum she's built up carry her. Her ankles and knees shake as she slows and she has to put out her arms for balance. While native Winnipeggers may be born on skates, Charlie is no native Winnipegger. As she gets closer, she bends at the waist and moves her arms forward. She's stopped moving and has to push off just a tiny bit more. She raises her foot carefully, keeping the other steady, and comes down on the edge of the blade, stumbling gracelessly and landing with a hard plop onto already bruised knees. Skaters whizz by her. She uses the bench to pull herself up and sits down.

"You're not very good at this." A child has skated up to her and begins going in small circles, alternating his skating from forward to backward in order to keep facing her.

"I'm afraid not," she says, brushing the frost of her pants.

"You're afraid?" he asks. She looks up. He must be about nine but it's hard to tell. He's wearing an oversized neon green ski jacket that hangs to his knees and a Blue Bombers toque pulled so far down it touches his eyelashes.

"Yes, afraid. Of falling mostly." Though it's only five o'clock, it's as dark as night. There's no wind so the cold is manageable and people are out taking advantage of the river skating trail. Teenagers glide by holding hands. Families pull toboggans full of toddlers. Cross-country skiers travel the snowy path beside the icy one.



“You can’t be afraid of falling, that’s when you fall. If you’re not afraid, you never fall. I’ve never fell.”

“That’s admirable,” she says. She takes off her mittens and pulls at the laces on her skates, beginning to loosen them from the top down.

“You’re done?” He stops and wipes his snotty nose on the back of his glove.

“Yes,” she replies, without looking up.

“I’ll tell you the secret of skating if you get me a hot chocolate,” he says, “the best ones are at Pasha’s. She puts a real marshmallow in each cup. A big one.” She looks up. He’s standing in front of her, feet firmly planted on the ice, knees bent in towards each other. The bit of face she can see between his toque and scarf is flushed with cold.

“I’ll get you a hot chocolate, but I’m done.” She pulls off her skates and wiggles her toes, rubbing the circulation back into them. As she fishes her sneakers out of her backpack, the kid squats down beside the bench, pulls off his mitts and neatens the laces on her skates before tying them together in a loopy bow. She picks them up and carefully swings them over her shoulder and they head up the stairs and into the market. The kid follows beside her on the rubber path. He doesn’t even need to hold on to the handrail.

“I’m Rabbit. Who are you?” he says.

“Rabbit? I’m Charlie.”

“Charlie? That’s a boy’s name.”

She shrugs. The rubber path stretches towards the skate rental shop.

“I’ll wait for you over there,” he says. “Pasha’s.”

Charlie gets two hot chocolates and a bag of mini donuts and goes back to where she left Rabbit. He’s found a seat on a bench near the door and at first glance, she passes him over, not recognizing the curly-haired child. He catches her eye and waves her over.

“Thanks,” he says, taking the drink. They sit in silence for a few minutes watching the crowd. “How come you can’t skate?” he asks.

“Just can’t,” she says. “I guess I never learned when I was a kid, so…”

“You should have learned when you were a kid,” he says wisely.

She nods. A handsome family in Mountain Equipment Co-Op jackets walks by. Rabbit pokes the marshmallow in his cup and watches it bob back to the surface.

“I’m also not from Winnipeg,” she says, suddenly embarrassed. “There’s no culture of skating where I’m from. People there ski, downhill ski.”

“Do you downhill ski?”

“No.” A busker begins playing a pan flute by the door and Rabbit sways back and forth to the music.

“Hey, you told me you were going to tell me the secret of skating if I got you a hot chocolate.”

Rabbit finishes a sip and looks at Charlie. “You have to commit to it,” he says flatly.

When he doesn't elaborate, she asks, "And...?"

"That's it," he says. "That's what my Dad says and I'm an excellent skater. My dad says you have to trust the ice."

"Your dad? Is he around? Are you here by yourself?"

"I take care of myself," he says. And then, "he's...I don't know, he's somewhere." He nods in the general direction of the market. "Well thanks," he says, and in one movement he stands up and throws his cup towards the nearest garbage can. "I hope you get better."

"Thanks," she says, but she doubts he hears her. The door is already closing shut and through the glass she sees him disappear down the stairs and back towards the river.

•

Back at the apartment, Charlie lowers the skates onto the floor mat by the door and takes off her outerwear. She moves the sheet, blankets and pillow from the couch to the armchair and sits. She pulls up her jeans and looks at her throbbing knees, gingerly touching the swollen flesh. Tomorrow, there will be purple bruises which, over the course of two weeks, will fade to brown and then yellow. Jason liked to photograph her bruises, making her stand in the bedroom where there was the most natural light, her injured limbs towards the window.

"If these photos make you famous, will you credit me?" she asked, as he looked through the lens, framing her forearm, which had collided with a doorframe a few days earlier.

“Of course,” he said, using two fingers to gently lift her elbow.

“And last but not least, I’d like to credit my ex-girlfriend, whose clumsiness is responsible for the collection you see today.”

“Ex-girlfriend?” he asked, looking away from the viewfinder.

“By that time we’ll probably have broken up.”

He pinched his lips and adjusted the aperture.

She was always excited when she fell or stubbed her toe, waiting to see if the injury would become visible. Most of the time, there was hardly a scratch.

The door down the hall opens and Lois stumbles out, rubbing sleep out of her eyes on her way to the kitchen. After a few minutes of opening and closing cupboards, she comes to the living room and joins Charlie on the couch.

“I didn’t wake you, did I?” Charlie asks.

“Nah,” she yawns. She picks up some fliers from the coffee table and starts flipping through them. The bubble and hiss of the coffee maker comes from the kitchen. “How’d you do? Did the skates fit?”

“Wobbly, a couple of hard falls. Nice night though.” Charlie offers her the bag of leftover donuts and tells her about Rabbit.

“Is he like Aboriginal or something?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Lois drops some crumbs on the sofa and Charlie watches them disappear between her legs.

The sisters sit licking powdered sugar off their fingers. The smell of coffee travels to the living room and Lois gets up. Charlie turns on the TV, but there's nothing on.

When Lois leaves for work, Charlie is asleep on the couch, the remote still in her hand.

•

Charlie walks home from the grocery store, a backpack with the heavy cans and produce on her back and two tote bags with more fragile items on each shoulder. Her hands are balled into fists inside her mittens. Her eyes run and her eyelashes stick together. Her scarf has hardened with ice crystals from her breath. The wind picks up as she crosses the Osborne Bridge.

"Charlie!" She hears a voice and stops to see a neon green ski jacket in front of her.

"Rabbit?" she says. "Hey, what's up?"

"I haven't seen you skating."

"It's been pretty cold."

"Well, yeah," he says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "Do you need some help?" And before she can answer, he's sliding the tote bags off her shoulders and walking in front of her towards home.

When they get to the apartment, they stop on the front steps. Charlie waits for her bags to be returned.

"Shouldn't you be getting home?"

“It’s okay, I’ll help you carry them inside.”

“I don’t know Rabbit, I – “

“It’s okay, I know you’re a good guy.”

They walk up the two flights to the apartment, the clomp of their boots echoing in the stairwell.

“Neat,” Rabbit says, as soon as he enters, staring up at the gargoyle like moldings in the entranceway. He carefully sets the bags down and kicks off his boots. He goes to the couch, plops down and starts flipping through the newspapers on the coffee table. “What’s for dinner?” he asks.

•

Lois wakes up to sweet potatoes in the oven and Rabbit watching the local news.

“Umm hello?” she looks down at him on the couch.

“Hi, you must be Charlie’s sister. I’m Rabbit.”

“You’re Rabbit,” Lois looks toward the kitchen.

“Why are you wearing pajamas? It’s afternoon.”

“I work at night,” Lois says, “so I sleep during the day.”

“Like a badger?” Rabbit asks.

“Something like that.” Lois joins Charlie in the kitchen, leans against the refrigerator. Gives her that look.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Charlie says, washing a few dishes in the sink.

They finish dinner by 7 and decide to play a tournament of tic-tac-toe. Rabbit quickly figures out Charlie's trick of covering the corners and they stalemate on almost every game. They drink hot lemon tea, the brand that she drank with Jason that time in the kitchen as they leaned against the counter, the small black velvet box near the toaster between them.

Lois and Rabbit are simultaneously engaged in five different games of tic-tac-toe, the crosshatch playing surface drawn multiple times across the sheet of paper. She is telling him about how Charlie use to wet herself when she was little because she was too shy to ask to go the bathroom.

Rabbit puts his hand on Charlie's shoulder. "Good thing you're all grown up now" he says before putting down a winning x and crossing the three in a diagonal line.

•

On a Tuesday afternoon Charlie puts on two pairs of socks, picks Lois' skates up off the closet floor, and walks towards the legislature. She makes her way down the stairs by the Louis Riel statue and to the river.

She's just stood up and is waiting for her ankles to stop shaking when Rabbit skates up behind her. He takes her mittened hand in his and they move east. There are no clouds in the sky and the setting sun is reflected off the ice and into her body, warming her face. She makes t's with the blades of her skates and pushes off, one after the next. She keeps her eyes on the ice in front of her. There is a light covering of snow on the ice and it sparkles like that diamond from

that black velvet box, which, after the tea, after they had said 'good night' and gone to sleep, she had tried on, being unable to sleep. The ring was too big and sat awkwardly on her finger, but she centered the small diamond and held her hand in front of her to watch it catch the light coming in from the streetlights outside.

"Look up," Rabbit says and she does. They're already nearing The Forks. They pass an area cleared for hockey and under the railroad bridge until they get to where the rivers meet. "You've committed to it," he says as they skate out on to the Red. On this bigger river, the ice is rougher and the banks are much further apart. Charlie and Rabbit slow and then stop, small figures in the middle of the frozen river.

"I'll race you back to The Forks," Rabbit says, breaking the silence, and before she can respond he's turned around and is speeding back in the direction they came from, torso almost parallel to the ice.

When she gets back, she can't find Rabbit. She takes off her skates and walks home.

•

"Remember when you use to be afraid of ice?" Lois asks. They're walking home after cheap Chinese food in the village.

"What?" Charlie says.

"Dad let you watch *Jaws* when you were a kid which made you afraid of water. Then you found out what ice was made off." She starts laughing. The cold



has lifted and when they reach the bridge, they can see dozens of skaters on the river beneath them. When they get to the middle, they stop and lean across the railing. Charlie sees a small skater in neon green appear below them and speed away.

“Was that...?” Lois asks, looking up to Charlie.

“Rabbit!” Charlie yells down and the neon green ski jacket stops, turns around, and looks up. He gives an exaggerated wave before turning around and skating away.

“Funny little guy,” Lois says as they watch Rabbit quickly weave through the leisure skaters on the path before he’s indistinguishable in the distance. Below them, the smooth swish of sharp blades on ice is interrupted as a skater trips and stumbles to the ground. He wipes out and slides until he’s stopped by the mound of snow at the edge of the path. His friends skate over, help him up, and brush the snow off his pants. Then they’re off again, disappearing underneath the bridge, skates chiming off the ice and echoing down the river.

### Past Perfect

“My ex-boyfriend made that” she imagines herself saying when someone points to the blue origami bird perched on her windowsill. It’s a problem, seeing everything in retrospect. Her boyfriend’s job, his car, his apartment, already romanticized in the past, though it’s the present and they’ve only been dating for 6 months. “That was when I lived in Winnipeg,” her imaginary conversation continues, “going to grad school and pretending to be an intellectual.” The other person in these conversations is usually a new boyfriend, one who has matching furniture and uses the word “affect” correctly.

When the new boyfriend in the imaginary future undresses her, she feels his erection through his clothes and thinks about her ex-boyfriend whose penis needed coaxing. “How nice,” she thinks, “I haven’t even touched it and he’s ready to go.”

And then she comes back to the present feeling terrible. Her boyfriend comes over for dinner and she nuzzles into him, scratching his beard, running her fingertips along his earlobes, pushing away the earlier thoughts and making a mental list of all the great things about him. He’s genuine. He’s smart. He makes her smile. He’s good to her. He’s got his shit together unlike the future boyfriend, who without a list at the grocery store spends \$60 on cheese and will interview for a job in Chicago without telling her because nothing and nobody can hold him down.

When they break up, she knows she'll be inconsolable for weeks, without appetite, withdrawn, sleepless or always sleepy. She imagines herself sitting on her thrift store couch staring at nothing as day turns into night. Friends will leave messages on her voicemail and send emails. Her Mom will say, "but he was so good to you" and her Dad won't say anything at all.

They'll have to meet to get back their stuff. She's always been reluctant to take and keep his things. When she tries to give him back CD's he's lent her, he refuses to take them. He has some of her most beloved books which he'll never read. At his place one night, she thinks of slipping them into her bag and taking them home.

She'll start casually dating men she meets online. When they try to sleep with her, she'll tell them she's not ready. That she just got out of something serious. They'll hold her and stroke her hair and then stop returning her calls.

She'll purposefully drunk dial him one night. Say she misses him. That maybe they made a mistake. That she can't imagine ever being with someone else. She'll start crying though it wasn't part of the plan. He'll be cool and collected on the other end. "Is someone there with you?" she'll ask. She'll wake up too early and feel stupid.

And then, as if he knows what she's thinking, her cell phone will trill and she'll open it up to read a sentimental message with too many exclamation points, because he knows, he's known from the start, that she's insecure, and just last night his parents called her by his ex's name, and that she's unhappy

with a recent haircut, and she could use some reassurance. But she doesn't reply, deletes the message, and smiles when she thinks that one day she'll look back on all those texts and realize he was perfect.

### **Stories to My (Imaginary) Boyfriend**

Of all the boys. The brutish and opportunistic. The bipolar, the drunk and the addicts. The egotists, imbeciles and frivolous. You are the least severe. I had high hopes at first. Like I always do. Won over by your charms, your smile, the way you said my name. Then it changes. First small things, like your reliance on text messages. Then larger, like how you hated your mother. I wanted to psychoanalyze this, relate it to your aversion to breasts and your notion that you would die before 40.

“What would Freud say?” I asked.

A romantic career is not an easy thing. The interview process alone can drive you to tears. But once the preliminaries are over, and you sit beside me and poke my hip, I know that I'll stick around at least until the benefits kick in.

You make more noise when you watch hockey than when we have sex. What if I called it my five-hole? You'd rather spend a night with a Red Wing rolling around in a homoerotic embrace, screaming “yes!” when he grabs onto your hips, roaring “come on!” as he pushes you against the boards, shouting “FUCK!!” when he misses the goal.

The bruised nectarines in the grocery store reminded me of you. Picked over, unwanted, sour, the red-orange flesh imperfect. Or wait. Was that me? You kept

your nectarines in the fridge where they remained hard and were too cold for me to bite into. I had to warm them up in my hands. You weren't so easy.

I'm sick of being woken up by your drunken late-night texts. Those electronic nocturnal emissions. The little screen lights up and I roll over, squint into the fluorescent screen. As my pupils dilate, they decode the abbreviations and insert the missing vowels. It's too late to be witty and indifferent. Roll back over, toss, turn.

This isn't my fault. You knew that when we met my idea of cosmetics consists of an eyelash curler and Vaseline; and that I only like olives after they've been drowned in alcohol. When we break up, may you cease to exist.

I've come to believe that the difference between being alive and being dead is that when you're dead, no one returns your calls. Have you not called because I'm dead? Are you somewhere, indifferently grieving? How have you gotten everyone I know involved? My phone hasn't rung for three days. I haven't received any emails either. None. No newsletters or spam or jokes from my cousin. Is there any other way to explain this?

How can you stand to sit down with me in this cliché? Coffee and a bagel on a rainy Saturday morning after sleeping tight on a double bed. You read the paper

and ask if I remember a certain hostage taking. If you had been holding the sports section, I could have read celebrity gossip instead of a book review. After this, I walk you back to your apartment, stepping around the puddles. I won't go in, but you'll kiss me where the pavement meets the path to your door. You probably won't call later.

The Law of Identity states that  $A$  equals  $A$  and that  $A$  does not equal  $\neg A$  and that everything, insofar as it is anything, is itself and not not-itself. That book I leant you is that book I lent you and not not-that-book-I-leant-you. I'd like my book back please.

Wasps come into my apartment to commit suicide. Three days this week I've found their dead bodies lying on the floor. We want to be somewhere safe when harming ourselves. I woke up in your bed and wondered if I would come home to any corpses.

## Lady, Motorbike

In Phnom Penh, we got by on the idea that our situation was only temporary. Our friendships were based on convenience and nationality, and would soon come to an end. We did not want to know too much about each other. *Where are you from? How long have you been traveling? Where have you been?* and *Where are you headed next?* was all that mattered. There were four of us – Penny and Mark, a Canadian couple from small town BC, and Sal, a young Brit they had met somewhere in Thailand. We were all passing through, wasting time and avoiding the various versions of work that awaited us at home.

We were there because if we weren't there, we'd be in Bangkok or Saigon doing something similar. Phnom Penh was cheap and easy to navigate. Drugs and English language used bookstores were easily found. The guidebooks exaggerated the gun problem and the biggest threat to our safety were the daily trips on the backs of motorbikes. We were so confident we didn't even hold on. Penny and Mark were looking for work teaching and Sal was fond of saying he was waiting for something to move him somewhere else. He was twenty-two and the son of a famous rock star. The four of us joked that if we ended up in prison, the band would reunite and play to millions at a benefit for our release.

I liked to escape the dingy guesthouse and walk along the riverfront everyday. It was a twenty-minute amble to the city centre and I kept close to the buildings and the shade they offered, eventually having to cut through the small downtown on my route. Lining the banks of the Tonle Sap were dozens of large



flagpoles in a misguided attempt at making the city international and welcoming. At least, the flagpoles drew the eye up, away from the brown water and amputees.

Children constantly ran up to me.

“Where you from?” I kept walking and they followed. “Lady, where you from?”

“Canada.”

If we were by the right flag, they’d point up to it. “Red and white flag with big leaf. Canada. Capital, Ottawa. Two languages, English and French. You speak French?”

“A little.”

“Comment ca va?”

“Bien, merci.”

At night, older children gathered to play indecipherable games. There were fewer kids asking for money and I could sit on a bench in peace, watch the cockroaches scurry across the pavement, and enjoy the breeze coming off the water.

On my way back to the guesthouse, I stopped at an internet café that had air conditioning. The cold air created goose bumps on my flesh, turning my sweat-damp skin clammy. Flies beat against the flickering fluorescent lights. I paid for half an hour and hoped to see his name in my inbox. There were four new messages. Three were newsletters I’d stopped reading and one was a note

from my sister wondering if I was still in Cambodia and whether I was planning on going somewhere else or coming home. I read the first few sentences before closing it. I checked the website of some newspapers from home, read a few blogs, checked my bank account and then played solitaire for the remaining time, occasionally glancing up to watch a young man beside me shoot the head off an infidel in the video game he was playing.

•

There was a bar with a rooftop patio overlooking the city, and after the hot part of the day had passed, Sal and I sat up there drinking happy hour gin and tonics. I was told there were many bats in the city and that seeing one during the day was considered good luck. From our wooden deck chairs, we often caught a flash of something.

The cityscape was a mess of power lines that we attempted to trace as they weaved to and fro between the poles themselves and the window, door, balcony or railing they were attached to. Sal suggested we buy large scissors and place bets on what would go out and where.

Occasionally we played backgammon on the portable board he carried around or guessed at people's nationalities, but for the most part, we drank. After three or four, Sal started talking about the girl who stopped waiting for him after his four-month trip became six and then eight and then twelve.

Buzzed, we stumbled down the stairs and back out into the day, the heat dying on the sidewalks. I enjoyed walking around with Sal as it decreased the

number of times a driver solicited my business. When I was on my own, calls of, “Lady, motobike?” accompanied me down the street. Some days, I tried to count them, but usually lost track. I learned to not make eye contact and keep walking. The calls would fade into the background like the ticking of a clock.

“Lady motobike?”

“Lady motobike?”

“Lady motobike?”

What I liked most about Sal was that he didn’t feel the need to fill in the silences with chat. When Mark was absent, Penny complained about Mark’s naivety and cultural insensitivity. Without Penny, Mark liked to reminisce about drinkable tap water. Despite being much taller than me, Sal matched my slow pace and we ambled through the numbered streets with no destination in mind. He was trying to learn Khmer and often tried to sound out the swirly letters on storefronts or street signs. I could say “hello” and “thank you”, which I found was all I needed. Guesthouse and restaurant owners spoke almost perfect English with Irish or Australian accents, depending on the nationality of their teacher.

•

At the guesthouse, Penny and Mark were getting high in the lounge, waiting for us to come back so we could go for dinner. After a week of a cheap Indian buffet in the backpacker district, we decided to venture further afield. Downtown, restaurants with English menus offered “magic” pizzas that the

guidebooks were wary of. We choose a restaurant that was populated with other white people.

“They all want a certificate,” said Mark, somewhat angered by his inability to find work despite an undergraduate degree. “Tempting to just say I have one, I mean, how are they going to check? Connor, that Irish guy, said Saigon may be a better place to look, but I hear getting weed there is nearly impossible.”

“And ‘Nam?” Sal interjected, “that shit’s communist, and they eat dog.”

“Only at certain times of the month,” I said, having read that it was considered auspicious when the moon was full. Besides, dogs ran loose all over the city and it wouldn’t hurt to get some off the street. A few nights prior I had been walking back late at night and had passed a dog, dying on the curb, its throat ripped open and bloody. It was speckled black and missing patches of fur and panting heavily as if overheated. I quickly averted my eyes, but had not been able to get the image out of my mind. The next day when I was about to pass the same location, I steadied myself in preparation for the sight, but the dog was gone.

Our food arrived and we ate. Penny and Mark set on moving onwards.

•

The next day I walked along a street I had never been on. The motorbike drivers were out in full force, leaning against their bikes parked on the curb, smoking cigarettes and staring.

“Lady, motobike?”

“Lady, where you go?”

“Lady, motobike?”

“Lady, hey lady.”

A young barefoot child ran up to me, fingers in his mouth. I smiled, but kept walking and he held on to the side of my pants and walked beside me. The child stayed with me as I made my way into a more familiar area. Eventually I stopped, looked at him and firmly shook my head, doing my best to not look sympathetic. After a few seconds of staring back at me, he let go of my pants, turned around and walked back the way we came.

When I got back to the guesthouse, Sal was curled up on the couch with a Scandanavian-looking girl. Her blonde hair was elegantly spread behind her head and her long brown limbs draped between Sal's. When he saw me, he quickly straightened up and introduced me to Ingrid who was working at an NGO that rehabilitated amputees. I smiled before heading towards the stairs.

I lay down on the bed that took up most of my small room. A few feet above me, flies were walking along the edge of the fan. I pulled the cord and the whole thing shook violently as it spun above the bed, circulating the air. I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. The drain in the sink was coated with hair and slime and would back up if I kept the water on too long. I usually didn't smoke, but cigarettes were cheaper than bottled water and I found it a nice occupation when I was bored with reading and drinking and walking around. I pulled one out of the yellow package and lit it carefully away from the

fan. I knocked the ashes out of the open window and wondered what time it was at home.

•

Penny and Mark wanted to purchase some of the checked scarves they had seen locals wearing and one afternoon we decided to brave the market. The market was downtown; a large circular building with vendors set up outside, increasing the perimeter and making it difficult to find a way in. We weaved through an armada of motorbike drivers waiting for potential passengers before entering into the outside ring of vendors. Tables of foodstuffs and t-shirts stretched seven deep towards the outside wall of the market, covered with blue tarps that kept the sun out and the smells in. The market building, when we reached it, was less crowded and selling more upscale merchandise. We went back outside and the couple approached a table that had the scarves on display and started to bargain with elaborate hand signals and broken language. Mark had learned how to say “don’t cheat me” in Khmer from the guesthouse owner and was eager to use it. I exited the ring of vendors, purchased some sugar cane juice, and leaned against a cement partition in the shade.

Penny and Mark emerged from the sea of tarps, squinting into the sunlight. I waved them over.

“Five for a dollar,” Mark boasted, folding his newly purchased goods into small squares.

It was too hot to eat, so we got fruit smoothies, rolled a joint and sat on the grass by the river. When Penny and Mark decided to return to the guesthouse for a nap, I went to the internet café. The proprietor was sitting at a counter in the back, wrapped in a shawl. He pointed towards an empty terminal. The chair was cold as I sat down and I wrapped a foot around the leg, letting the cold metal rest against the flesh of my sandaled foot. There was an email from an American I had slept with in Thailand looking for recommendations for guesthouses and restaurants in Malaysia and a one-line message from a good friend at home wondering if I had been sold into slavery.

•

Sal and I decided to go to the museum. We had avoided it thinking that after seeing the temples in Angkor, a few pieces of ancient Khmer art would fail to move us. We quickly strolled through the badly translated exhibits before sitting in a nicely shaded courtyard in the middle of the building.

“You heading to ‘Nam next week?” Sal said, pulling up and crossing his long legs on to the wooden bench. A French-looking couple strolled by, film cameras hanging around their necks.

“I don’t know...maybe,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“It’s all same same, you know?” he said.

“But different. I hear they have bread. And good coffee.”

“Wherever you go, you’re always there.”

“God you can be so fucking obnoxious,” I said, looking into the blue of his eyes.

“I’ll still be here, you know.”

“I know.”

“Hold on,” he said, reaching his hand towards my face and gently removing a mosquito that had landed in a piece of hair by my cheek. “I’ll miss hanging out with you guys.”

“Yeah, we’ll miss you too.”

•

I gave the rest of my pot to Sal and bought a bus ticket. Saigon was just as cheap as Phnom Penh, and the rooms usually had air con, hot water and cable TV. I spent a lot of time watching MTV Asia and established a regular walking route, through the market and around the post-office, where I liked to sit on the long wooden benches and stare at the painting of Ho Chi Minh. The lobby of the guesthouse had a computer with internet and I’d check my email before going back to my room for a second shower of the day. Three new messages this time but none of them the one.



## Afterword

The Oxford English Dictionary dates the earliest recorded reference of the term “short story” to 1877 in the *Independent*. Though the mode was by no means new, the creation of the term signaled a shift in literature whereby the new form became “an index to the invention of modern fiction and its relationship to changing social, economic and cultural contexts” (March-Russell 1). Short stories are an appropriate medium for addressing the sense of self, place, love, and affective engagement in a postmodern world in which people can communicate via Twitter in 140-character updates, surf multiple tabs at once, and video chat on a cell phone.

My thesis is a cycle of short stories that explores how the self adapts, or fails to adapt, to the contemporary world. As the Internet, international travel, and antidepressants change the way we communicate, circulate, and think, it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile our internal and external selves. The eight stories in my thesis introduce characters who are isolated from society and other people and searching for a place and a person to call home. They attempt to hold on to their humanity while dealing with failing and/or dysfunctional relationships, new cities and technological advances, and group therapy. Faced with these obstacles, the characters drop out, both literally and figuratively.

Fiction often happens when there is a disruption of the status quo. My stories occur in that moment of transition when the current state of affairs gives way to another. However, my characters are often unable to take the necessary

steps to emerge on the other end. They remain in transit between cities, are unable to end bad relationships or be happy in good ones, and have trouble moving on. Like in the short fiction of Lorrie Moore, the predominately female protagonists are “exiles of sorts: on the lam, on vacation or simply on the road, in search of someone or something that’s been missing in their daily lives” (Kakutani). Unsatisfied with where they are and thinking that something better awaits them elsewhere, they are continually on the move.

“Baggage,” “Past Perfect,” and “Stories to My (Imaginary) Boyfriend” exemplify this restlessness and condense all the themes of my thesis into three short narratives. In “Baggage,” a man goes to meet his ex-fiancé at a train station and compares their past relationship to his present one. In “Past Perfect,” a woman imagines a future without her current boyfriend, trying to decide whether or not the relationship is worth preserving. In “(Imaginary) Boyfriend,” a collection of fragments details a deteriorating relationship. In all three, there is wanderlust of the heart. Even in a functional relationship the characters of “Baggage” and “Past Perfect” cannot help but feel like there may be something better. They are apprehensive about their current situation, over-think it to the point of anxiety, and then are unable to take the necessary steps to change. The first-person narrator in “(Imaginary) Boyfriend” is paralyzed by anxiety, obsessing over the details of her failing relationship though incapable of taking action to end or better it. Like many of Moore’s protagonists, she is “obsess[ed] with [her] own emotional temperature” (Kakutani). Aware of her feelings, she capitalizes on the poetic

possibilities of the situation, and like Moore's heroines, shows off her wit in language. She uses "wordplay as a means of survival" and "seek[s] solace in language," (Weekes, para. 9, 14) but words are an ineffective defense against getting hurt.

Though Moore's characters are contemporary, they rarely engage with technology beyond a landline. Younger and more tech-savvy, my characters are immersed in the Internet-age. They have cell phones and Facebook accounts; they check their email and not an answering machine. Used to communicating electronically, they are less loquacious than Moore's protagonists. Succinct both in their heads and in conversation, the characters are not as comfortable saying things out loud. While Moore's verbose characters leave little doubt as to their emotional state, my characters often keep to themselves.

A second influence is the short fiction of Katherine Mansfield whose stories, like mine here, often explore the complexity of everyday experience. Small, seemingly inconsequential details accumulate to form the narrative as the characters observe the world. Rather than participate, they sit on the margins and watch. Like Mansfield's Miss Brill, Millie, and Bertha in "Bliss," they are active-observers, but their speed of thought is not reflected in their stasis. Though unhappy in the present, they are scared of what the future could bring. "For them," W.H. New observes, "change threatens; the way things are – the static status quo – offers a kind of protection" (109). Quick-witted and street-smart, they isolate themselves from society, imagining that they are better than

others. They are proud of their astuteness and take pleasure in noticing details. While able to point out the follies of others, they are unsure of where their own faults lie.

The majority of Moore and Mansfield's stories occur in the city where the clash between the urban and the individual provides ample material. For hundreds of years, writers have been interested in how the urban environment supersedes the emotional part of being. From Charles Dickens to Paul Auster, "writers have depicted the material city cut off from a spiritual energy" (Lehan 5). As urban populations have steadily increased, this theme of urban depersonalization has become more and more prevalent in literature. Though the place is not always specified in my stories, the characters are all city-dwellers, dealing with their situations in the isolating and often anonymous urban environment. In "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) George Simmel writes that "the deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society" (324). The city, Simmel believes, threatens to wipe out our autonomy and personality, privileging the objective and quantitative capital and intellect over the subjective and qualitative social and emotional. The city's hostility to matters of the heart is reflected in my characters who struggle in their quest for genuine human connection; in cities from Canada to Cambodia, their efforts to form relationships are continually thwarted.

As in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* and Douglas Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the Canadian city often provides a background against which my characters' search for love, sabotage existing relationships with overthinking, and try to get over past hurts. Brand and Coupland's urban fables are typically set in Toronto and Vancouver, both internationally recognized big cities. Montreal, as the third Canadian metropolis, is also a popular setting with writers like Mordecai Richler, Leonard Cohen and Heather O'Neill setting novels there. Smaller prairie cities are much more rare in fiction with perhaps the notable exception of Winnipeg. From Ralph Connor's 1909 melodrama *The Foreigner* to Carol Shields' Pulitzer Prize winning *The Stone Diaries*, the Manitoba city has a rich literary history. Gabrielle Roy, Adele Wiseman and more recently, Miriam Toews and David Bergen, have all set novels in Winnipeg.

In *The Urban Prairie*, Guy Vanderhaeghe notes that Winnipeg is an exception to the rule. In general, he sees an absence of Western Canadian cities in literature and blames this on the fact that prairie writers lack the confidence that their cities are worthy of artistic representation and have few "appropriate models [as] art, more than most artists would like to admit, relies on imitation" (117). From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Winnipeg writers had a template for writing the city whereas other prairie cities, particularly those in Alberta and Saskatchewan, had no model to work from. Calgary in particular is largely and noticeably absent from Canadian literature. Even contemporary Alberta writers such as Aritha van Herk and Andrew Wedderburn set their novels in rural communities. One of my

stories – “Effexor for the Win” – is set in Calgary, but is vague about its location, relying on a few building names, recognizable to only those in the know. A new and shiny city with the money to keep reinventing itself, Calgary could be too in flux to write about, or its writers could be waiting for the critical mass needed to set the city in literary motion.

The urban world my characters live in is highly contemporary and they make use of technology in an unselfconscious way. The characters use social networking, check their email, and receive text messages. Their world is ephemeral, like the video of Montreal that Finn records on his cell phone in “Mobile.” These images do not occupy physical space and cannot be grasped or held on to. The intangibility and impermanence of digital living matches the characters transient lifestyles: without anything concrete, the characters are anchor-less, free to drift from place to place. As Generation Y, they lack social skills and reach out to people over digital space. They have grown up with the Internet and are use to computer-mediated communication (CMC). This form of communication has advantages and disadvantages. The largest of the latter is CMC’s ability to easily manipulate and distort reality and truth. In the absence of face-to-face interaction, visual clues and body language vanish.

Misrepresentation is easy. The city that Finn sees through his cell phone in “Mobile” resembles the real world, though differs from it considerably. The characters in “Internets” do not live up to their online profiles. When they meet for the first time, they are awkward and uncomfortable with their physical proximity.

The texts that the characters receive from their partners in both “Past Perfect” and “(Imaginary) Boyfriend” hyperbolize their senders’ personalities.

For introverts the “thought and review process” (Amichai-Hamburger 189) of CMC is a considerable advantage. The ability to compose an email or text and then edit it before sending provides greater control over the interaction. Social anxieties are alleviated as the user decides the terms of their communication: when to write a message, when to reply, and in what environment to do so. CMC also “creates the potential for high self-awareness,” (Amichai-Hamburger 189) a particularly appealing option to my characters who are overly conscious of their own feelings but reticent to express them. CMC allows them to reveal as much or as little as they desire. Socially awkward, shy, and unable to meet a partner in a traditional venue, the characters in “Internets” go to an online dating website. Though their initial meeting is stilted, and their relationship forced, a genuine and loving relationship eventually emerges. There is much unsaid in the protagonist and Sal’s in-person relationship in “Lady, Motorbike.” The protagonist’s main focus is on an emotionally laden email that may never arrive.

As communication increasingly moves online, other technologies keep apace and the digital and online world starts to displace the “real” one. Online shopping, banking, and libraries have eliminated many of the pretexts for leaving home. Games such as *The Sims* and *Second Life* simulate everyday experiences. Websites and technology even use words related to the human self to conflate the virtual and the real. The personal pronoun “I” is affixed to many of

Apple's products and software – iTunes, iPod, iPhone. Websites like *MySpace*, *Facebook*, and *Lava Life* use similarly “personal” diction. The result is that we become less connected to the physical world. Digital space begins to occupy what was once ‘real’ space. In “Mobile,” Finn films his journey to his dealer’s on his cell phone, replacing the real world with a digital one. However, as the recording later shows, this digital world is unreliable – removing people from the spaces Finn travels through. The cell phone literally disables the ability to communicate face-to-face. Though my Generation Y characters are shy, anxious, and uncommunicative of their own accord, technology exacerbates these traits and they remain isolated.

Guy Vanderhaeghe writes that often when western writers had to use an urban setting they “showed an extraordinary unwillingness to identify which cities they were writing about... [and] the result was the city *qua* city, a bare bones sketch of the urban with most distinguishing features eradicated” (120). My urban stories do not conceal their environment and aim to express the individuality of that specific location. While exploring surface level details of geography, speech, food, and architecture, the stories move beyond the surface and show how these details influence and relate to the individual. As Eudora Welty notes, “place...has the most delicate control over character...by confining character, it defines it” (11). As place shapes character, character also shapes place. An insider’s perspective differs widely from an outsider’s perspective. The former, native to the place, is comfortable and familiar with the environment while the latter is out



of place and may be removed from the community. The outsider does not belong, and this is often the crux of his or her story.

The outsider's perspective on place can be expressed through travel writing. A type of regional literature, the genre combines "the particular and the universal," so that the details of traveling (methods of transportation, lodging etc.) are not "wholly inert and discrete but are elements of a much larger meaning" (Fussell 16). The exterior voyage is supplemented with an interior voyage that takes the writing beyond that of a guidebook, a form closer to journalism that can easily become dated. Though the physical details of "Lady, Motorbike" may one day be inaccurate, the internal struggle of the character is timeless. Similarly, Charlie in "Minor Injuries" is new to Winnipeg, and she experiences the city as an outsider. Winnipeg's geography provides the background to her search for closure.

Though not all of my characters are foreign to their space, they are all in transit of one sort or the other and "no love or insight can be at work in a shifting and never-defined position, where eye, mind, and heart have never willingly focused on a steadying point" (Welty 23). While the city and its environs delimit the physical space of my stories, the characters' internal space is perhaps still more integral to these narratives. Exploring the often unrequited relationship between thought and action, the internal monologue is a major component of my stories. Primarily introverts, the characters are more concerned with their own thoughts and feelings than with the external world. Even in an environment that

encourages talking, Naomi in “Effexor for the Win” keeps to herself. Shy and reserved, she cannot express the root of her depression, though it occupies much of her thoughts. The Canadian protagonist in “Lady, Motorbike” is incapable of making her own decisions, waiting for validation from an email, waiting for Sal to make a move, and waiting for her fellow travelers to go somewhere that she can follow. She is disengaged from her surroundings, more focused on biding her time than the foreign space. These stories use first-person narration which allows the reader to be in the characters’ heads and see the disconnect between what they think and what they do. In a cycle of short stories more concerned with thinking and emotional life than action and external events, this is the expected point-of-view. However, only half of the stories use first-person, the other four – “Mobile,” “Internets,” “Baggage,” and “Minor Injuries,” – use third-person. Naturally succinct, many of the characters simply do not have the verbosity for their own narrative and require an outside presence to fill in the silences.

In my stories, love is always suspect and a cynical narrative voice presides. Though only in their 20’s, the characters are world-weary and disillusioned; their obsessive thinking has led to terse conclusions and a pessimistic outlook. George Simmel writes about how city dwellers “create a protective organ for [themselves] against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten [them]” (326). This “blasé outlook” (329) is common to my characters who have the seen

everything/done everything attitude of indifferent youth. Disenfranchised with a hostile world, they adopt an indifferent attitude.

The flâneur features in the three “city” stories – “Minor Injuries,” “Mobile,” and “Lady, Motorbike.” The protagonists in these pieces walk through a city, trying to find genuine human connection and waiting for an undefined something. As Michel de Certeau writes, “to walk is to lack a place, it is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (103). Like the characters in Mavis Gallant’s short story collection *In Transit*, the protagonist in “Lady, Motorbike” is displaced, longing for something she cannot articulate. She walks through Phnom Penh unable to exist in the present. “What the speech act is to language,” de Certeau writes, the urban system is to walking, “a spatial acting-out of the place” that attempts to actualize both the city and the characters’ desires (97-8).

What the characters desire, however, is uncertain. “Just as waiting seems to be the proper state of the impassive thinker, doubt appears to be that of the flâneur” (Benjamin 425). The protagonist in “Lady, Motorbike” is unsure what she wants, does not know where her allegiance lies, and is undecided as to how to proceed. Similarly, Charlie in “Minor Injuries” has run away from a relationship she is hesitant about. By walking (and skating) through Winnipeg, she tries to find a place to fit in. The act of walking provides the characters with time for contemplation and the journey becomes the medium by which the character is able to express themselves. While Finn’s journey in “Mobile” has a clear purpose – to get to his dealer’s – the journey itself as mediated through his cell phone is

bewildering. His dependence on the cell phone and the alienating effects of this technology becomes apparent as Finn's filming makes him an observer rather than an active participant in the places he moves through.

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin quotes Larousse on the subject of the flâneur:

A word dropped by chance will reveal to him one of those character traits that cannot be invented...those physiognomies so naively attentive will furnish the painter with the expression he was dreaming of; a noise, insignificant to every other ear, will strike that of the musician and give him the cue for a harmonic combination.... this external agitation is profitable: it stirs up his ideas as the storm stirs the waves of the sea. (453)

The flâneur's walking and observing is active, a participatory practice that inspires and engenders an outcome. The flâneur-type characters in my stories however change very little from beginning to end. The protagonist in "Lady, Motorbike" is unable to decide her own course while still waiting for that email from home. Charlie learns how to skate, but the conclusion she comes to about her situation is vague. These characters, and the others in my thesis, more closely resemble the more contemporary slacker figure. One step removed from the flâneur, the slacker is a more passive figure who is related to ideas of labour and leisure. Not actively participating in productive society, the slacker "[goes] against the grain of a culture committed to measuring all achievement by the rule of money, work, and status" (Rotella 73). The characters in my stories bum

around Phnom Penh and Winnipeg. They are never seen working or worried about finances. They have the laissez-faire attitude of the characters in Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*, a novel that one critic wrote "captures the listlessness that accompanies growing up in today's info-laden culture" (Jedeikin and Lovell). The characters have "terminal wanderlust," one of the many terms defined in the margins of *Generation X* and defined as an inability "to feel rooted in any one environment." People with this condition "move continually in the hopes of finding an idealized sense of community in the next location" (171). Many of my characters are on the move, thinking that relocation is the solution to their problems, but despite this continual locomotion, they remain uninspired, passive, and static.

Frequently written about and often mythologized, Generation X is characterized by this transient lifestyle and slacker mentality. Generation Y, the generation to which my characters belong, have both the attitude of Gen X and the technological familiarity of their own era. In the shadow of the more trendy Gen X'ers, the Gen Y characters' listlessness is magnified by existing in the shadow of their more popular forbearers as well as the rapid ascent of technology that has made slacking even easier.

The slacker ethos is incapable of feeling. Their empathy is diminished and they are unable to feel for themselves or other people. This is why the slacker has become such a well-known figure in popular culture. Slacker heroes like Ferris Bueller, Bill and Ted, and Harold and Kumar, disregard others and often

their own personal safety to accomplish their ends, resulting in comedic narratives. This male slacker is becoming a universal figure, an archetype for a new generation. The female slacker, on the other hand, is uncommon and elusive and when found is often the “underachieving smart girl” (Paule 87) whose slacking is an act of resistance to a society she cannot fit in to. Lelaina in *Reality Bites* is the valedictorian of her college class, but would rather make arty films about her friends than find meaningful employment. *Ghost World*, an exception to the male slacker movie canon, features two female slackers, Enid and Rebecca. After graduating from high school they choose not to go to college, and instead, play cruel practical jokes. The main tension in the film revolves around Rebecca’s desire to do something with her life – get a job, go to college – and Enid’s desire to resist these trappings of society.

The female slacker characters in my stories resist by refusing to participate in a world hostile to their existence. Naomi in “Effexor for the Win” does not want to associate herself with the other members of group therapy or with her fellow high school students. She is smart enough to get by by just showing up and is able to exploit this fact. In the case of Charlie in “Minor Injuries” and the protagonist in “Lady, Motorbike,” the characters physically remove themselves so they do not have to engage with their problems or the society that these problems came from. Faced with a bump in her relationship, Charlie in “Minor Injuries” leaves her world behind and hides out with her sister in Winnipeg. She does not get a job and spends her days watching TV, walking

around the city, and learning how to skate. The protagonist in “Lady, Motorbike” has left Canada, the place where she is suppose to fit in, for Cambodia, a place where it is expected that she will not fit in. In this foreign environment, her disengagement is not unusual. These female slacker characters are smug in the knowledge of their own intelligence, but lack the confidence to make use of their smarts. They do not value themselves enough to make the decisions necessary to fix their problems, and if they cannot fix their problems, no one can.

As “it is exceedingly rare for a slacker to be motivated enough to actually coordinate the effort required for change,” (Radwan 43) the stories often lack resolution. While there are glimmers of hope in the conclusions of my stories, there is still a long way to go for a happily-ever-after. The closure that the characters seek remains in the distance. Rejecting “the logic of unveiling [that] has become a dominant mode in Anglo-American writing,” (Baxter, “Burning” 47) my stories offer no hard truths or epiphanies. Instead, they are often “a series of clues but not a solution, an enfolding of a mystery instead of a revelation...images without the attached discursive morality” (Baxter, “Burning” 54). In this way, they are more true to life, which rarely offers neat endings. The characters do not disappear after the last page, but continue to pursue their ends.

Inspired and influenced by short story writers from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, my thesis is a cycle of short stories in which individuals attempt to reconcile their internal and external selves. Constantly in

transit, the characters are searching for a person or a place to connect to, though anxious and overly self-aware, they sabotage many of their opportunities to do so. Further complicating the characters' search for meaningful relationships is the hostile environment of the city in which money and reason prevail over community. Characters who are both familiar with and foreign to their environment demonstrate that the city is never a sympathetic place. In these urban environments, technology plays a major role in shaping the character's lives. Online and digital communication replaces face-to-face interaction and the characters become increasingly uncomfortable in the 'real' world; however, this 'real' world is less important than the characters' internal space where they feel most comfortable. Here, the tension between their speed of thought and their physical stasis becomes obvious; the characters are active observers and thinkers, but are unable to translate those thoughts into actions.

The characters' fluid observations and their penchant for walking suggest their common origins in the flâneur figure. But, while the city reveals itself to the flâneur, to my characters it reveals very little. The characters do find expression through their journey, but their desires are too unclear to be actualized. While the flâneur engages, they disengage. These characters are slackers, who, disenfranchised with the world, refuse to participate in it. The slacker figure is smart, but underachieving. He or she lacks the motivation to accomplish his or her end. Hence, the stories lack conclusive endings, and the characters who



inhabit them will continue to search, in their own haphazard ways and at their own stuttering pace, for their happily-ever-after.

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