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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES

VOLUME XIX 2021



THREE.

PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE CANADA
STUDENT AWARD FOR FICTION

PANORAMA
BY KATHE GRAY

A LETTER FROM BIELEFELD
BY MARK BURGESS

SANCTUARY
BY MELANY FRANKLIN

Three.

PANORAMA

BY KATHE GRAY

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SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES



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Canada

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All pieces in *Three* are works of fiction. Most names, places, characters, and events are the product of the authors' imagination, and any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. In those few instances when the authors mention real persons and reported events, it is within a similarly fictionalized context and should not be construed as fact.

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Introduction

One thing that stands out about Kathe Gray's story *Panorama*, winner of the 2021 Penguin Random House Student Award for Fiction, is its brevity. Only three pages long, it nevertheless packs a wallop.

Taking that lesson, I'll make this introductory letter very brief. Congratulations to our other two winners, Mark Burgess for his brilliant and provocative story *A Letter to Bielefeld*, and Melany Franklin for her engaging novel excerpt from *Sanctuary*, and thanks to our jury of Harriet Alida Lye, Guglielmo D'Izzia, and Ward Hawkes.

Thanks also to Beth Lockley, Melanie Cheng, Angela Lee and everyone at Penguin Random House Canada for their support of this award. Thanks to my SCS colleagues Karen Fraczkowski, Benjamin Wood, Meredith Koehler, Eduardo Padilla Lares, Cecille Bugaran Agmata, Igor Purwin, and to our new Dean Catherine Chandler-Crichlow. Finally, thanks to our incredible instructors: these stories are evidence of their good work.

Here's hoping that when I write this letter next year, this pandemic will be over.

Enjoy the stories!

Lee Gowan

Program Director, Creative Writing

University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies

Each year, we continue to be inspired by the learners of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies (SCS). The passion, dedication and commitment to their writing and to each other is a hallmark of this unique community.

The strength of the creative writing community is why SCS is honoured to recognize the 2021 Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction. From a collection of incredible submissions, the jury has selected Kathe Gray's *Panorama* as the award recipient. *A Letter from Bielefeld* by Mark Burgess and Melany Franklin's novel excerpt *Sanctuary* received honourable mentions.

We are proud to play a part in developing Canadian talent and connecting writers to industry leaders like Penguin Random House Canada. Of course, the accomplishments of our learners would not happen without the talents of our celebrated, engaged instructors, to whom we are grateful for sharing their experience and insights.

Congratulations to the award winners—Kathe, Mark and Melany—and to all who provided submissions. You have shown true dedication to pursuing your passion, and we hope you continue to see the rewards that come with doing what you love. Thank you to our instructors; your guidance, expertise and devotion influences learners and colleagues alike. Finally, a sincere thank you to Penguin Random House Canada, whose long-standing commitment and leadership makes this award possible.

I wish you all the best and commend your commitment to lifelong learning.

Yours truly,

Catherine Chandler-Crichlow, PhD

Dean, University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies

On behalf of Penguin Random House Canada, it is my honour to congratulate the recipients of the 2021 Student Award for Fiction: Kathe Gray, who is the winner of this year's award for *Panorama*, and finalists Mark Burgess for *A Letter from Bielefeld* and Melany Franklin for *Sanctuary*.

After such a long time spent patiently kindling our hopes for a return to some of our familiar ways of life against all the uncertainty the future still holds, it is fitting that each of these three winning stories meditates on displacement while still catching on the possibility of return, redemption, and regrouping. As we continue to forge on, the richly imagined worlds our honoured authors have created invite us briefly to escape, and then to return with our sense of wonder and curiosity a little restored.

I hope that, while reading these stories, you, like me, will be filled with anticipation for what their authors will do next. All of us at Penguin Random House Canada are proud to continue our support of emerging writers, and inspired, especially now, by their ability to create whole worlds with words that change the way we look at our own surroundings. Kathe, Mark, and Melany have demonstrated this most wonderful power of fiction and proven there is much to look forward to in Canadian literature.

Our thanks, as always, to Lee Gowan for his leadership of the Creative Writing program, to Dean of the School of Continuing Studies Catherine Chandler-Crichlow, and to all the program's instructors. Thanks as well to this year's jurors, authors Harriet Alida Lye and Guglielmo D'Izzia and Doubleday Canada Assistant Editor Ward Hawkes, and to Production Assistant Melanie Cheng for her invaluable support.

Congratulations once more to Kathe, Mark, and Melany. I hope that their work will transport you as it did me.

Beth Lockley
VP, Marketing and Communications
Penguin Random House Canada

Finalists for the Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction 2021

NAME OF STUDENT	TITLE OF ENTRY	NAME OF INSTRUCTOR(S)
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\$2500 WINNER:

Kathe Gray	Panorama	Dennis Bock Ken Murray Chelene Knight
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HONOURABLE MENTIONS (2 \$1000 Prizes):

Mark Burgess	A Letter from Bielefeld	Russell Smith
Melany Franklin	Sanctuary	Kim Echlin Dennis Bock

FINALISTS:

Kimberley Alcock	Twilight	Kim Echlin
Diana Blackmore	Amid the Spaces	Diane Terrana
Jim Colbert	Alphabet: Twenty-six Letters	Catherine Graham
Caitlin Garvey	The Chrysalis Protocol	Bianca Marais
Susanne Kwon	Jack that 8	Bianca Marais
Nadja Lubiw-Hazard	Saving Seraphina	Marina Endicott
Megan Tady	Dark Horse	Bianca Marais

PANORAMA

KATHE GRAY



KATHE GRAY is a doctoral candidate in Theatre and Performance Studies at York University in Toronto. Before returning to grad school, she was an award-winning book designer who specialized in exhibition catalogues, illustrated coffee-table books, and academic monographs. She likes to think the love of word and image that characterized her graphic design is also evident in her fiction and poetry. Kathe and her family live in Guelph, Ontario.

As in other villages across the plains, the people of Nurmi, Saskatchewan, spoke of that January day for decades on. Old-timers would recall the unusually warm morning. How the snowbanks began to soften before the school bell rang. The children—and here the old-timers mostly meant themselves—skipped off without hats or coats. The next generation, who'd been raised on the stories of their parents and grandparents, added details: the sun had never felt so glorious. Women threw open the windows and hung laundry on the line. Men in shirtsleeves steered their herds to the shortgrass. Oh, the music of sudden snowmelt spilling into the coulees.

Midafternoon, the warm breeze stilled, and, just for a minute, a person could hear every little sound for miles. When the moment lifted, the sky had grown baleful and cold. The snow began not ten minutes later, so thick your own hands would disappear in front of you, so icy eyelashes froze shut. Mercury plummeted. “The wind was like a witch and her sisters,” Kalle Jarmo was known to say. Everyone knew Kalle was partial to a curious turn of phrase, but they agreed he was right. Its howling, its frigid breath. Its impenetrable force.

Some say that Kirsti Larsdotter led her students to safety with clothesline. Others say they groped their way to her boarding house, following one another by sound, all bleating like sheep. Danuta Maki gave birth by herself, huddled with the baby under a heap of bedding and clothes. Her husband, gone to town for coal, made it home on foot, four toes lost to frostbite. Old Reverend Korhonen was found steps from the manse, hands clasped in prayer, they say. The snow worked its way through

thresholds and keyholes, drifts of it gathering indoors. Cattle and sheep froze in the fields. By nightfall, the snow was knee-high. None out would survive, except the boy who crept into Yannik Salmond's piggery to bed with the hogs.

The villagers told these stories freely. Not so the story of Harakka, the farmer who travelled the township with his horse and wagon in the days after, digging the dead from snowbanks. He'd take them to his empty barn, his livestock lost to the blizzard. On earth strewn with straw, he laid them down in groups of family and covered their bodies with quilts his mother, now gone, had made. In his barn, the villagers found their lamented, and the farmer treated each of them with the same kindness he'd paid their kin.

Harakka had not always been known as such. He'd been christened Theodore Pasi Nilsson. As a boy, he'd been Teddy, but when he passed into manhood, the villagers called him Theodore Jr., his father being Theodore too. Only Tilde Heino ever called him Theo, accepting the carving he'd made of her and her collie. Then touching his hand, saying, "I adore you, Theo, but I'm promised to Arne Fosburg." Of course, the postmaster's son. Eventually, his bachelorhood, his greying temples, and his father's death made the suffix obsolete and, for reasons no one can recollect, he became plain Nilsson.

As for the nickname, perhaps it came from the children who knew him only by his broad back, his ability to lift and hold human heaviness. Maybe they thought him a sort of collector, like the black-and-white birds they saw come spring. Harakka, the magpie.

But in the old country, the magpie was a fearsome bird whose spiteful laugh foretells misfortune. As the villagers weighed their losses, they grew dark. Whispers began. Nilsson called up the storm, they said, stole our luck for himself, harvested our loved ones like grain. Reverend Lindqvist alone could have stopped the absurdity, but he was new to the parish, new to the cloth. He was still frightened of death and spooked by the man who had proven himself its equal.

So the villagers began to treat the farmer with a chilliness that bruised him. His trips into Nurmi became sporadic, until, finally, Arne Fosburg told the Reverend some months had passed since he'd last been seen.

“With winter upon us”—and here Fosburg deliberated on the proper name to use—“Nilsson should have been in for stores.”

Fosburg drove the Reverend to the Nilsson quarter. He and his horse watched from the road as the Reverend made his way up the lane, uncleared of snowfall. To the house, unoccupied, curtains drawn. To the barn, empty, but for a large worktable. The table was bare, so it seemed, until the Reverend saw it was not. He pushed the barn doors wide, trod across the wintery light. Fine shavings of wood tempered his footfalls. The air stirred, sweet and fresh. On the table, the schoolhouse, the mercantile. A figurine swept the steps of the church. Another carried a basket of lunch to a threshing crew, hand on her rounded belly. It took him moments to understand.

Ah, a replica of Nurmi and its outlying fields as though seen by a crow. Everywhere—he could distinguish them now—miniscule figures carved from birch. The Reverend squatted to examine them. Old Jarmo hunting grouse. Tilde Fosburg digging in her garden, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. The Neimen twins playing ball, though he’d buried them after the storm. Annika Kallio, Matti Lahti, Tyko Virtanen, he’d buried them too. Oh, Nilsson had turned back time, returned the community to life.

In that moment, Reverend Lindqvist understood that faith was almost always misplaced. He thought of the safety matches he was constantly searching for in pockets and drawers. Never where he expected them to be, always somewhere else. You couldn’t feel the heat until you lit them, but you couldn’t light them until you knew where they were. Now he felt the warmth.

The Nilsson farm lay fallow for five seasons after the villagers first saw the panorama. Then Jonas Lindqvist, no longer with the church, learned to run the plough. Theodore Nilsson had disappeared. The villagers, though, swear even now that if you are stuck in a drift on a winter road you can hardly see for snow, he will come out of the storm to push you free.

A LETTER FROM BIELEFELD

MARK BURGESS



***MARK BURGESS** is a Toronto-based writer whose fiction has appeared in *Nowhere* and *The New Quarterly*. He's reported on federal politics, advertising and travel, and is currently the editor of a financial magazine.*

My train arrived in Bielefeld before dawn. I couldn't see the ash cloud but it must have been there, lurking in the atmosphere, somewhere between the station's orange lamps and the fading stars, like a bad dream you can neither remember nor entirely shake. I'd just had one of those dreams. At the airport, on countless screens, a volcano coughed dust at Europe. I would have flown if the ash cloud wasn't obstructing hundreds of flight paths, if it wasn't real. Still, I had my doubts. I couldn't help scrutinizing the bronze sky as I staggered from the station into the damp autumn morning, eyes bleary from makeup and everything else, wheeling luggage that must have been mine, not entirely convinced of where I was or why I had come, or why getting there had been such an ordeal. I had conspiracies on my mind, thanks to you.

I won't get carried away and confirm that Bielefeld is a real place. My first instinct was to buy a city map, for evidence, but the station's kiosk was closed. There will be plenty of time for splashy verdicts, and I'm in no state to make authoritative claims about anything. Fortunately I'm here to play a reporter, not to be one.

After an hour's wait at Stansted I had managed to talk to a woman wearing the airline's blue silk scarf. She looked like one of those colourful talking birds, with her beak of a nose and orange lipstick, repeating words until they lost all meaning. "Eruption plume..." "Extremely fine ash particles..." "Cancelled." Stansted, the last place I should have gone. You told me so. But I wasn't really thinking at that point, was I, Richard? What was that terrible, melodramatic phrase

you used as I struggled with my coat and luggage, desperate to leave your London flat? I was sleepwalking toward my fate, you said.

I showed the bird lady my boarding pass when I reached the front of the line, which was really more of a scrum. I knew it was a silly, pointless gesture, as if I had been waiting in a proper queue, as if ignoring the terminal's chaos would mean it wasn't happening and I could sneak through some hole in reality and check my bag and board a plane to Bielefeld, flying through untainted skies.

The flight is cancelled, the woman said. She didn't waste eye contact on me. She had sized me up with half a glance and ruled me unworthy of even a flash of her remaining compassion. You would say that's flattering, but I didn't take it so well. The ladies' room was overflowing. Untidy bodies making doomed attempts at hygiene, settling in for the long wait. Not a good place to cry. Outside was better. It was astonishingly quiet. Quieter than it had been in decades, I would hear on the news. No planes taking off. I could hear birdsong. It was sunny, not a trace of ash. I sat down in the sun, on my suitcase, and checked my email. Nothing from you. There was an exhaustive message from the military simulation's administrator. Flight disruptions, alternative routes to Bielefeld. Don't even bother going to airports. This was written in bold, underlined, asterisks on either side. The simulation would be delayed by one day, but no more. The simulation must go on! I had to be in Bielefeld the following night.

I closed my eyes, face to the sun as if the ash cloud were about to block it out for good. I thought about how far away Bielefeld was without airplanes, though I think everything felt far away just then, even you. I thought about what you had told me: the Bielefeld Conspiracy. We were at the pub in Liverpool Street station. I had drifted in exactly eight hours after boarding a plane in Toronto and inhaling several gin and tonics. I must have looked like a shadow version of however you remembered me, a ghost with a hangover. You were sipping something amber and flat, reading your own newspaper a little sheepishly. Exactly how I remembered you. In less than 24 hours all European flights would be cancelled, but we had no idea. You told me about the Bielefeld Conspiracy, a joke conspiracy that claims Germany's twentieth largest city doesn't

exist. Even that claim to relevance, “twentieth largest city,” sounds forced, you said, an attempt to ground the place in census and modest status. What else? The CIA, Mossad, aliens. Cars with Bielefeld license plates dispatched across the continent to maintain appearances. Train schedules that don’t allow enough time for a stop. Angela Merkel once agreed to participate in a town hall in Bielefeld, “if it exists at all.” This was Angela Merkel joking, also implausible. I don’t know if you finished your beer. You didn’t finish the Bielefeld story. Soon we were in your flat, an abrupt collapse into familiar things, positions; things and positions I alternate between savouring and trying to forget, or pretending they never happened at all. That’s a bit too coy, you might say. The London stopover was my idea. The jet lag, though, the gin and tonics. And this ash cloud providing cover, shrouding our latest relapse.

I read about Bielefeld as I sat on my suitcase in the sun outside Stansted, possibly crying, possibly accompanied by birdsong. It was easier than figuring out what to do. The city’s marketing department had made the most of the conspiracy. It ran a contest offering a million euros to anyone who could prove the city doesn’t exist. But how do you prove a negative? It would be like proving I don’t have a job to return to in Toronto, or that I don’t love you anymore.

“Lena,” you asked in the pub. “Have you ever been to Bielefeld?”

No.

“Do you know anybody from Bielefeld?”

No.

“Do you know anybody who’s ever been to Bielefeld?”

Also no.

But that proves nothing, I said. I don’t know anyone who’s been to Essen, either, or Bonn, or Madagascar. I don’t even know anyone who’s heard of Bielefeld.

“Except for me,” you said.

True, except for you.

Bielefeld’s Wikipedia entry had a list of notable people. I imagined you reading the names in a terrible accent. A Bauhaus architect. A 19th-century chemist. A cyclist named Klaus. The names could have all been made up. The only one that meant anything to me was Dr. Oetker.

The thin-crust pizzas you stack in your freezer, tidily, like rations on a space station. I never saw you eat one. Dr. Oetker's CEO wasn't a doctor. It turns out his father was a Nazi, trained at Dachau. The company supplied pudding for the Wehrmacht. The CEO was kidnapped from his university campus as a student. A mechanic locked him in a crate, limbs shackled in a way that shocked him if he resisted. Which I guess he did because those electric shocks broke both his femurs and two of his ribs before his father paid the ransom. He barely learned to walk again. The mechanic buried the ransom in a forest and went to jail. Fifteen years later he was arrested in London trying to swap mouldy banknotes. There's a movie about it. Christoph Waltz plays the mechanic. I'm not making this up.

* * *

When did I start to panic that I would never make it to Bielefeld? I'm not sure I ever did. You can't worry too much about getting somewhere that may not even exist. Which I suppose is like saying I was sleepwalking toward my fate, which is not something I would ever say. Eventually I picked myself up from that airport stoop and found a bus to Amsterdam, where I would catch a train to Bielefeld. I finally slept on the bus. I took a sleeping pill to make sure of it. I should have been reading the military simulation briefings, immersing myself in the invented conflict, taking this lucrative, unexpected work seriously, since it was the only work I had. But really, what were the chances of that? I'm grateful you didn't grill me about my leave from the newspaper in Toronto, that you didn't make too many jokes about the irony of being paid to invent news in Bielefeld. One or two jokes was enough. I know how darkly funny it is, how grotesquely symmetrical, but I'm not ready to laugh, not yet. They say they'll take me back, when I'm ready. They haven't defined that last part.

On the bus I kept waking up with my mouth open, feeling as though I had just been speaking, about what I'm not sure—Bielefeld, conspiracies, you—but then I'd shift and fall right back into a heavy, drugged sleep. It reminded me of those long drives when we were reporting in Afghanistan, on roads eerie because they were so freshly paved, when I would sleep on

your shoulder during daytime stretches in LAVs because that was the only time on those excursions outside the base that I could sleep at all. They were so boring, those drives. Something I said to convince myself I wasn't scared.

In Amsterdam I had five hours to kill before the train to Bielefeld. I found myself at the counter of a dingy coffee shop, surrounded by men a decade younger than me as I broke off a large square of cannabis chocolate. And then I was wandering canals at twilight, getting cursed at by cyclists, finding the city intensely beautiful one minute, terrifying the next. I saw a sign for a pancake cruise and I boarded a boat, because I was suddenly very hungry. The boat was full of families. I don't know how many pancakes I ate, how many Grolsches I drank, how many times I watched the bartender overflow my mug and scrape the foam into a shallow, frothy moat. The cruise was too long. A woman, the mother from a neighbouring table, gently shook my shoulder and asked me, in Dutch and then in English, if I was OK. I'd been bent over my last pancake for several minutes, head in my hands, staring into a pool of syrup. I gazed up at her with what must have been exhausted, bloodshot eyes, pupils like black planets. I decided to take a walk. But there was nowhere to walk because I was on a pancake cruise, winding through dark canals. The boat's lower deck had a ball pit. Three blond boys pelted a fourth blond boy with plastic rounds. The fourth boy was crying. I hesitated at the stairs and he glared at me. They all did. There was nothing I could do for him, you would have said. You and my therapist. I went up on the deck and breathed the damp, autumn air and watched the gingerbread buildings, the lights and their dreamy reflections in the canal, the painterly blur, the contrast of sharpness and softness, the lights ringing the stone bridges' half-moon arches that became full, hollow moons in the water; when we passed through them, I imagined they were portals to an alternate reality. And they may as well have been. I don't remember much else. I must have boarded a train because I woke up in Bielefeld.

There were supposed to be five journalists on the military simulation but I'm the only one who made it. The ash cloud kept the others in Canada. I owe my presence here to you, then, Richard, since I would have been trying to fly with everyone else if not for my night in London. I wonder if the others, watching a volcano erupt on airport televisions, know about the Bielefeld Conspiracy. I wonder if they believe it now.

In the Media Cell it's just me and Léonie, a former military public affairs officer. Léonie did a tour in Afghanistan. Then she retired from service, got married, had twins, and started working for the company that hosts the simulations. Our dynamic was strained at first, out of habit I guess. We would have been adversaries in Afghanistan, acting out petty squabbles from opposite sides of the information war. But we only have each other here and it doesn't feel like there's anything to fight about, or for, now that we're essentially mercenaries in a made-up conflict. Lena and Léonie from the Media Cell. The fact that our names are similar and we're both slim brunettes with ponytails, the only women on the base not in uniform, provides cover for all kinds of unwelcome attention from much older men who find us indistinguishable, which further isolates us, making us less distinguishable.

There's a scenario briefing every morning at 7 a.m., after a foggy bus ride to the military base. The bus is full of passengers who never arrived. I try to occupy as many seats as I can. It's still dark when we get to the base. By then I've been awake for hours, on account of the jet lag. I don't know if the daylight ever comes. We're inside all day and I imagine volcanic ash blocking out the sun. We flash our NATO security badges, if you can believe I have one of these. Boys dressed as soldiers collect our phones. Different soldiers, even younger, return them in the evening in little zip-lock bags. Then it's back to the Hotel Bielefelder, whose glowing sign suggests I really am in Bielefeld, a place that really does exist. The hotel has a lovely bar.

I can hardly stay awake for the morning briefings, but sleepwalking is easy here since the exercise's outcome is determined in advance. The briefings describe a made-up country, X, where the simulation is set. X has a flag, a currency, a government, a history, several languages. The government is corrupt, the currency sorely devalued. The flag could be a

sport's team's logo: thick yellow bars, leaping green feline. The history is as horrible as any real country's. A man named Gabriel leads the sessions. Gabriel wears a brown, three-piece suit with a pocket handkerchief, insane clothing for the setting, especially since he wears the company's standard-issue khaki vest over top. We all wear it. Gabriel created X. I would put him somewhere between 46 and 73 years old. He speaks with an unplaceable accent: unplaceable because, I learn from Léonie, it's entirely affected. He returned from a year at Oxford with a master's in history and a new set of mannerisms, like a charmless Gatsby. His round glasses make him look almost menacing but in a pathetic way, like a Nazi in an Indiana Jones movie, his defeat never in doubt.

Gabriel went to Afghanistan on a research trip for the company. I imagine you coming across this little man, with his silly accent and Tolkien worship, asking questions about insurgencies, poppy farms, Pashtun tea rituals. All to invent, catalogue and profit from a fake country's collapse. NATO has arrived in X to secure order and good government, now that the fighting has stopped. A post-conflict operation to maintain the fragile peace, as if that happens anymore. The exercise trains soldiers to deal with the complexity of such operations. My reporting contributes to this complexity. To verisimilitude. A word Gabriel uses at every opportunity.

The briefing room here isn't unlike the room in Afghanistan where you and I met, where we sat day after day and had our heads filled with similar fantasies about a place that sometimes feels no more real than X. I'm trying not to think about that room. I'm having difficulty. This briefing room is almost empty, providing space for you and other ghosts. Elsewhere on the base, in rooms I never visit, soldiers react to the news I produce. I don't see it happen. I don't know what they do with the information. The simulation advances, that's all Gabriel tells us.

* * *

My hotel room looks out at some kind of women's mental health facility. The main building has a familiar institutional look. It could be a nursing home in Manchester or a wave pool in Mississauga. A glass atrium is lit

up all night. Beside it there's a sprawling gothic building, the original hospice. The silhouettes of pine trees darkly mirror the building's green copper spires. It must be the only building in the neighbourhood that survived the allied bombs. It's almost always in darkness, at least during those hours when I'm in my hotel room, not sleeping, gazing out. Sometimes I see a light on behind the old stained-glass windows, and sometimes I see a person in a window, looking back at the hotel. But that may just be the cannabis chocolate, which I've been nibbling compulsively.

I read the scenario documents before going to sleep, as if I were a real reporter researching the strange country to which I've been dispatched. Sometimes I believe this and feel genuinely excited. There are maps of eastern Canada—the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes, in particular, where the company is based—but the lines are drawn differently because these are X's borders, and the names are all foreign and wrong. I fall asleep, but only briefly. I wake up stoned and jet lagged at 3 a.m. and turn on the news and return to the documents, but I don't absorb a thing. It's as if the pages are blank, or written in one of Gabriel's invented languages. The maps are more disorienting than ever. New question for the Bielefeld Conspiracy test: Have you ever watched German news coverage of an atrocity in a forsaken country you can't identify, while reading about an atrocity in a forsaken country that's completely made up, jet-lagged and high on cannabis chocolates, in Bielefeld, in the middle of the night? I stare at the pages describing X, waiting for them to make sense. I look out at the institution's stained-glass windows and don't see anyone looking back at me, except when I do. I think about calling you but I refrain, unsure of what I would say if you picked up, unwilling to risk the despair that accompanies an unanswered call from a foreign city. Eventually I pull myself together. I shower for an eternity, brush my teeth for even longer. And then I tie my hair back and put on my khaki vest and shuffle downstairs for breakfast, where I eat everything in sight.

The woman at the hotel's reception told me about the institution. She's a thick woman with kind, wrinkled eyes. She spoke as if she'd worked behind that desk for most of the previous century. The pastor in charge of the hospice refused to fill out forms for the Nazi euthanasia program, she said, saving hundreds from deportation to the camps. This made me

think about the women's shelter in Afghanistan. My eyes welled up. I tried to explain that I haven't been sleeping well but I'm not sure the woman understood or cared. Her story could just be one of those that people tell themselves, that cities and entire nations tell themselves, in order to live, to make living more bearable, clinging to a fragment of truth and letting the rest be written over with time. The first few mornings there were copies of *The New York Times* in the hotel lobby. The woman at the reception just shrugged when I asked why they stopped appearing. I assume the ash cloud interfered with delivery. Soon we'll be cut off from the rest of the world entirely. What then, Richard? How will this letter, or whatever this is, ever find you? You may never hear from me again. Internet access on the base is tightly martialled. I can't be bothered to check anything when the pimpled soldiers return my phone in the evening. I head straight to the hotel bar. I know what's happening in X and nowhere else, and that's almost comforting. I don't even know what's happening in Bielefeld, if anything ever happens here.

* * *

The hotel bar is as empty as the bus and the scenario briefings. The woman who runs it nonetheless takes a great deal of care in her tasks, checking the taps, rinsing and polishing glasses, even though the glasses must have already been rinsed and polished. There simply aren't enough patrons to account for her level of activity. I wonder whether the hotel would be busier if not for the ash cloud. I try to ask and can't make myself understood, due to language or alcohol, or lack of effort. Near the bar's entrance there's a small taxidermy collection. One night I saw Gabriel take a knee and pet the badger before gliding over to his preferred seat, alone at a table for two, his back against the booth's red leather cushion. There, he sips a single cognac all night. Gabriel looked fondly at the stuffed badger as he stroked its back. I guess we're all feeling isolated. He has a way of moving that makes it seem as though he's not wearing shoes, not even taking steps.

Usually Léonie and I have a couple of drinks when we get back from the base. Usually I have a couple more after she goes to bed. Léonie

knows exactly when to stop. This is something I admire and resent, since it's something I never learned, or learned and then forgot. Léonie drinks just enough to permit a level of candour that she keeps bottled up on the base. She processes her day out loud and leaves it behind, while I stay at the empty bar, brooding over the present day and many others. One night she asked about my leave from the newspaper. It shouldn't have surprised me that she knew, or that she wanted to know more. You didn't need a NATO security clearance to find out what I'd done. Gabriel must know too. But I was still surprised when Léonie asked. It's funny how you can Google yourself until you want to die from shame but a will to self-deception prevails, allowing you to believe that others haven't also looked you up and found everything there is to know, every triumph and failure, every compliment and accusation, or you pretend the results were different for them, that the negative parts just didn't appear in their searches, and so you go on existing in the world.

Léonie was tactful. She buttered me up first. She told me she remembered my reporting in Afghanistan, called it "mandatory reading" for public affairs officers. She was referring to my article about the women at the shelter. She didn't mention what happened to the women. She left that part out. Then she said she heard about my leave. I wasn't ready to talk about it. I don't know if it's because she mentioned the shelter first, connecting it with what I did later, when I got home, at least connecting it grammatically. I asked her the German word for taxidermy. I asked her if she'd noticed that the volume of Gabriel's drink never seemed to change. I told her I had a moment of weakness, stress, a deeply regrettable moment I may never live down. Léonie wasn't satisfied.

"But it wasn't just one time, Lena, from what I read. Correct me if I'm wrong. You made up quotes. You invented people. On multiple occasions."

What could I say? That inventing felt harmless when I got back from Afghanistan, compared to what happened when I reported on something real? That I could barely get out of bed, let alone pick up a phone and conduct an interview? That the stakes felt depressingly low? That people believe what they want to believe anyway, no matter what? That most reporting is as useful as shouting into an active volcano? To change the subject, I asked her how she did it: the new career, the family. The moving

on. I was genuinely curious. “You make it look so easy,” I said. Buttering her up, I suppose.

“It always looks easy to someone else.” Léonie smiled modestly. No, apologetically. “And not everyone went through what you did over there.”

I told her a lot of people went through a lot worse. I didn’t mean for it to come out harshly but I’d had a few drinks and Léonie subtly recoiled. I asked her if she ever thought about going back.

“All the time,” she said, “but I know I won’t.”

“I feel ashamed for leaving.”

“Lots of people do,” she said. “But it doesn’t mean that staying would have helped.”

I wanted to ask if she still felt afraid all the time. I wanted to know if she slept, and if so, how. But I didn’t ask and eventually she finished her wine and left, gently squeezing my shoulder as she stood, asking, with a knowing look, whether we shouldn’t both call it a night. I pointed to my glass, said I’d be right behind. Then I ordered another. One night I’ll ask her, just like I’ll ask you, Richard. Are there really no nightmares? Or is it that you don’t tell me about yours, that you never could or never wanted to, or that mine already took up too much space? I know better than to resent you for it. And yet I resent you for it. The ease with which your life has resumed. I could claim it isn’t fair, or something ridiculous like that. Most of the time I’m glad you found this stability. But some nights I’m much smaller. Some nights, like that one in the hotel bar, where I was soon a quaking lunatic, snot and hiccups and all that—on those nights I want to be compatible with your stable life, your moving on. Not alone in a hotel bar in Bielefeld, haunted by men yelling in a language I never learned, by charred bodies I never saw but that existed anyway.

When I looked up Gabriel was almost beside me. There were two stools between us. He’d glided over to sit at the bar with his half-drunk cognac. He didn’t look at me or say anything. The bar seemed darker. The bartender, demonstrating her professionalism yet again, must have dimmed the lights hanging above us under stained-glass shades. Gabriel’s handkerchief was between us, removed from his suit pocket and waiting on the bar. It reminded me of those silver plastic shock blankets we used to carry everywhere. I took the handkerchief and wiped and blew. I

thought about leaving but I didn't move. In a voice that was barely audible I thanked Gabriel. I put the handkerchief back on the bar where he'd left it for me. We both stared straight ahead and finished our drinks. Eventually the hiccups stopped.

* * *

The next evening I sat with Gabriel on the bus back to the hotel. We worked later than usual and I was exhausted, alternating between anticipating my first drink and vowing to skip all that and go right to sleep. I was drinking Bundeswehr-grade chamomile tea to sway me toward the latter. Léonie was at the front of the bus, talking to her children on her phone. She spoke softly but I caught tender inflections; big, warm bursts of laughter rolled to the back of the bus. I apologized to Gabriel for the previous night.

"Returning to old battlegrounds is not for everyone," he said. I nodded, hoping he would leave it at that.

"For some people it can be very comforting, though." Gabriel stared out the window as he spoke, hands folded on his crossed leg. Outside, Germany's twentieth largest city blurred by. It would be easy to criticize the simulation for what it doesn't include, he said. There's no cyber warfare, no deep fakes, no doctored videos of presidents surrendering or revered anchors appearing to deliver news that never happened. There are no planted stories, no incidents staged to arouse sympathy and sway public opinion. There are no troll armies pumping out falsehoods through hundreds of false avatars until no one is sure what's really happening, until everything is reduced to conspiracy. The simulation reads like it was written by a hobbit who never left the Shire, he said, which I realized was Gabriel being self-deprecating, making a joke. I nearly spat out my tea.

"All that would be very useful but that's not how the generals want it," he said, turning away from the window and looking at me. I noticed that his pocket handkerchief was back in its place, which would have been gross if it didn't look so pristine, as though it had not only been washed but ironed, all traces of the previous night expunged.

“We prefer the exile of the virtual to the catastrophe of the real,” Gabriel said. “That’s Jean Baudrillard.”

I looked out the opposite window and rolled my eyes.

“In any case,” he said, “it’s always more comfortable to fight the last war. Even more so in a controlled setting. That’s why the simulation feels so familiar. It’s what wins us the contracts.”

When we arrived at the hotel, Léonie gestured to her phone and pointed up, telling me she was going to continue her call in her room. There would be no company for me at the bar. I exited the bus with Gabriel and we walked through the lobby, past the taxidermy collection. Then we were alone in a hallway whose numbered doors concealed vacant rooms, a long hallway with beige carpeting muffling our steps, and then we were at my door, saying goodnight. For one vertiginous moment I wondered if we were about to kiss, but Gabriel’s small hand emerged from nowhere, attached to a slight, feminine wrist that was almost swallowed by his suit sleeve. I shook it with relief, and turned in.

* * *

At breakfast I realized that it was Halloween. I had no idea how the day would be marked in Bielefeld. There were no pumpkins or cobwebs or witches’ cauldrons in the lobby. The stuffed badger wasn’t dressed as a ghost or a Disney princess. I wanted to dress as Dr. Oetker, or as the mechanic who kidnapped and maimed the heir. Or as a volcanologist, describing ash clouds all day to enraptured audiences. Instead I wore the company’s standard-issue khaki vest, the logo with the olive branch on my left breast, surrounded by a half-dozen pockets I never used. On the base, everyone dressed as soldiers.

That day I wrote an article about a shelter for women fleeing domestic violence. The violence wasn’t uncommon in X, but the shelter was. Aid groups had moved in behind NATO and quietly set about their work. I wrote about the shelter from the perspective of a European newspaper, a story of progress and hope. That part was easy, familiar. I had written the story before. Then I wrote about it as a columnist for a newspaper in X. He saw the shelter as foreign meddling in family life. X’s social media was

rampant with hate for the women who had deserted their husbands. A micro-funding campaign to reward anyone offering information about the shelter's location raised an obscene amount. A group of furious men blockaded a local government office, demanding information. And just as they marched on the shelter, gasoline canisters in hand, NATO forces intervened. That part was new. I reported on it as well. The soldiers didn't find charred bodies in the shelter. There were no charred bodies to find. And if there were, they wouldn't have been real bodies anyway.

Gabriel told me he liked the story. Léonie didn't say anything but her silence was supportive, another knowing look. Enough to make me cry. I locked myself in a bathroom stall, since a military base in Bielefeld is not a place for the type of release I knew was coming. I felt like I had discovered a new power. I could keep doing this, rewriting the ending. I could do it over and over. Everyone is becoming tolerant of improvisation. At this stage it's all about getting the simulation past the finish line, which is in sight, if it hadn't been from the very beginning. It doesn't matter what we write as long as we observe the appropriate arc: chaos to despair to hope to lasting peace. I can see why Gabriel says it's comforting.

On the bus ride that night, Léonie played news clips on her phone showing clear skies, passengers moving through airport lines against the normal friction. Handsome pilots were interviewed; footage of planes taking off and landing somehow looked strange and elegant again. A steaming volcano appeared less novel and fierce. It had only been a week. But maybe a week in Bielefeld is actually much longer, Richard. Maybe you'll be an old man by the time this letter arrives, if it ever does, and you won't even recognize the signature at the bottom or remember the name.

At the hotel bar, Gabriel described the next simulation. It would be very much like the current one, he assured us. He was going straight from Bielefeld to Powidz, in Poland, which appeared to be a real place. Léonie was going home to see her kids, but she would be back. Another fortnight in X, Gabriel proposed. I accepted without hesitation.

I'll have two weeks off before I go, enough time for a stop in London. But I think I'll stay here instead, see if the jet lag wears off. I don't want to stray too far from the simulation. I feel so tired. I want to walk around the institution's grounds during the day, watch the hotel bartender rinse

glasses in the evening, let my mind empty. Maybe I'll finish this letter. Though it's possible I'll still be writing it months from now, still hopping between nondescript cities serving as proxies for X, emails from my editor at the newspaper crowding my inbox, inquiring about my state of mind, my health, my return, broken up by one or two messages from you. I wonder when it will be enough, these simulations. When I'll have rewritten the story as many times as I need to and my exile can end. You may wonder where I am. You may think I disappeared in Bielefeld, sleepwalked off the earth. You may not be wrong.

SANCTUARY

MELANY FRANKLIN



MELANY FRANKLIN is a lawyer with the YMCA of Greater Toronto and is currently working on her first novel. She has taken the Novel Writing Workshop with Dennis Bock and Guided Writing with Kim Echlin through the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies. In 2019, Melany was a recipient of the Janice Colbert Poetry Award (runner-up). Her work is published in the Law Society of Ontario's Special Lectures Series (2012) and in her high school yearbook.

That's Henry over there, to the right of the bus driver's chair, seated by the window. He was first on and will likely be last off given that his destination is clear across the country. Already his fellow passengers have disembarked and been replaced several times over. That is because the coach's business is mostly short haul. Lennie, the driver who assumed the wheel in Winnipeg, has taken it upon himself to explain this to Henry and to provide a detailed accounting of the industry's contractions of late. Like a lot of folks, Lennie is worried about his job and, more generally, the state of the world. It's 1974—not a good year by almost any measure.

Mercifully, Lennie doesn't ask any questions and Henry wills himself to relax. He's dried up, tired of a lifetime of talking, with nothing more he wants to say. According to his cousin, Doris, he's bone weary. So much so that he's given up his barber's chair after almost thirty years, although he still goes into Trenton on Thursday nights to shave the new recruits. The money's good. Twenty-five cents a head and he can get through at least six an hour. It doesn't matter that his hands shake.

If Lennie ever stops talking, Henry will pull out a book. All these years, he's found many ways to keep his thoughts at bay: hard work, Zane Grey, cards, Saturday Afternoon at the Met on the old RCA, his grandchildren. But of late, even a visit with his old friend, Pie Morgan, won't assuage the nausea. It's his nerves, Doris says. They're shattered.

Henry's doctor put him on heart medication last year but that hasn't helped. If anything, Henry feels worse. A sourness has settled into his mouth, a metallic taste that he can't seem to get rid of no matter how much he gargles or smokes.

Should anyone ask him his plans, Henry will put on a brave face. He'll say that he's travelling to Victoria, to see his daughter and her husband. He won't add that they aren't expecting him, that he up and left his house on Wednesday morning, surprising even himself by buying a bus ticket.

By the way, Henry's dying, or at least expects to be dead, very soon in fact, although you would never know it to see him, full-haired and handsome as he is, if a little thin. Despite the cramped quarters and stale air, he looks as starched and clean shaven as when he began his journey a day and a half ago.

The bus isn't much worse for wear either, although its fishbowl windshield is pocked with dead bugs, mosquitos mostly, and the creased metal of its hulk is stained brown with mud. It moves easily and has carried Henry the equivalent of a trip east to Charlottetown already. The vastness of this country ought to silence any man.

Despite Lennie's jabbering, it's the road ahead that has caught Henry's attention just now, the straight line of asphalt burned grey in the heat and not a settlement in sight, the sun brought to heel by a cluster of flat-bottomed, low-slung clouds. He feels carved out, hollow, an interloper in an alien landscape. He's riding the shutter of light and shadow, light and shadow as if he's a young man all over again, as if it's a Mediterranean sky that he's travelling under—cobalt-lidded clouds impotent against the heat, clots of dust in his throat, his body empty of everything but fear, his fear as thick as a pack of dogs.

Henry would do anything to have it rain, for this particular prairie sky to open up. Maybe he really is ready to die, although Reverend Swain says that's not it at all, only that some questions are too big, some burdens too heavy. Old man Swain will never stop trying to convert him.

The world may be going to hell in a handbasket but the inhabitants of the land they are crossing just now refuse to be moved by anything other than progress. They will never admit defeat. Everything is cyclical. They are partial to fresh starts, to spring, to planting, to hope.

This time it's the Melville Millionaires in front of the depot, a pile of twelve-year-old little leaguers changing buses on their way to Prince Albert, jumping up and down and jostling each other next to a line of battered suitcases, all ready for loading.

The team's chaperones look on warily as the boys burst in. As the engine cranks into gear and Lennie shouts for the kids to quiet down, Henry's mind suddenly clears. A shoe lies by the side of the road but he doesn't see it. He's turning to the man who has just sat down beside him, who's offering up some coffee out of a thermos. The bus roars. A group of kids in back begin to sing. Rain clouds curl at the horizon.

The atmosphere on the bus changes immediately. It's almost physical, like a slight electrical charge passing through. In an instant, Henry's mood is transmuted from gnarled and sore to spry. Must be the kids, he thinks. Their enthusiasm feels comfortable, familiar.

One of the chaperones needles the boys and the passengers in front share a laugh. "Woah, Tim—what did you do, pack a different outfit for every inning?" and "Danny—I will confiscate that licorice if you don't give me a piece right now." Gradually the noise level resolves into a contented hum. These are good people, Henry decides.

Lennie glances back at Henry's new seatmate. "How are they?" he asks.

"The kids? You know what, they aren't half bad. I mean, they're just learning. We're going to play a little ball tourney this weekend and do some fishing."

"Fishing's good in Prince Albert," Lennie says. "You from Melville?"

"Me? No, Virden, but my wife's from there. We're both teaching, at least for now. She's expecting. Our first," he explains. "I'm Brad, by the way."

"My bride and I have three kids, God bless them," Lennie says. He glances back at Brad. "You about twenty-five?"

"Twenty-six."

"Mine are out of the house now but we're still waiting for grandkids. What about you, Henry? You got any?"

Henry nods. He has ten grandkids, at least ten. But that's not what he says.

"A newly-minted granddaughter, born in April," Henry tells them. "That's where I'm headed now."

"Newly-minted, I like that," Lennie says. "Grandkids, I'm looking forward to that."

Brad has his nose in a newspaper. "Thirtieth anniversary of D-Day tomorrow," he says.

"Is it," Lennie replies. Henry stays quiet. Brad is unfazed.

"Either of you fight over there? I'm just guessing."

"Me, no," Lennie says. "Too young."

Henry hesitates. "Yup, I did some of that, but a year earlier, in Italy."

"A D-Day dodger," Brad says, his face brightening. "The novel, *The Regiment*, we're reading that now."

"There's a book?" Lennie asks.

"Yes," Brad says, his newspaper forgotten. "Would you mind if I introduced you to a couple of my students?" Without waiting for an answer, he turns and shouts down the aisle. "Kevin. Ian. Get up here now." Brad turns back to Henry. "Kevin and Ian are in the history club," he says.

The two boys dutifully report to their teacher as ordered but will not yield to his lesson. They shuffle from side to side and stare out the window. Henry chuckles to himself. Lessons never did much for him either. Better to be out and about in the great outdoors, he always thought. As for Kevin and Ian, well, Henry suspects their preference is likely the back of the bus from whence they came, from whence a card game is likely in progress.

The kids are hoping to be excused, no doubt, but it ends up being Brad who excuses himself first, overcome by the need to impose order on some of his other charges. "Martin," he says, "Do not leave your bag in the aisle. It's a fire hazard."

Kevin and Ian look at each other and smirk.

Henry leans forward. "Either of you boys have a television?" he asks.

"Oh, yeah," says the one. "Yup," says the other. "Colour," they say in unison.

Henry is no longer sure which kid is which but he nods. "I guess the ball games are televised these days?"

"Yes!!" The bespectacled of the two boys is animated now. He grips the handle of an imaginary bat, shows them the glint in his eye and swings hard. They watch as the barrel of the imaginary bat cracks the imaginary ball and sends it up and out of the bus, way past Lennie, like a flare.

"A homerun, that one. No doubt about it," Henry declares.

"I saw Hank Aaron, you know, when he broke the record."

"No kidding," Henry replies, truly amazed.

The boys are standing over Henry now like grown men, arms spanning the aisle, hands gripping the headrests. "Did you see it?" one of them asks.

"Nope, no television unfortunately."

"Ah, that sucks," one of the kids says.

"I'm going to be rich when I grow up," the other boy announces after a pause.

"Well that's something."

"Yup. My Dad says the world's my oyster."

"The world's your oyster, eh?" Lennie has been eavesdropping. "What does that mean?"

"Not sure," the boy says, craning his head back to answer Lennie. "Just that I'll be able to be whatever I want if I study hard and do well in sports."

"And it's rich you want?" Lennie asks.

"Yup. Stinkin rich."

His sidekick snorts and gives his friend a shove. "You stink already."

"What will you do with all that money?" Henry asks. They pause together to contemplate the question as if the money is already in the boy's pocket waiting to be spent.

"Not travel by bus. I'll get a plane ticket if I have to leave home for anything."

"Hey," Lennie says. "There's nothing wrong with the bus."

"It gets you from A to B," the kid agrees. "But when I'm old, I'll have my own car, so I'll either be flying or driving."

"We'll go anywhere we want, whenever we want. Do anything we want, see anything we want, buy anything we want."

"How old did you say you are?" Lennie asks.

"We're twelve. We're all twelve. Well, Martin's thirteen. But my Dad says even twelve-year-olds better have plans or the world will pass us by."

"He said that?" Lennie asks.

"Well now," Henry interrupts. "You boys have a way to go yet. I'm wondering though—I don't have a television but I do have a little radio here—a transistor—with batteries." Henry rummages in the bag at his feet. "You want to borrow it for a bit? You might get something on the AM. You can let me know if you find anything good."

The kids take the radio gratefully and are gone in a flash even though Lennie is calling after them. "Do not grow up too fast," he says. "You can't play little league when you're old."

“Can you believe it?” Lennie asks Henry. “Twelve years old and already so sure about what they want.”

“I like it,” Henry says. “I might be further along if I had been as bullheaded.”

“My bride would tell you I’m already full of bull,” Lennie jokes. “But I want only for beer and a fishing rod.”

Henry admires Lennie’s certainty and wishes the same for himself. For years he’s believed that there was a noose around his neck but it occurs to him now that it might just be a rope at his feet, from which he can step safely away. Henry’s on the cusp of something he can’t quite make out. Yet he must have known when he locked the door of the old farmhouse and set out on this trip that he was taking on another kind of journey.

The bus has caught up with the storm at last. Beyond the spray of rain washing across the windows, the countryside is a blur of freshness. The velvet of green has Henry’s thoughts gently turning. This time it’s a vision of Francine at the station in Fayegate all those years ago, resplendent in her pink hat, still half-asleep, sending him off with a kiss, and the rest of the soldiers spilling out of the passenger car to set condoms aloft, like festival balloons. In his memory, the platform is obscured and Henry has to lean out the window to see her. As the train begins to move, the mass of rubber spheres lift in a single wave and Fran covers her mouth to laugh.

Yes, that was a time all right, fragile and sweet, Fran smiling and the boys drinking and singing, as if nothing else could touch them, as if the whole of their lives lay ahead of them.

*

If it is the 30th anniversary of D-Day—well, Henry thinks, that’s a lot of years. Reverend Swain says that war has a half-life, like uranium, and the heat it gives off fades over time but Henry doesn’t analyze things like Swain. All he knows is that his hands still tremble.

The sway of the bus has put most of its passengers to sleep. Not the youngsters of course. Their heads are still bobbing behind the high backs and Brad is still standing over them. He points at something out the window, their destination perhaps and sure enough there’s a water tower

in the distance, a bright blue egg atop a spindly tripod of metal scaffolding. There are billboards coming up too: Have A Nap Motel, Life is Sacred, The Red Barn—harbingers of a settlement ahead.

Traffic suddenly appears out of nowhere, trucks with open cabs and a police cruiser. Henry admires an old blue and white Dodge that is stopped at the light. The kids rush to open the windows so they can wave at a passing train and when the whistle sounds, they cheer as if the engineer meant it for them.

Fresh air moves through the bus in fragrant waves. It's the kind of afternoon that will conjure up a lifetime of afternoons if Henry will let it. Underneath all the activity, there is the familiar stillness, the particular slant of the sun, the slowness of time.

* * *

When Francine saw Henry off at Fayegate, he had yearned with every particle of his being to stay but just a few weeks later he was all in, one of twenty-five thousand men on the move and sailing smartly down the Clyde. The flotilla of transport ships and destroyers, every vessel ramrod straight and steady against the tide, incited waves of band-playing along the river bank. Some of the boys sang along.

Below deck of the H.M.S. Glengyle, the afternoon sun reached across from the portholes in tidy stripes. In the near empty dining hall, a small group of men huddled around Henry. He was showing his expert's hand, guiding a blade with his thumb, up and back across Christie's scalp. What little hair was allowed by army regulation was softened with water and shaving powder. It fell away in soapy bunches.

"I suppose nothing can be done about the ears," Donny remarked.

"You know what they say when a fellow's lop-sided," Mack said. "It's no wonder he doesn't get any letters."

Christie cuffed the shoulder of every man on the way back to his seat before Norman took the chair. He asked to have his head shaved counter-clockwise, so it would grow in neat.

"Now that's an old wives' tale and it's lucky you have me," Henry said. "If I do it like that, it won't grow back in it at all." They laughed.

The men had received their orders at last—they were headed to Sicily—although the name meant little to them. Initially, when the tropical kits were handed out, Christie had frowned at the mosquito netting and malaria tablets and camouflage grease but Henry had grinned. “I’ve an idea that’s worthy of Duff,” he’d said.

Duff was Sergeant Major Duffy, a lad not much older than his men. Short and a little chubby in the face, Duff looked the part of a cherub and he might have been that—part boy, part lion—for he was at least as tough as an ox. In the three years they had been deployed, there wasn’t even a handful of maneuvers that he’d missed. He ran when they ran, dug when they dug, marched when they marched. If not a father figure, then perhaps an elder brother in temperament: street-smart, impatient, loyal.

Just that morning, Henry’s platoon and two others had attended a lecture with Duffy. They had studied the maps, talked through the plans and asked their questions. They were shown the details of the landing beach and taught a few Italian phrases.

Duffy leaned in close and spread his arms wide. “Pursuit is the objective, gentlemen,” he said, tracing a line up the island with his finger. “First Brigade will move right along here. Pursuit,” he repeated. “We’ll give chase, I’m sure of it, and I’ll be damned if they’ll have a choice but to move.”

Henry carefully wiped his blade and another soldier took a seat.

“Duff’s a bit of a show-off,” one of them grumbled.

“Yes, but it’s us he’s showing off. Don’t think Monty doesn’t notice. He likes what he sees.”

Indeed, on his last visit with the Regiment in early spring, General Montgomery had addressed them informally, standing in his Jeep with the men gathered around, not in formation.

Once their heads were shaved, the group of young men—six farm boys, two clerks and a barber—smeared camouflage grease along their noses and across their cheeks to mask their good natures. They ended up achieving a look of fierceness that they didn’t quite feel. But no matter, it would come.

That evening, they marched into the mess together arm in arm, and even though their singing sounded like caterwauling and they fell together in a jumble of laughter at the end, their effort was met with loud

cheers. Every man thumped his table with two fists and the cutlery clattered. Duff got a kick out of it too, that he made clear, and, well, hell, it inspired all the boys. For the next week, until the landings, Henry was met with claps across his back and nods of approval.

"I'm next," they said. "Remember to do me next."

* * *

Henry squinted through a narrow gap in the crumbling limestone. "When you write your mother, you can tell her that I finally believe in God," he said.

"I've been telling her that all along," Christie replied. He was busy poking at something with his foot and didn't look up.

"What's there?" Christie asked.

"No cricket pitch," Henry said, grinning at his own joke.

Christie snorted. "Tweedy's brought us to the right place then. Good on him."

The remnants of an old fortification clung to the length of the ridge where they stood. The Town of Assoro lay ahead and, a few miles beyond that, Leonforte, but Henry could make out only the gloomy outline of cypress and juniper scrub littering the narrow valley between them.

They had been barely three weeks in Sicily and already they had bashed their way more than a hundred miles up the island. Most spectacularly, they had navigated three thousand vertical feet the previous night without so much as a torch to guide them.

Behind the two men, the rest of the battalion soundlessly claimed their positions, fanning out from a narrow path at the summit. As dawn made its own slow climb up the sheer rock face, they prepared to dig in.

The Germans must have thought the mountain impassable; otherwise they would have established a rear guard. Instead just a handful of soldiers had greeted the first riflemen over the ridge. It was one of these that held Christie's attention. As soon as he succeeded in rolling the body, the man's dead eyes fixed on Henry's boots and would not let go.

Obviously, the poor fellow had been impervious to the heat. How else to explain the tie, tightly knotted at the throat, and the jacket, closed

from sternum to waist with gleaming silver buttons. Henry considered his own khakis, rolled up high above his elbows and knees.

“Jesus, Christie,” he said. Then he peered closer. “He’s a clean bugger though.”

“He’s that,” Christie agreed.

They were in the thick of things and whether it was the string of sleepless nights or the dead German, Henry felt a little wild. It was like there were two of him looking out across the island—one Henry who was all sharp edges, his Bren at the ready, and another, a git who might run out into the open and start shouting, not because he felt himself invincible, or because God had already decided who was going to win, but simply because he could, because it was possible.

He reached out to steady himself. Sicily stood so much in opposition to what he had expected. Their training had been fashioned on precepts of duty and honour and, at Inverary, even beauty, but there was no method to what they had done here—or at least there hadn’t been before now. Every image that came to his mind was splintered: vomit floating on the shallow waters of the landing beach, an exquisite team of horses smashed to bits on the narrow road to Valguarana, grain fields burned to ash. Even water was poison in this place, the dysentery so bad that he and Christie had cut flaps in the backs of their pants.

On one of their last exercises in Scotland, Duffy had surprised them with a piper. As they’d neared the summit at Dun Na Cuaiche, at the very moment when Henry had thought he could go no further, there had suddenly been ringing from the pipes and a view of the loch in all its lustre. They had rested there in the sun, just specks on the great plateau.

There were no such flourishes to mark their movements in Sicily. Each day was a seismic blur. Christie said they were living crowded hours, something he had read in a book, but it stuck. They belonged to the rush of men and machines that were rising and falling across the island, their dead hurriedly buried and their wounded hurriedly dead.

The previous morning, after a near two-day march, the regiment had finally stopped to rest in a shallow ditch. They had fallen quickly asleep and were soon coated in the fine white dust that swirled around every passing vehicle on the busy road. They woke to an eerie scene—every

one of them looking like a ghost and indistinguishable from each other. It was only the sting of sand in Henry's eyes that reassured him they were all alive, that he was still alive.

They could see the Town of Assoro off in the distance, a sun-baked menace, just like every other Sicilian town. Its terraced orchards twisted into impenetrable screens capable of hiding anything. The very idea of breaking camp to march up to it from the road had seemed so obviously bone-headed that Christie predicted they would most certainly be ordered to do it. Perhaps they would have but for the fact that their commanding officer, Sutcliffe, returned after his reconnoiter dead. His adjutant, gravely wounded, begged the senior staff not to make them go.

A call went out for volunteers and they learned of the army's more audacious plan: an overnight climb up the back of the mountain. "Our chance to poke the panzers in the ass," someone shouted and the others laughed.

"Lieutenant Colonel Tweedsmuir is your new Sutcliffe, gentlemen, and he is kindly asking for sixty fighting men to make the first assault on Assoro," their platoon sergeant explained. "Now how many of you poor bastards have nothing better to do?"

To Henry's surprise, Christie had stepped forward. With a casual nod to the others, the rest of the boys fell into line too: Norman and Ernest and Mack, Marvin and Jack, then Godfrey and Donny, the same bunch who'd had their heads shaved and pretended they were fierce. Well, Henry thought, it had gotten them a few laughs. But this, this wasn't a joke.

None of them was army, none of them had any ambition for it and they had never talked about volunteering for a mission, not ever. Over their three years in England they'd always stayed straight, never doing too much or too little, letting others get ripped on leave, letting others work for privileges. Henry had his Fran and Christie, well, he'd preferred walks in the country and his books.

Yet for all of their remove, Christie had liked Sutcliffe, most of them had, and something about Sicily seemed to have galvanized him, to the point that he'd repeated to Henry how there were only two choices, to kill or be killed.

That was what Henry hated most about the army, how it was always right even when it was wrong. They had been asked to step into an abyss and whether they approached from the front or the back, they would die on that mountain, he was sure. He imagined his footfall like a drumbeat and the footfalls of all of the men together, hundreds of drumbeats, audible for miles. Yet he stepped forward to join the others. How could he not? Bloody hell if they all died and he didn't. But, clearly, they were braver than he and not put off by the ugly premonitions of the day—ghost soldiers at the junction, a commanding officer dead and the moon rising as bright as a lamp.

If they held any advantage at all, it was the predominance of country boys in their mix. They were farm boys, accustomed to a day's work before sunrise and another after it set. They knew how to navigate in the dark. They knew that trees blacken the sky even in the pitch of night while a dirt path shows lighter. They knew that the slightest contrasts glimmer, that darkness illuminates. Even in that unfamiliar terrain, their experience counted for something.

But Henry wasn't thinking about advantage. He was thinking about tripwires and traps and angry dogs. He was thinking about floodlights, about making a fumble, of being surrounded and then shot. Clearly though, Christie was not.

"I'm thinking I might write to Vi," he told Henry as they waited for twilight to pass so that their movements might go undetected.

Bad luck to post a letter, Henry thought, as if it might be his last, but he didn't say it. Instead he busied himself replenishing their kits. They needed only water and ammunition. Their personal belongings, packets of mail and photographs, were to be left with the Master Corporal for safekeeping. Henry hesitated over a pair of barbering shears before returning them to his pack. Some things he couldn't afford to lose.

"But really, I'd rather you write to her," Christie said.

"Ah," Henry said, smiling in spite of himself. For more than a year, Francine had been hoping Christie would show an interest in her sister and now, all the way in Sicily, it was finally to come about. "Tell her about Donny's socks," he said. "That'll give her a kick."

Donny's girl had knitted the most terrible pair of woolen socks. With

the left more suitable as a fishing net and the right a hat, it was a wonder they were ever mailed out. Vivian's socks were infinitely superior and he had sold Donny several pair.

"Don't tell her you're volunteering. She'll worry."

Christie nodded in the direction of Assoro. "I'm done waiting for things," he said, smiling at Henry. "Pursuit is my objective."

Henry stretched out on the ground with his helmet as a prop and closed his eyes. Even with the sun gone, the heat did not give. His breath burned dry and sharp in his throat and a few hours later, when he stood to join the others in the padre's muster, his body swayed from right to left and then right again, as if he were still at sea, off-kilter in a storm. He longed to disappear.

A sudden movement interrupted his thoughts and he almost startled. The padre's prayers were finished. It was Christie, just ahead, signaling with his hand to begin. In the darkness, the gesture was more sensed than seen. Impossible, Henry thought but he followed, signaling to the man behind, who signaled to the man behind him and so on, sixty riflemen feeling their way along the narrow path last travelled by a Sicilian goat.

Henry knew the padre had been offering up his own brand of comfort and courage but the words had still stung. The old psalm felt more like a funeral rite. The padre's words turned over in Henry's mind even as he tried to push them away. Mechanically, he mouthed the lines from memory, *My cup runneth over, a word for every step. My cup as he heaved himself up the first ridge, skirting boulders and thick wells of gravel. My cup as they began their ascent, as the scramble nets were unfurled. My cup as he hung over the gorge, clinging to ropes, and when he struggled for a foothold, when he ran out of breath. My cup as Christie pulled him up, his body scraped and bloodied and bruised, and as he turned to pull up the man behind and the next. All the while, the sun threatened to rise.*

They waited near the top until the strafing started, until the British aeroplanes began to drone and they heard the crump of gunfire. That was their signal to move again and they ran across the top with only the slightest of obstacles. It was one of these, a tall thin figure with a book in his hand, that Henry had taken. To kill or be killed.

Henry instinctively tugged at his belt. "I could use a bath," he said, continuing to scan the area for signs of life. He felt a lightness radiating through him. "How would you rate my chances?" he asked.

Christie was done with the German. He surveyed the scree ahead of them, still shrouded in early morning shadow. "About as good as a hair-cut and shave," Christie said.

"Well then, we might be in luck," Henry said. "If there's a barbershop out there, I'll be damned if I won't find it."

* * *

The following day and night were an agony, what with barely any water and the unabated heat, but they weren't among the dead or wounded. They weren't propped in caves, waiting, helpless. Once the guns went quiet, Henry couldn't wait to move. He wanted to put down a flag, mark their place. He wanted to claim things.

Despite Henry's encouragement, Christie wasn't so sure. He'd been up sick most of the night, dizzy with thirst and fatigue. He distracted himself by making notes, of umbrella pine, oleander, myrtle and broom. And how to describe that sky? To his mother, he wrote, the deepest blue with wisps of cloud shot through with lavender. In his letter to Vivian he was more earthy, utterly nostalgic for the verdant green of her home county and inquiring after her sister. On the thin pale paper that doubled as an envelope, he mustered the courage for a real message. Please write, he asked.

The Town of Assoro was still standing but whether it had been abandoned or was crowded with inhabitants, it refused to say. Its roofline was dented, blown through in spots. The only souls in sight, a pair of donkeys, grazed on a narrow strip of grass that skirted the town.

"You think they know something we don't?"

"That it's safe out in the open?" Christie asked. "They're asses, Henry."

The animals were none the worse for all the shelling and Henry silently cheered them on. The other men must have felt the same for along the whole line of slit trenches, no one was willing to bet against them.

Tony soon appeared with breakfast rations and water and news that the neighbouring town of Leonforte had officially been wrested from the Germans. The rumble was supply trucks moving in.

GC, a grey-haired man with an athletic build, ambled up and gave a friendly nod. "I've heard what you boys accomplished the other night. Remarkable," he said.

"GC and I have some business," Tony told them. Tony could speak some Italian and earned extra money that way, helping non-military types like GC find their stories. GC was a presser, a reporter who had been with the regiment since Dunkirk.

When Henry shared his idea of searching out the local barbershop, GC not only approved, he wanted to come along. "You can open under the regimental colours," he laughed, clapping Henry's back.

GC had no army rank, hadn't since the first great war, but he had a certain confidence about him, as if his approving of a sojourn into town was authority enough to make it happen. All things being equal, Henry might have chosen to lay low a bit longer, but he was sick of waiting for orders and he liked GC, appreciated his efforts to cheer the men, entertaining them with mordant sketches of army life that sometimes ended up in their hometown papers.

Henry had been marching and resting, sitting and standing, sleeping and eating, all at the whim of his commanding officers long enough. Given a chance to make something of the day, something of his own choosing, away from barking sergeants and the like, he would take it. Assoro seemed a good place to start.

*

The barber shop, situated on what appeared to be a main thoroughfare, was as wide as it was tall, the length of at least two men, and dim and cool. The only furnishings were a pair of cane chairs and a small wooden desk, painted black. There were glass jars full of barbicide and aftershave, a small mirror propped against the wall and a large, copper-coloured urn for water. It stood nearly full.

Henry glanced back to the far end of the shop, suddenly hopeful that he would find the proprietor there, some old gentleman with an enthusiasm for his work, but the place was empty save for a back cupboard full of soap shavings, scissors and a blade. Henry swept the contents into his pack. He told GC that he would cut the hair of every man in the unit

before they moved on, just like the crew he had cut on the Glengyle. He would make a flourish, lift the boys' spirits.

*

By noon, it was dull and hot, but Henry had set up yet another shop, this one in a cave, where it was considerably cooler at least. Some of the boys followed him and were arguing over their turns when GC produced a bottle of grappa. He was unanimously given the first pull.

"You should be holding a bat," Tony said. "You look like Stan the Man at the plate." The others laughed. GC had his knees bent to give Henry an easier reach. He flexed a little.

"If you care about your ears, don't move," Henry warned. "And I'm for the Yankees this year, not the Cardinals, so be careful."

Tony took a drink and passed the bottle. Each of them took a swig, made a face, sighed, and waited for the alcohol to light a bit of a fire in their bellies. When someone asked where they might find more of it, GC told them they'd find wine for sure, but it would be homemade. "Not close to anything you've ever tasted," he said.

"Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades anyway," someone replied. "We'll take what we can find."

*

Henry can't remember which of them suggested the return trip into town but he takes the blame. After all, wasn't it his lark they were on? His happiness had been as light and as fickle as a drifting feather.

Since then, it's been a steady fall. The harsh judgments he works over and over in his mind, as if he is tragically powerful, as if he alone set the world in motion. But, of course, people die. In a war they die in droves.

Turns out that Christie, an only son, blessed with a devout mother, a well-practiced griever, had been destined, like his father, to die young, and nothing to be done about it. The others too: Norman, Ernest, Mack, Godfrey, Donny, Marvin and Jack, and nothing to be done.

Even as they stood about the cave, joking and scheming, a scope had

already been calibrated, a gun turned. A soldier had flicked away his last cigarette and was preparing to light a fuse. He stared at a distant speck, unblinking.

On any other day, there might have been shouts from the market, the occasional squall of a baby, the patter of a carpenter re-hanging a door, the lazy call of some sleepy animal, the grind of an engine, the reassuring buzz of industry. It was mid-afternoon and the Sicilian air was as still and hot as an oven. As the boys traipsed past the town square, they breathed quickly, in short gulps, like fish on land.

“I bet the girls are at the lake. Damn,” Donny said.

“Damn,” Jack replied. The others were silent.

Henry had been thinking about it too, about the lake back home, bigger even than the endless sky that stretched out from Assoro, continuing many miles beyond the furthest point a person could see. He wanted it, the burn of cold water on his skin, the weightlessness. He wanted to push his body down deep, colder and colder, darker and darker.

A glimmer of something bright pulled him out of his thoughts, a flat of metal that turned the sunlight into a narrow, white beam. Almost simultaneously Duffy appeared with the aide de camp and put a stop to their plans. “It’s not safe,” he practically roared, pointing to a small patch of shade by the town well.

The others hustled, as Henry should have done. It was a coin lying Mussolini side up on the stone tile. He knelt to see if there were others, and all at once his senses failed him. The friendly grumbling of his mates was swallowed up by an incredible blast. He heard nothing else, felt nothing else, not even his body. In place of the soft, blond tiles of the piazza there was only dust and blood and a boot, still laced but without a man attached to it, and Henry understood nothing. He watched blankly, a stranger to himself, even as others ran towards him shouting words, unfathomable words.

Someone pulled Henry away, put him on a medical transport. In his memories, he is floating over the scene, as if he’s watching it. There is the steady strobe of the sun through summery clouds, the pulsating shadows across his body and across the open cab of the truck, the sun that won’t stop shining, the terrible, glaring light.

The bus has almost emptied out and Lennie is long gone. The young ball players too. It's a stranger gently nudging Henry awake, pointing out the ferry terminal and, beyond it, the Georgia Strait, all mist and drops of rain. The tang of salt and cedar land on his tongue. Something new.

Henry doesn't remember his dreams. He steps out into the world.

The Judges' Comments

The three jurors were unanimous in their choice for the winner of this year's Penguin Random House Canada Award for Fiction: "Panorama" is a strong, confident, jewel of a story that left us all awestruck. Richly imagined and told, with no words wasted, this weird and wonderful story holds the power of a fable.

Harriet Alida Lye, Author of *Natural Killer*

Mark Burgess' "A Letter from Bielefeld" is a fever dream of a story, masterfully exploring the contortions and sacrifices we endure to create comforting narratives. But beyond the contemporaneousness of its subject, it is simply good writing—richly characterized, carefully plotted, and wonderfully entertaining.

Ward Hawkes, Assistant Editor, Doubleday Canada

Melany Franklin's novel excerpt, *Sanctuary*, commences as a quiet and ostensibly inconsequential cross-country bus trip, only to compel the reader into a different kind of journey: one that is deeply troubled by haunting memories, guilt, and self-acceptance. As the narrative gains momentum and confidence, the author's evocative prose and composed lyricism shine through.

Guglielmo D'Izzia, Author of *The Transaction*

