

bum

Ken Sparling

“We will all have to learn to live with the wind,” said the girl.

Her voice was quiet like a lake.

“There’s probably a point at which you need to give up,” someone said.

“Probably,” someone else said.

“We might as well get used to it.”

“Wind and shadows
provide good openings.”

The boy in the blue tunic
scratched himself.

“You don’t actually believe any of
this crap?” asked the girl.

“There’s probably a good reason
for it,” said the boy.

“Probably,” said the girl, nodding absently.

The girl reached up from where she was lying with her head nestled in some guy’s lap.

She touched a cheek.

The boy felt sad.

It felt like his privates were wet.

He sat on a public toilet.

He could hear what was falling.

He whispered.

The air in front of him seemed dewey.

He could feel the smell of himself.

I had decided that over the course of the next few weeks I was going to try to get into an effective rhythm for managing the dishwasher – for the way it got loaded, for how often we ran it, for when during the day it got run.

On weekends, you could run it anytime.

But on weekdays, you had to wait till after 7:00 p.m.

That's when the hydro rates dropped.

There was really no way to run it and unload it the same evening.

We were too tired to stay up till the cycle finished.

It was imperative that you wait until the dishes cooled.

Someone was behind the bar,
reading Proust.

Light fell through the door.

A young woman stood in the
doorway looking around.

The fry cook let out a belch.

**Shakespeare is just another
word for nothing left to lose**

I come home after work and Kitty
has her sewing machine apart,
lying in pieces on the kitchen table.

She opens her mouth, but all that
comes out is a little squeak.

Her eyes make me think of an
animal that has been shot, but
didn't fall down.

Bill looked old, but
somehow beautiful,
which made me
think I'd maybe
been looking at
him for too long.

Small planets crawled up out of the mud, then somehow made their way into the kitchen.

Far up the street a baby cried, its voice tumbling through the evening air, arriving at the boy through a trap door in the wind.

The girl's words rolled over like armadillos exposing their soft underbellies.

Chatty crows flung themselves
from the branches of Douglas firs
outside the second storey
bedroom window.

The girl dressed.

She looked nice.

I had no idea what time it was,
but I started the car anyway.

She awoke **one morning**.

She was lying in **bed**.

She looked **down** at her **body**.

Her **head** tipped **up** **off** the **pillow**.

Her **chin** **pushed** **against** her **chest**.

She **threw** **off** the **covers**.

wake me up before you go,
she whispered.

She was having
that dream again..

The one with the pigeons.

Grey pigeons.

Pecking at crumbs

in a public square.

Her knees rose under
the tent of her nighty.

“Nighty-night,” she said.

“Nighty-night,” he said.

“Stop patting me like
I’m a dog,” she said.

It wasn't so much that she suddenly felt unreal, more as if she'd never been real in the first place and was only now discovering it.

I thought of it kind of like
putting a bra on my
sentences, thereby
obscuring their beauty.

I didn't really want to do this.

I wanted people to be able to
see my sentences.

Even if they were a little bit hidden.

She was looking for the place
where the evening filtered
into day.

She opened the glove box.

It wasn't in there.

“What am I trying to catch up to?”
she asked herself.

“God only knows,” she answered.

Anything, she thought.

“If I could just catch up to
something,” she whispered.

It's myself, of course, she realized.

only in the manner in
which things tumbled
from her mouth did she
recognize the semblance
of anything familiar.

The words themselves meant squat.

She was wearing a filmy blouse which
I took to be made of finely woven silk.

Kitty would want me to use a
knife to cut off proper slices
of my meat like a normal
human being, I told myself.

IT WAS AT ABOUT THIS TIME
THAT I STARTED LEAVING
MORE SPACES BETWEEN THE
WORDS I WROTE.

He nodded off.

It was kind of late for him
to be up.

He always arose early to
watch the sun rise.

He felt it was the least he
could do.

So he has this crazy dream about a girl.

Morning comes.

He wakes.

Goes to the window.

Pulls the curtains back.

Peeks out.

There's a girl out there.

She's asleep on the lawn.

The boy was in the lobby
of a hotel somewhere on
the south shore.

There was a
woman involved.

Her eyes looked
wide and agitated.

At the beach, they set up chairs
that unclenched like white flowers
opening their petals to the sky.

The prince was the first to sit.

The king's kid sister and a
cousin from up north were in
the lake up to their knees, their
royal garb rolled up to their
waists to keep it dry.

The elevator went up.

It stopped.

The doors opened.

The girl got off.

The boy got off.

They were on the
fourth floor.

They looked around.

They didn't know where
they were or why.

The girl was talking.

The boy couldn't
understand her.

When she talked,
her lips moved.

Sometimes her
teeth showed.

Clarissa said: I wish you would tell me what you're talking about right now, Marvin.

I'm just talking, Marvin told her.

Well stop, said Clarissa.

There was a whale going by far out in the bay.

They could see it spouting water up into the grey sky.

**In the war
between the
chapters
of this book,
I am never the victor,
said Victor.**

I do often feel like I don't
quite know what I'm
talking about.

But maybe I do.

Sometimes I do.

But this time, no.

**I most recently imagined
I saw the dog going by.**

**The men from the tax
shelter looked like Hobbits
wearing dresses.**

**"I guess the meeting is over,"
one of them said, sounding sad.**

I saw a little bird. It was outside the
sliding door, near the deck. A

chickadee, I think, and it reminded me
of yesterday down at the beach when

I came out of the water and there
were two sandpipers running together
along the shore. They didn't look like
the sandpipers I remembered from

when I was a kid. But they behaved like sandpipers, running together, just the two of them, dodging the waves that lapped up onto the sand. They stopped for a moment when I came out of the water. They looked at me. Then they ran a bit further along. One of them stopped, and the other

kept running, but then circled back a tiny bit when the other one didn't follow. They looked at each other for a second, then they both darted off in the direction they'd been going all along, which was north.

'IS IT STILL BEHIND US?'

CALLED THE GIRL.

SHE TRIED TO RUN

A LITTLE FASTER.

SHE CHECKED HER WATCH.

4:10 P.M.

**SHE COULD HEAR THE
BOY PANTING ALONG
BEHIND HER, TRYING TO
KEEP UP.**

**THE CREATURE WAS LIKE
A SCARY DOG THAT RAN
ON TWO LEGS.**

The girl gave the boy a book to read.

It was about some people who ride around in hot air balloons.

At the end of July, the boy wrote a letter to the girl telling her that he didn't think things were working out.

The entire episode seemed far away, and possibly metaphysical. The girl looked at the boy like she was seeing something hovering around him, like an aura, or just a miasma of coloured mist. She squinted her eyes. “I sometimes think about the kinds of questions I would ask people if I were a television interviewer,” said the boy. The girl stopped looking at the boy. Her eyes looked like white lakes.

*I Should Go To The Grocery
Store One Of These Days, he
whispered Into The Fridge*

Thursday arrived and

I still needed milk.

On Friday, I went for a walk
along the beach.

I'd already been here
three weeks.

The woman next door
is watching TV.

Her TV makes a sound.

It sounds like wind.

***I went up to the beach
to get some sunshine.***

I was having coffee on the porch.

I went inside the cottage.

I got some books.

I took them out to the porch.

***I put them on the wooden
table beside my coffee.***

A woman was walking through the
dune grass, down to the beach.

She stopped when she got
to the edge of the water.

She stayed there for a while
looking out over the lake.

I picked up a book.

The boy made a plan.

It was a big plan.

Somehow, I missed the sunset.

*I'm not even sure why I looked
at my watch that day in June.*

*But that's when I saw that it
was seven-thirty-seven p.m.*

I looked up at the sky.

*Then I turned on my heel and
stumbled through the sand,
back up into the dunes to try
again to find where I'd
parked the car that day in
the summer of 1952.*

Sometime, late in the night, the girl thought she heard a baby cry but when she sat up and listened all she heard was the boy breathing in the bed beside her.

**Suddenly, the laws of nature
seemed pretty unstable.**

**Risen like silk walls, broken laws
beckon to us from a place where
we can go and cavort and not care
if we get caught, not care
about anyone or anything.**

ALL OUR VAINGLORIOUS
and MISMANAGED
momENTS FLOOD BACK
to embarrass us
BRIEFLY BEFORE
we move on again.

There was enough sturdy ground below the slabs and posts to make the slabs and posts seem suddenly insufficient. I still can recall the engineers scrambling, dazed, like men made mad by rubble, until

they stumbled into the
streets, running south. The
streets were all pissed up
with rain that was running
into gutters riven into rocks,
like cracks in the world
overflowing onto the
sidewalks of our memories.

We'd had our voices piped in
on occasion, sure.

And yes, you're absolutely right,
we did sometimes
find it necessary
to use autotune.

At three-thirty, Kitty
arrives home with jam.

We toast crumpets.

A car radio thumps in the road
outside the kitchen window.

Parky will be home soon.

The lumps of her breasts and the
dome of her belly blocked her view
of the valley where her legs
emerged from her trunk and then
travelled in two separate

directions, as though trying to
get away from each other.

**CHILDREN ARE PLAYING
IN THE MUD.**

**MOTHERS AND FATHERS
ARE DRINKING TEA.**

YOU HAVE TO STOP
ALL THIS NONSENSE.

BUT IT NEVER STOPS,
DOES IT?

The girl imagines the boy in the
lobby of a hotel somewhere in
the south, with palm trees lining

the circular drive outside the big plate glass window at the front of the hotel, and that smell of plastic and carpet you get in a new hotel. She pictures the boy sprawled in a chair, as though he owns the place or something. He is reading a book, but she can't make out the title clearly in the picture she is holding inside her head. It isn't a

book the girl has ever heard of.
It's some new book. Something
experimental, full of random
words that fall like detritus
over the edge of a waterfall.
Knowing the boy, it is probably
a book of weirdo poetry.

“I am not a boob,’ I say aloud.

There is no one in the room with me.

I feel like such a boob.

There Are So Many Excellent
Opportunities To Just Stop
Right Now And Do Nothing

He was a tall dark man with heavy whiskers, holding a pair of binoculars. He kept the glass to his eyes for a time, then dropped the binoculars over the cliff. His lips moved. He might not even have been speaking. He might just have been moving his lips as he formed words in his mind.

West leads to the grocery store.

I knew I was doing it, but
I just didn't care anymore.

I was sick and tired of being
quiet for the baby, drinking decaf
in the mornings, and taking drugs
to get myself to sleep at night.

I wanted to be the
secret ingredient in
something wicked.

With the girl on the tennis courts, it was the getting out the ingredients stage of the game.

“I am,” Cecilia said in response to her husband’s most recent query.

The world is so beautiful
this morning.

Everything I see
makes me want to stop
and just stand here.

I can't breathe right.

The other night I was lying in bed, and I could see something down there on my foot. A hair, maybe.

This hair, or whatever it was, was on my big toe. I was hoping it wasn't some kind of insect. The thought had crossed my mind. It didn't seem to be moving, but who could tell in the dark like that. I didn't want to wake Loni. I didn't want to have to tell her that I was worried about something on my

toe. I'd have to explain to her that I'd seen something on my toe that I didn't recognize. The thing down there on my toe, that hair, or whatever it was, wasn't making any noise. None that I could hear, anyway. Of course, there are sounds that a man cannot hear. Dog whistles, for example. But that was no dog whistle down there on my toe. Thinking about how this thing on my toe might or might not

be making some kind of sound that I couldn't hear only reinforced my feeling that there is an awful lot of distance between a man's head and his toe. The toes are sort of down there on their own, really. I lay in bed staring down at my toe, which was poking up in the moonlight, and I was hesitant to move, for fear of waking Loni.

They showed up at a time when I wasn't really ready for them, but that's always the way, isn't it. I had just gone out to get the post, and when I got back to the house, I stood on the porch for a while, just looking around. There were dark clouds crawling across the sky like scary monsters. Melinda was at the spa for the day, and there were four or five dogs I didn't recognize prowling around down by the pond. The fish were

really jumping, and I remember thinking, Good God, can this really be happening. And then suddenly there they were, like aliens arrived after a four hundred year journey in stasis, all gooey looking, like they'd been swimming in slime. Maybe it was the long flight they'd had to endure, but they all looked really crabby, and I so very much wished that I didn't have to have anything to do with them.

Every time the sadness drops
into my stomach, I force
myself to hold onto it tightly,
to keep it near me, to not mess
with it, to not try to make it go
away – to not describe it, or
circumscribe it, but just to feel it
float inside me.

Like as if we were sitting together
in my living room holding hands
and you had to go home in a little
while and we were just sitting there
talking about nothing for a while.

And nothing big was happening.

Everything that was
happening was small.

Last time I saw her was
November. She told me
she had a gerbil in her purse.

She sat in the dark and
touched the letters in her head.

Quietly, she spoke to herself.
“Sorry, I didn't mean that,” she said.

Her ears were in contact with felt things.

It was raining in her hair,
and puddles reflected light,
and every time someone
said, "I didn't mean that,
princess," she smiled the
smile of the smiling.

They could change their voices at will, and talk in other voices.

They were young.

We, on the other hand, had picked our voices long ago.

And while we existed with the knowledge of our ability to change our voices, we had never changed our voices since that day, particular to each of us, but common to us all, when we picked our final voices.

Finally, I saw the angel in the thing.

I was trying to remember what it
was we kept laughing about.

I put on my coat and
went out the front door.

I walked to the end
of my street.

It was snowing.

PART FIFTY-FIVE

Mom was dumbfounded anytime anyone didn't like her. It broke her heart. When she was a child, she must've cried a lot. As she got older, of course, she began to lash out. She came home talking about certain people: "Why do they treat me this way?" With certain people, this could only lead to spiritual diminishment. But with Mom, this is how she lashed out.

And also, she always gave examples.

Kit got mad and yelled at

me - well, she didn't really

yell, it just felt that way.

What she really did was more

like saying some harsh words

in a really scary voice.

I kept crumbling off bits from
the tiny cinnamon cheesecake
loaf she'd brought back to me
from the Christmas fair she'd
attended with her sister, Jill.

He pissed and turned
his head and the dark
glasses over his eyes
turned everything dark.

Across the yard a man
was cutting grass.

It looked like the man
was driving the mower
over his dog's tail.

The dog was howling.

The man took the
dark glasses away
from his eyes.

The sun made it hard
for him to see.

The piss was

coming out of him

yellow in the sun.

He put the

sunglasses back on.

Lately, I've been listening to the
white space in between my
sentences in order to try to hear
what the sentences are prying
apart. I want to see what they
look like pried apart.

I might put them back together later.

Or maybe I'll just throw them out.

You can hear the edge of the universe echo in the sound of lawn mowers mowing grass on Sunday afternoons. The universe looks like a map. You can follow the map down to the lake. Modern maps are useless in this respect: when you arrive at a lake, they cannot accommodate you. But in the pauses between blue moments, modern maps do serve a kind of purpose.

Suddenly, I didn't
care that we
weren't going
away. Earlier I'd
cared. But now I
didn't care.

*If you convince yourself
of something, you can
make it happen, he
tells himself. He's read
this somewhere,
he realizes, or heard it
somewhere. His aunt
must have told him.*

A SOUND LIKE HIS HEART
BEATING IN HIS EARS.

A SOUND LIKE FEAR
IN THE EMPTY COVE
WHERE HIS STOMACH ACID
WASHES ASHORE
LIKE WAVES ON THE BEACH
OF HIS IMMINENT MORTALITY.

I never felt a part of it.

I never even knew what it was

I never felt a part of.

I close the book I'm
reading in the midst
of a great battle
scene and find myself
alone in bed at 7:00
in the evening on a
quiet summer night
when no one is doing
anything but waiting
to go to bed.

He tries to be as quiet as a mouse.

Quieter, even.

He imagines himself as a mouse,
then as the shadow of a mouse.

Liberty enjoys drawing at home. When asked how she put the googly eyes onto her dragon, Liberty says, “I got my glue out and stuck them on.” Liberty agrees that the dragon’s eyes are pretty funny.

What really freaks me out
is that hat on the hatrack
in my cubicle.

Whose hat is that?

**Lulu was a
former olympic
high jumper
who was
constantly
seeking some
way to integrate
her past glory
into her current
job as a
data-entry clerk.**

**How many times
do I have to tell you,
God can't be your friend.**

A guy named Taylor
had long black hair,
but that was all he had.

Mondale had to wear a brace
on his arm even to dial the phone.

Pony Express had a mahogany desk
in his office on the top floor,
and he had an American Express card.

Jacob's job was to fill out forms and then send them to people who had filled out forms they had sent to him.

Gradually Grady's office was becoming more and more automated.

After Frank retired, Milicent had less and less to do each day.

The boy stopped reading and lay in bed with the newspaper on the floor beside him.

'That's insane,' someone said.

The boy turned to the girl. 'Who said that?'

The girl put her fingernail between her teeth.

"It's just someone out in the parking lot," she told the boy. "We left the window open last night, remember," she added.

"Do you think they can hear me from out there?" asked the boy.

"Maybe," said the girl. She thought for a moment. "Probably," she said.

yellow heads

dip gently

in the wind

Felt a lot better today.

Less pain in the abdomen.

Less pain in the crack of my ass.

Why am I feeling better?

Eventually things pile up.

You have to clear a little space

on your desk.

God saw the end coming

from the cupboard

he was hiding in.