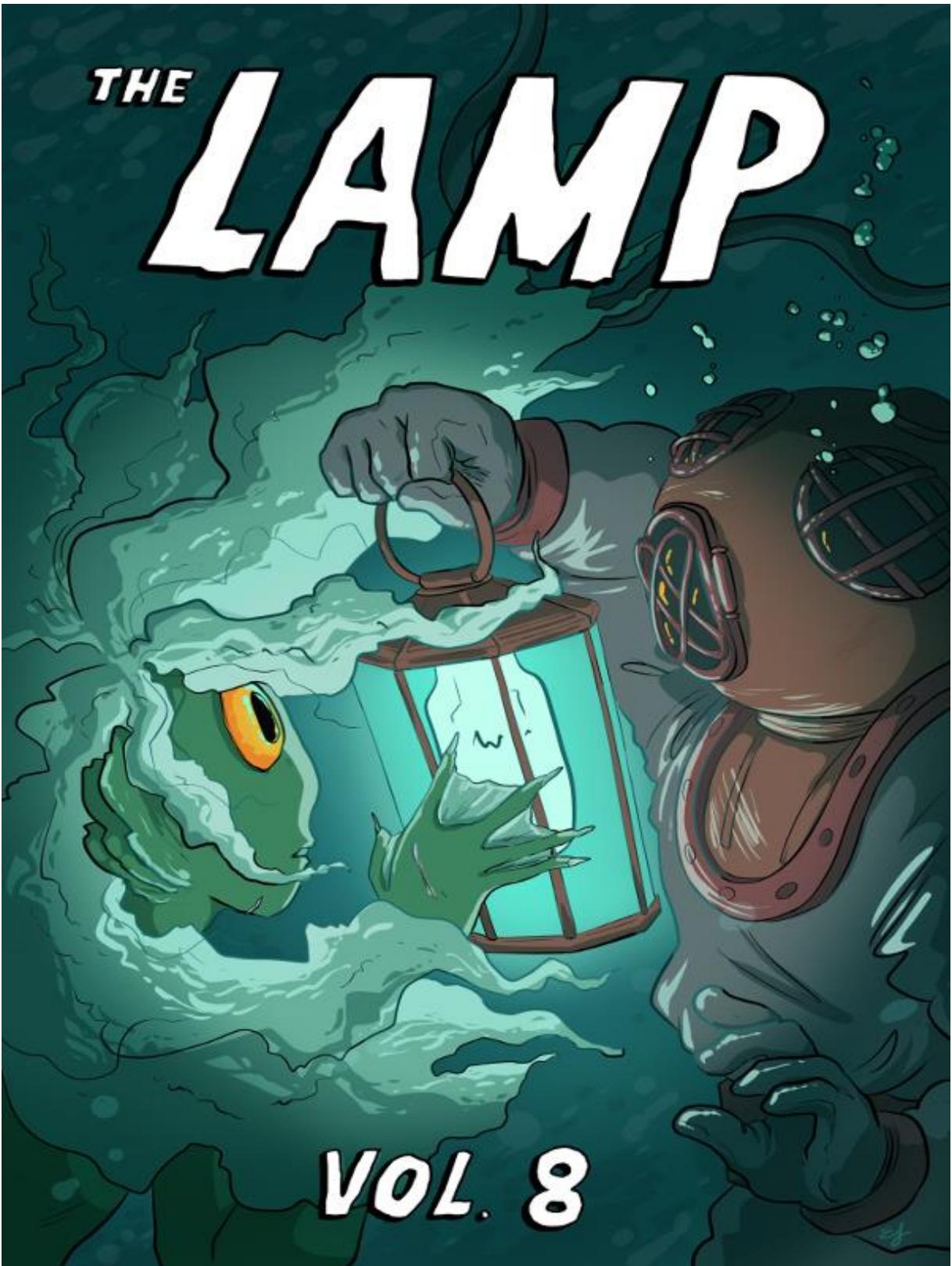


THE LAMP



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Mouthwash and Mass Destruction

Galadriel Watson

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck

Mom repeats the word as if her exhalations will douse the flames erupting behind my head. It's not me she's freaking about: it's the crap in the back. Me, I'm worried the parrot will mimic her and never shut up.

Stop the car, Mom says.

Dad stares ahead and says, I can't.

Stop the car, Mom says.

I can't!

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck

Fort McMurray burns. The bird screeches and flaps and a plume of white down sprays about. My lap and the back seat are confettied with feathers and tiny seeds.

I won't let on that I'm freaked too—Dad and I share this cool-cucumber thing and it's our duty to keep up pretenses. In addition to devouring the Alberta city, tongues of fire flick from a box wedged by our truck's tailgate. The air inside the cab is clogged with acrid smoke and my eyes sting and my throat feels scoured but I wouldn't dare open a window as I'd let more in. A joke inappropriately comes to mind: What's black and white and red all over? The forest beside us.

Ha, ha, not funny. What was once a shady, tree-filled wild patch is now a mixture of charred skeletal limbs—coal black—or flames that erupt either pure white or orangey-red like cheap lipstick. Sparks rain down. The houses to our right squat like sitting ducks—stoic ones, petrified but resigned as the firing squad takes aim. Cars, bicycles, wheelbarrows, gnomes wait in vain for people to fetch them. Beyond the steady roar of the fire, reminiscent of an airplane revving at take-off, I hear the high-pitched blaring of a chorus of smoke alarms. The temperature's infernal.

We're stuck in a traffic jam, in a last-minute forced evacuation. Couldn't they have told us a hell of a lot sooner? This morning they said all was fine. Now it's RUN! My armpits sweat, as does the small of my back. The parrot beside me takes a shit.

I look over my shoulder, squint into the headlights of the pickup behind us.

Mom, it's out.

Which box was it? she says.

I dunno.

Which box was it?

Hold your horses, I'll look.

Don't undo your seatbelt, Dad says.

Can't look if I don't.

Don't undo your seatbelt.

It's just for a second, Roger, Mom says. You really think we're going to get in an accident?

I'm on Mom's side; we're driving about as fast as a tortoise. And believe me, in this race between the tortoise and the flare, it's the flare that's gonna win. I undo my seatbelt, place my hand on top of the parrot cage for leverage—the bird screams in protest—rise as far as the roof will allow and pivot toward the houses that line the road

to Hell. Pretend la-di-da this is a normal drive on a normal day and there isn't an inferno gaping its glowing jaws to engulf us.

I dunno. Some box, I say.

The flaps of the box are yawning and jagged and singed but whatever's inside never caught and the fire's petered out. Plus it's hard to see 'cause the back is jammed with a mishmash of stuff and 'cause the world out there is dim and burnished like dusk despite the fact it's late afternoon or early evening by now. I was in grade twelve band and cells started ringing and the principal started announcing and vehicles started gathering and parents started herding kids into them, arms over shoulders, bodies hunched, as if a shooter just took out the cafeteria. Mom eventually showed up too, hands flapping, and I was glad mostly everyone was gone by then. Although most of my peers know my mom's the one with the outfits too eccentric, the patterns too large, the jewellery too layered, the presence too present, I attempt to keep our connection hush-hush.

Mom twists and tries to see past me. Way at the back? she says.

Way at the back.

To the left or the right?

My left or your left? I swing back around and my left and right switch. Driver's side, I say.

Oh god, oh god, oh god, thank you, Mom says.

We deflate to a halt inches from the bumper before us, then slowly restart our crawl. You'd think fleeing a city would be a hell of a lot more flightful.

Seriously, Marion? Dad says.

Mom rocks back and forth. The tips of her ears are pink.

You brought that shit? You have 10 minutes and an entire house and you brought that shit? He grabs at his collar, tugs it away from his throat.

Mom stops rocking. I brought that shit, she says.

You bring anything of mine?

Passports, taxes, insurance papers, laptops. Mundane crap, check.

You bring my mouthwash? I interject.

Dad says, The crap that gets us through life.

Mom says, Yup.

You bring my mouthwash? Will there be a place to buy mouthwash?

It's not that I'm worried about bad breath, although that's always a concern. It's that I got my smiley pierced last Saturday and have to rinse my mouth with alcohol-free mouthwash after every time I eat or the germs will move in and my mouth will be a raw pulsating mass of gangrene. Or something like that. My daytime mouthwash has been abandoned in my locker. My nighttime mouthwash sits in the cabinet under my bathroom sink. I lift my tongue to nudge the balls on each end of the U-shaped ring that rests against my two front teeth, and the flap of skin under the centre of my upper lip aches.

Right about now, Marion, Dad says, mundane would be fucking nice.

Marion used to be Lady Merry. A groupie. A hanger-on. A slut, I imagine. That's what they're snapping about. We've been in the car all of 55 minutes—or at least Mom and I have, since we picked up Dad later—and our entire past may soon be destroyed, but we've regressed to the 1980s.

When she was a teen, Mom hung out with this band—I like to call them the Dreadful Dorks but they were really the Fateful Forks. What a name! Open a dictionary and bam, pick two words and there you go. I tried that once and my band would be Merchant Fortress. Not bad. Except I don't want a band. Mom wants me to want a band. I play guitar—barely—and sing like poorly maintained bicycle brakes. I once said, Who needs a skill? I'll just drape myself over a random scrawny arm, flash some tit and I'm in.

Mom nearly slapped me for that one.

Thing is, I've seen her tits. And I'm not talking about from the breastfeeding perspective. I've opened the box—boxes—she's so dearly worried about. One is feathered boas and these sky-high gold heels, the heels as wide as bricks, and black pants that look like Lululemons at the top but then flare into these god-awful skirts like a flamenco dancer's that only start at the knees, and this black bustier with scrub-brush frills, and more. She found me looking and I cringed as if I'd been caught devouring all the cookies but she dove into the things like long-lost BFFs and yanked everything out and swung them round and was going to make me try everything on—or watch her do so. I hardly escaped.

The other box is newspaper clippings and signed albums—records!—and ticket stubs and whatever other artifacts you accumulate as a groupie. Photos, too, and that's where I saw her tits. With three other women, fellow groupies, hamming it up, a photoshoot with a bland grey backdrop, Mom's hair black and spiked, and her wearing nothing but a vinyl miniskirt and fishnet stockings. Not even shoes. Her nipple taking up half the real estate of her tiny breast and brushing some other girl's upper arm. Then another photo of her in this long tapestry vest and this guy—the lead singer Floyd, she's told me, this skeletal fellow with greasy hair and a honking big nose—kneeling before her and flaring open her vest and stretching his tongue past his cavernous nostrils toward this very same nipple.

No wonder Dad wants these to burn.

Dad's trying to text and drive, using the edge of his forearms to keep us straight while his hands cup the phone at the centre of the wheel. I put my own phone down a while ago—my friends are fleeing like us, as safe as you can be driving at twenty kilometres an hour through a ravenous pyre. There's only so much *Fckn hell, the Super 8s gone and Luv u! Praying 4 u!* and *Yo, got a marshmallow?* [sic] you can take. Plus reception's appallingly spotty.

Roger, put it down.

Yeah, Dad. You'd freak if I was texting.

Dad's multitasking skills are at their max: he's not able to drive and text and answer Mom and me too. His fingers keep working.

Dad!

Roger, fuck's sake, put it down.

When we picked up Dad at some random rendezvous spot between home and the shop—after weaving, cursing, backtracking, stalling behind traffic and finally ending up at the same location as him—he took over driving, abandoning his own car at the side of the road. He always drives when Mom's in the car. I think it's from her days of constantly being chauffeured. If someone else can do the work and you can toss your sandals aside and display your lime-tipped feet on the dash, all the better.

He also chucked more boxes into the back—vital office stuff, I guess. He'd meant to put them in the back seat with me but saw the parrot and yelled, Marion! What the hell is that?

Joyce Wheedlemeyer's.

Joyce who?

Ned's mom.

The woman down the street? You stole her parrot?

I could hear it screeching all the way from home. They weren't there. I didn't know if they'd be coming back. I couldn't leave it.

So we get the poultry, Dad said. Dinner, I guess, huh? He winked at me. At that time, we didn't know things were bad. This was police overreaction. A little afternoon drive—skipping school, skipping work, woo-hoo-hoo being truant—and a tale to tell at backyard barbecues, flipping burgers that smell far more smokily menacing than The Fire That Never Was.

As soon as Dad called the parrot dinner, Mom rounded the truck and slapped him out of the way and slammed the door as if he already had a butcher's knife in hand. Mom's sensitive about these things. We saw the remnant of this crash once on the QE2 between Edmonton and Calgary—the car like a crushed can of pop and the cattle-hauling semi on its side—and Mom started crying for the cows: But what happened to them? Are they okay?

Love, don't worry, they were on the way to the slaughterhouse anyways.

Dad sure has the touch.

Apparently, he did once. He managed to sweep her out of the Dreadful Dork's embrace and onto his Harley. The band had gone to look for bikes to buy and Mom was there too, testing out which seat would vibrate best, and Dad's dad owned the bike shop. Love at first sight and an amber-whiskey FXS Low Rider whisked my future parents away.

Now Dad owns Phillipson's Bikes in Fort Mac but rarely rides the things—his passion, he's discovered, lies in paperclips and spreadsheets.

I, for good or for bad, take after Dad.

Nononononono, they can't mean it. Turn around, Roger, turn around. Roger, go back!

Dusk blazes into day as the trees to our right that hadn't yet burned now catch and flare, scooping over us like a tidal wave. Around! Mom screams. Around!

There is no around. There's this street clogged with cars, hemmed in by flames and houses, with other cars backed up to turn onto it from side streets. Who built crappy communities with only one road out? We'll explode. We'll end up as singed corpses. My ring will fuse into my teeth.

Cut through a yard! That one, there! My god, Roger!

Phone in his lap, Dad flicks the turning signal, not to careen through a yard, leap over a pool, smash through a fence, but to shoulder check and glide into a gap another driver—probably just as terrified as us—has politely freed up in the left-hand lane, the one farthest from the flames. Dad swipes his brow with the back of a hand. I admire his bold move, since he's now on the wrong side of a two-way street. Not that it's a two-way street anymore, with people only going, not coming. Sparks and bits plummet down: it's

like a giant welder is welding a pipe and we're caught in the spray. A tree torches into purple as an unnatural midnight falls.

Waterfalls gush from the backs of my knees. The parrot's charcoal beak rattles the cage as its talons clasp the wire squares. A distant boom reverberates and I assume something has detonated: a propane tank, a car, a home.

Like counting sheep, I inventory my possessions to calm myself. If at least two of the boxes in the back are Mom's groupie things and at least two are Dad's work things and one is my guitar case and my backpack is at my feet and the seat beside me is stuffed with sleeping bags and the parrot and parrot things and apparently every box and can from our cupboards and a cooler of food from our fridge, that leaves little in this truck that may be mine.

Including my mouthwash? I never got an answer from Mom about whether she grabbed it or not. Do I want her to go into my bathroom cabinet anyways? Do I want her to see the box of condoms? God, she'd be shocked. Or rather, disappointed. No, no, no, not because I *have* condoms—she's the one who gave them to me, presented them to me when I was 14 as if they were a regularly required necessity like tampons. I don't want her to see them 'cause the top remains sealed and coated in dust.

The wills? Dad says. He must be doing his own inventory: The Things We Left Behind. Today's a capital letters kind of day.

That other filing cabinet, Mom says. Shit, I forgot.

Marion, seriously?

Roger, seriously. What're we going to leave Pris anyways, a molten key to a fused super mailbox?

Everything could be fine.

If everything's going to be fine, the wills can stay where they are.

Yes, my name is Pris. Short for Pristine. As in super clean, spotless, sterile, immaculate, untouched, untarnished, untainted. For someone who hopes her daughter isn't a virgin, Mom sure named me wrong. Honestly, I think she and Dad were stoned and did that flip-open-a-dictionary thing.

I go by Pris, which has equally wonderful connotations: prude, sissy, stuffy, puritanical, goody-two-shoes.

My best friend Suze, on the other hand, likes to call me P, spelled Pee. The joy! Suze and I are having this down period right now—not that I hold Pee against her. It's just what we do, have these down periods. Lately Ben is the problem. Not *problem*, per se, 'cause he's super decent (boringly so?) but 'cause Suze's lips can't unsuction from his long enough to carry on a conversation. Or say good morning. Or acknowledge I exist.

In a text a few minutes ago—a.k.a. a lifetime—Suze said she and her family are fleeing up north, to the safety of the oil sands camps, while we're fleeing to the south. Never the twain shall meet. The last I saw of her, her fingers were slipping from Ben's, slow-mo style, arms outstretched, while their parents pulled them apart in the school parking lot. So yeah, a down time for us all.

Stop it Roger, put that down, drive!

I *am* driving, Dad snaps. He's still texting intermittently, a letter here, a lurch forward in the truck, another word. It's work, I'm the owner, I have to make sure everyone's okay.

Mom turns from him, toward the blaze. I can see her reflection in the side-view mirror, that she's closed her eyes. Her skin glows as if she's at a basement rec room party and someone has thrown a red scarf over the lamp to create a mood. With her features dimmed, I can almost picture her as a teenager, smoke from non-wildfire sources coiling about her head.

Dad, I say, why are you worried about work people now? Didn't you make sure everyone was out? Aren't you supposed to go down with the ship?

I do. I am. It was confusing. I'm just making sure. Just let me be, everyone, okay? Look, see, there.

I have no idea where we are—our drive's been too convoluted, too slow, too smoky, too incinerated—but ahead there's an intersection. No rules of the road being followed here, cars thumping over medians, but there are rules, yes, there is order, there are police lights and emergency vehicles and police officers nearly invisible in the gloom waving their arms to go right, go right, go right. We go right.

When we drive through Hell, we don't talk.

We had thought we were out. We had thought being out of the city meant being out of danger. We had only just entered it.

The highway is like one of those glass underwater aquarium tunnels that let you walk right through the jellyfish and sharks. Except this isn't watery, soothing, pale blue. This is the underworld. This is gliding into the furnace of a crematorium.

The truck's temperature gauge says it's fifty degrees inside.

Dad grips the wheel. I lean forward to grasp Mom's hand. Even the parrot is silently in awe.

As if a curtain is drawn back, we exit. The sky is dusty blue. The trees on either side of us are blanched and parched from a dry winter and hot early spring, but alive. We're out of the not-so-amusing amusement park haunted house. I taste blood and think of my smiley but no, it's my lower lip that bleeds. I have ripped off skin.

My name is...

My name is...

My name is...

My name is...

I'm trying to prompt the parrot to tell me its name but it's not complying. I think it's something bizarre like McGillivray. I've only met it once before, years ago, while selling raffle tickets to raise funds for a school band trip to Calgary. Mrs. Wheedlemeyer needed her purse and led me to her kitchen. There the bird squawked about, producing a cacophony you'd make too if you had to inhale such a fug of cigarette smoke.

Out of one frying pan and into another.

Since leaving Hell, things have gotten smoother. Not faster, mind you—it's still a tortoise-bump-against-tortoise world. But none of our surroundings pose an immediate threat of consuming us. The smoke is the tiniest titch less.

The bird bites, from what I remember. For the first time, I really look at it as it swings on its wooden perch. It's camouflage green with some orange on its chest like it blushed in the wrong place. Its head gradients into turquoise and its beak is sharp, sharp, sharp as it pecks at this pockmarked white thing, like bone, hanging on a string.

It's got this nasty black tongue that thickly pokes out. Every once in a while it cocks its head and looks at me, wondering why the hell I can't remember my name. Every once in a while it shakes its whole self like a wet dog and the feathers and seeds multiply on my lap.

Dad keeps texting, one eye on the traffic, the barest contact of body parts keeping us moving and straight. Mom keeps her eyes shut, shudders.

When will we go back? Will we ever go back? Will there be a back to go back to?

If your house is the only one standing, would you rather it had burned down?

Will I graduate? Where will I graduate? I have that English assignment due Thursday and a calc test Friday and the grad dance is in five weeks and I need to pluck up the courage to ask Jared to go—or to nudge him into asking me, or to nudge Suze into nudging Ben into nudging Jared to ask me. Jared of the unkempt hair that curls into the sweetest ringlet behind his ear, Jared of the rusty mint Mustang, Jared whom I used to eat sand with and then ignored for over a decade and then who recently, magically became *more*. It's amazing how a plaid shirt can fall just right on someone, when on anyone else it would just hang.

Which direction is Jared driving in right now? Did he save his Mustang? Is he thinking of me?

Ha.

I probably wouldn't have mustered up the balls to ask him to grad anyways.

I've already been conditionally accepted to go to the University of Calgary this fall, after another summer of schlepping designer coffees, to pursue a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting. Mom groaned when she heard that one, while Dad squeezed my wrist.

Accounting! she said. What kid dreams of going into accounting!

Then I got my smiley pierced. I'm not certain what it was about—not an act of rebellion, as Mom thought it was the best thing since sliced bread. Reconciliation? A happy medium? Give and take? Sorry your daughter's a math nerd, but at least she looks cool? It's not like I hate Mom—I just wish she'd tone it down. Sometimes she can be fun. Sometimes I want her to be proud.

I fainted during the piercing, wobbled my way out when it was done. I can't bite into an apple. I can't even bite into a strawberry. I fret about how the dentist will properly clean my front teeth. I'm going to become addicted to mouthwash. I fantasize about the tingle on my tongue.

Speaking of which, my stomach is grumbling but I have no mouthwash to wash food down with. Good thing I could stand to lose a little weight.

I'm doing a butt-cheek dance, my knees banging against the bird cage, against the door handle, against the back of Mom's seat. I feel like I haven't stood up in weeks.

Are we there yet? I say. Wherever there is?

Anzac, Dad says.

It sounds like Prozac and for a moment I think he's telling me to take a chill pill.

Huh?

Anzac, he repeats. He jiggles his cell. Someone from work told me there's centre set up there. We can get some info.

The info is that Fort Mac is toast, Mom says. Let's go straight to your mother's. Even if they get the fire under control it'll take days. I'm not holing up on some cot.

This is the first time I've ever heard my mother elect to see Dad's mom, who lives south in Edmonton. Grandma's not too keen about the Lady Merry days and Mom's not too keen about any of Grandma's days (cept giving birth to my dad, I guess). I like Grandma's brownies.

We'll start by going to Anzac, Dad says.

In addition to Prozac, the name reminds me of Anatevka. Mom, being musically inclined, is addicted to musicals and has made me watch *Fiddler on the Roof* at least a dozen times. At the end, forced to flee, Tevye and his family and the other displaced Russian Jews mourn the loss of their village, Anatevka. I've always wondered what the big deal was. People up and move all the time. Now their plaintive wailing resonates.

Anzac's out of the way, Mom says.

Anzac'll be good. We'll breathe for a moment. Take stock.

Anzac's out of the way. It's much smarter—

Shut up, Marion. You get your boxes, I get Anzac.

The gas tank wins. The centre in Anzac is ahead, just ahead, and the needle is plummeting and Dad's shuffling forwards and backwards in his seat like a toddler encouraging a push-bike to zoom. He's not managing to create much momentum. We're spluttering. We're puttering. We're stalled. We roll to a slanted stop barely off the road.

Damn! Damn! DAMN! Dad is whacking the steering wheel with his fists and stomping on the pedals and thumping his back against the seat and the whole truck rocks and the parrot screeches and Mom starts crying and I pull my knees to my chest and press my eye sockets into my kneecaps and light explodes and I can't see and I can't hear, can't hear, can't hear, can't hear.

DAMN!

The door slams, the truck stops rocking and the bird flutters to a stop. I see Dad heading on foot down the highway and Mom sobs and if I squish my eyeballs hard enough, maybe they'll burst into my brain and I'll die.

A car rumbles past. Another. Another.

Eventually, fingers touch my shin.

Come on, sweetie. Mom is pulling it together. Let's get out. It's just a little bit ahead. We can walk. Grab food, I'm starving. Come on, sweetie. It'll be okay. I've got granola bars, I think in that one, there. Maybe they'll have water at the centre. They must have water at the centre. God, I'm thirsty. And gas. We'll get going again soon.

I give in and lift my head and my vision fireworks back to life. Dad's out of sight. Why would he abandon us? I rummage where Mom tells me. The first thing I pull out isn't food.

My rug-hooking kit? I say. It's this do-it-yourself kit for little kids that I got as a game prize at Suze's birthday party years ago, a square of potato-sack-type fabric with a sheep printed on it. Like painting by numbers, you're meant to hook the pre-cut yarn into it. I did all of five knots and was done.

I cry from the absurdity and Mom laughs between tears.

You gotta grab what you can grab, she says. Come on, let's get out.

I unfold from the truck like a butterfly from its cocoon. Flap my wings. Fill my lungs. The trees are squat here in northern Alberta. I bless them all.

Mom points down the road ahead of us. Says, It's not far.

We start, the brown grass tall enough to scratch my ankles at the gap below my capris. Mom stops.

Think we're forgetting something, she says.

Oh god, yeah, shit. (Mom likes it when I swear.)

I can't haul the whole cage so I dare to unpin the door. I dare to point my index. I dare to insert my arm. The parrot watches, head cocked.

He won't fly away? I ask.

Mom calls from somewhere outside, near the back of the truck: I'm sure his wings have been clipped.

I inch my finger toward his claws, hooked over a wooden perch. Closer, closer, closer. Watching the beak. The back of my finger touches his reptile-skinned toes. He steps—one, two—and my arm weighs down. I pull him out of the cage. I pull him out of the truck. I pull my hand to my chest and cup the little body with my other hand. MacGyver—that's it, named after that tacky TV show. He's soft and he's warm.

Okay, right, ready, I say.

Mom's laden down too, her two boxes of groupie mementos stacked in her arms. She can't see over the top, but peers around a side.

Dad has the keys, she says. I can't lock them inside.

Doesn't the truck auto-lock after a time?

I'll bring them anyways.

We stop short of the chaos of the rec-centre parking lot. On a small rise of lawn, Mom lowers the boxes, shakes out her arms, stretches her neck. I place the bird on the corner of one of the boxes, run a finger down his back.

We spot Dad.

Dad's not too far away, leaning against a burgundy minivan. Dad has his arms around a woman, a woman with wavy blond hair, a woman in a short pink skirt. She's curled into his chest. He's flattening himself against her. He's kissing the top of her head.

Isn't that—

I think it's Deb, a saleswoman from Dad's shop. A hot current shoots through me.

Mom turns away from them. Mom sits. Mom leans against a box. Mom closes her eyes. The parrot finally speaks: fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck

When the bird soon gets bored, Mom says, It's nice to get some fresh air. Got those granola bars?

I turn from Dad too. I hand Mom a bar I'd stuffed in my sweatshirt pocket. I open another and break off a piece for the bird. I consider eating one myself but worry about mouthwash. I consider unscrewing one of the end balls of the smiley ring and threading out the ring and tossing it across the lawn. I consider being an accountant. I consider Jared's pale eyelashes. I consider Suze's pink fingernails flicking the grimy light switch in an oil sands trailer. I consider whiling away the time making a hooked-rug sheep, except I left the kit in the truck. I consider the hazy sun on my cheeks and the home I may or may not have.

I leave in the mouth ring. I gingerly bite into the bar. Maybe they'll have mouthwash in the centre.