

ANDREW RAI BERZINS
FUNCTION CREEP

REMAIN CALM.

Who said that?

Voice from somewhere. Maybe. Maybe. Least it seems, someone said.

Though then why [Leonard falls to wonder] do sounds of spastic metal, plastic, wood, glass—*shatterings*—offer such rich rewards to the ear?

Still here, still all there. Presumably mostly, all right, Leonard. Leonard is and *knows* he is—whether this can now be deemed luxury. Breathes deep—*no crime in that, sure.*

[Who said *that?*]

Standing still. Breathes. The old in-out. The old joke. Some comfort in that. When suddenly, out of the blue, the brainfog and flotsam, jetsam, detritus, horde of hisses, a story staggers forth: *So there was this dog*

There was—[it's said]—this dog that could not distinguish people on TV from those in real life. Someone on TV might say, *hey you get outta here!*—the dog would leave the room and it might be hours, days, before someone else on TV or in real life might say, *come here honey I love you*—and the dog would return.

Ferguson told Leonard he knew the dog. This was not a second-hand story. Ferguson had met and engaged with the dog. Said that in the dog's presence, he felt like an advertisement, not a person. Disliked that dog. Intensely.

One night the owner came home and found the dog sick and writhing on the floor. The TV was on, but the owner didn't notice what the TV might've been suggesting.

Leonard said that if the dog had been his, he'd have telephoned the station, demanded to know the nature of the broadcast and told them he had an obedient pet, the death of which he might hold the station to blame.

Said this out loud to Ferguson, but, whether due to Leonard's congenital mutter, Ferguson's congenital earwax, or the fact that Ferguson

thought Leonard to be Spanish and made minimal effort to understand him, Leonard got little back.

Todo es non espero was all Ferguson offered, his gaze drifting out to the distance, the lead grey lake over which a cluster of gulls swooped and swore, vicious for fish.

Just after seven in the morning, Leonard leans back against the outside wall of the restaurant from which he's been jettisoned. Cause unknown, perpetrator unknown. Barometric stasis. Good drying conditions. Crotch with that troublingly viscous feel.

Beside him the door hisses to a close. Leonard looks up the red brick face of the three-storey, once-proud bank. Hands secure in the pockets of his jacket, turning over the packets of salt. Windsor Salt. Some royalty there. Some hint of something majestic there.

Said—or it used to be—if one were to drop a coin from the top of the Empire State Building it would imbed itself in the pavement to the tune of several inches. Striking someone in its path, the coin would pass through the skull, neck, torso, lodging somewhere roundabout the pelvic bone. Research thin, sorrily thin.

Past the eavestroughs eaten with rust, Leonard sees birds dangling in mid-air, remarkable variety of blacks against the blue. Gasoline green, silk maroon. Grackles, he remembers. Grackles, they're called. What a god-awful ugly name for a bird of such striking luminosity.

The grackles on the wire, clearly undaunted by the mean and miserable nature of their name, look down at Leonard, waiting [it seems] for him to lie down and cool. Though he is not moving much, he is moving, his shudders alone sufficient to suggest that he might put up a fight. His eyes might be delicious, but is it worth the risk of a broken wing?

A car goes by, and through its window drifts the news, but the syllables dissipate before Leonard can corral them into meaningful words.

News does not always bring clarity and hope, Leonard knows well; he is not naive. One newscast lurks in what he believes is his memory: Buffalo, early 1960s, a man is found the morning following a terrible blizzard, frozen in the snow. Slumped into shrubbery, he's halfway between his car and his house, twenty feet on either side, midst of which he'd lost his way. Briefcase sits at an angle in the snowdrift, as though flung in the hope of reaching safe harbour. His system clear of both alcohol and drugs, he lost his way.

It is not clear if they showed the man. Leonard doesn't think so, for TV of that time. But Leonard remembers, conjures the face encircled in snow-laden juniper boughs, conjures the slightly-opened mouth, the ice-blue lips and reasonable teeth. Two hours southeast of where Leonard lived, that people could freeze twenty feet from their door.

This, Leonard still finds unsettling—*when* he finds out, which he just has. Here in this brisk spring morning in which the risk of death by “exposure” seems like something otherworldly. Remembers studying weather in school, cumulo-nimbuses, kilopascals, average mean thunder per hectare of tundra—but blue-faced salesmen in overshoes, overcoat, earmuffs, trimmed-brim rabbit-felt fedora, frozen stiff in their driveways—no.

One could ask why. Whys lead nowhere.

Why one is a goose, but two are geese, whereas one is a moose, but two remain moose. Leonard used to find it a little bit funny, till Ferguson informed him: it is not funny. Merely a trick of similarity in sound masking entirely different language roots. *Goose* is from the Old Norse—*gas*, whereas *moose* is from the Algonquin, presumably for *moose*. One moose being plenty for most, perhaps to the Algonquin a plural seemed redundant.

Ferguson assumed Leonard might know this, assuming that Leonard might have some Native in him. Complexion maybe. Heaviness of eyelids. This came before Ferguson's decision to ascribe to Leonard a Spanish identity. *Quiero reir*.

Leonard stands at the streetcar shelter. He is not even waiting for the streetcar. In point of actuality he's waiting for the bakery. To open.

Two women—streetcar waiters—stand nearby.

There's three of us, the taller one says. She's thin, purple-lipsticked, with blush that licks the cheeks in big hooked tongues gallivanting out from the dark of her temples. Spiral eye sockets. Hard steel eyes. Zero chance of precipitation.

We're trying to cross the street, says the woman. *The two of them go, they're a couple steps ahead, but a panther will not let me cross.*

The streetcar emerges from the bend a few blocks up. The second woman picks up her briefcase. *A panther*, she says, betraying no opinion.

What do you think it means? says the first.

The second woman makes a vague *hmmm* noise, but her lips stay shut; she moves past Leonard, her lips more than likely their natural colour,

perhaps accentuated by neutral gloss, or perhaps she licked them, Leonard can't tell. She rolls her eyes for what seems solely Leonard's benefit.

The streetcar doors open. The women get on.

The streetcar is red. Pulling away, it leaves an absence, a vague green vacuum shimmering the size of a streetcar, rectangular replica green complete absence of the streetcar that was so recently there, in its metal and rivets and rubber, the dogshit from shoes and chewing gum from mouths, the glass and formica and paper and oil. Instead there stands a green lack, a hole in the world ... out of which the panther comes.

The woman was right, it was not a lynx or leopard or tiger, it was not a puma, it was not a lion or cheetah or cougar, it was not a civet, a bobcat, a tom. This was a panther, with emerald eyes. Deep low rumble swirling in its throat. Black, poised, possibly lethal enigma.

Leonard surrenders, and takes a step out.

The feline screech transforms to brakes—Mercedes-Benz brakes—that shatter the spell. Leonard finds himself on the pavement, slumped back against the car's gleaming grill. The irate driver stands over him, accusative. As Leonard struggles to rise, one knee promptly buckles under and he's forced to grab for balance. His hand finds the three-sided-star hood ornament, latches on, but the ornament gives way, attached as it is by an elasticized cord. Leonard tumbles back down to the pavement, the ornament snapping back into its fixture.

Leonard looks about to find the jungle gone. He looks at the car. It could've been a Jaguar. It would have been ironic had it been a Jaguar. Other hands gently remove him from the street and place him up against a fire hydrant. Engine of the Benz a diminishing growl as it creeps off away through the intersection.

Jaguar? Panther? He wonders, he ponders: do jaguars come in black?

One of Ferguson's theories held that soul transmigration was site-specific. Souls re-entered the world through their earlier point of exit, they didn't have to *lurk* quite, they were—while extra-corporeal—free to wander, but, come the time they sought a fresh carrier, had to return to the place from which they'd left. Give or take a hundred yards. He had no proof, Ferguson admitted, but liked the idea, so decided it was so. One of the beauties was that no one could prove any different, not while they walked the earth.

Leonard, he told him, could well have been a porpoise, so long as he was born in a suitable location, meaning—by an ocean. Leonard, for his part, had no recollection of expressing the desire to have previously been a porpoise. They were sitting at a beat-up lakeside bench, Leonard looking out over the water, presumably with something Ferguson construed as longing. Leonard was generally fond of water, but with no established bias of salt versus fresh.

Unless you can locate a fresh-water porpoise—nearabouts, mind you—you were born near the ocean or were not a porpoise. Not a lot of sentience roaming that murk, Ferguson snarled at the dark choppy plain.

To be fair, Leonard wasn't averse to porpoises. He liked their sense of humour, their chucklehead-on-helium laugh, their reputedly deft dealing with sharks. It was nice to think that he too may have once moved through his habitat with grace, glee and gusto. His back ached, his knees were shot, his neck sometimes hurt from the burden of his head. He seemed to remember in a backache book the contention that our first mistake was standing up. Downhill from there. Curse of the species.

Leonard returned from thinking to find Ferguson in full verbal stride regarding soul transmigration. Not to be unkind, but he'd heard it before. The endless mutations, qualifications, addendums and even one or two *notwithstanding*s—Ferguson having come from the world of law. Now that Ferguson was clear that Leonard was not Spanish, just an English-speaking mumbler with olive skin and shifty cinder-eyed gaze, Ferguson assumed full comprehension from Leonard. Or, if not precisely comprehension, a listener with *potential* comprehension, which—if not ideal—was at least sufficient. Ferguson wasn't looking for conversation, rather the facsimile of a conversant, yet one who stayed quiet most of the time.

Just then he was on about ethnicity, how his theory paradoxically both challenged and supported the concept. It allowed for souls to continue in one area so long as the bearers of the souls continued there, living and dying, being recycled through generations of an increasingly distinct genetic pool. Yet it also allowed for a soul in the carriage of a wanderer to cross the world and exit there, and then re-enter courtesy of the local population. This soul would inevitably differ from the souls of those much longer in residence; but, carried in an ancient family line, it would be wholly accepted, regardless its strangeness.

Leonard stands in front of the hardware store window, watching his image facing in at a ratchet set on prominent display. The word *ointment* hangs in his head.

Ointment, he says, thinking to rid himself. *Ointment!*... but the word remains. He looks off down the street. The word goes, but briefly. No sooner does his gaze return to the ratchet set than so too does the word. *Gouge*, he then remembers, someone saying *gouge*. Ointment for a gouge, gouge from a ratchet? It is possible, no, it is not outlandish.

Turns from the window and starts down the street. *Down?* Must be, given the end of the street drops unseen into the staggering blue persistence of the lake, where still swim salmon and sturgeon, where perhaps [majestically] the Great Lakes fresh-water porpoise

He scans his limbs for ratchet scars, not entirely sure what one would look like. The arms first, then the legs. Foggy. Further? How far back? His pants will not rise much past the knee, his shins a brilliant springtime white, scales on his kneecaps, bites on his ankles, nothing resembling the work of a ratchet. Looks up. Finds himself facing an undrunk coffee in a Galaxy Donuts Styrofoam cup on the concrete planter-box enclosing a first-winter-battered maple sapling. Looks so Canadian it makes him want to cry.

Coffee does not inherently emasculate, not off the top, not in all cases. Toxic in excess doses to the pregnant. Drunk most determinedly by the Finns.

Leonard picks it up and swirls it about, the thin grey film of coagulated cream breaking up into particles like river ice in the spring, below it the rich ochre promise of greased brain optimum performance—perhaps new thoughts! He takes a sip, gags, spits. Thinks of the fellow he met in the donut shop selling subscriptions, would not say to what. Interesting strategy. Missing some fingers.

Lost to a client? Ratchet? Beast?

Abruptly remembers as a child—[child!]*—*of a form they brought home from school. Insurance. What one could get for a finger, an eye, a hand—the money was astounding. Sat with a friend—Donny Wilson—and worked over what was losable. Leonard gauged he could make well upwards of \$200,000 without great encumbrance, some weakness to the left side was all: left eye, left ear, all except thumb and index finger on his left hand, the baby finger on his right, couple toes on each side excepting the big ones, his hair if they wanted it [no price listed], maybe a kneecap so long as he could

still skate, any inside stuff that was not essential, his sense of smell [though not his nose], his front four teeth [as per hockey heroes], tonsils, and, of course, his appendix.

Donny was willing to lose one arm, entirely, preferably his left. He'd broken it before, a bad break that didn't heal properly and ended up shorter and weaker than his right. He felt he could do just fine without it, especially with tens of thousands in return. Donny Wilson, poor old Donny, lost no limbs, just went and died, by electrocution, aged eighteen, working as a sloppy electrician's apprentice.

Few worse things than a sloppy electrician.

Sadness swamps Leonard. Who needs memories that only bring back loss?

But do they—it strikes him—*only* bring loss? Remembers now Donny's laugh, a loamy chuckle, an easy warm thing like a summer wind. Donny's superfine slapshot from the point, them sneaking up to Donny's older sister's window to watch her reveal her wonderful breasts. His mother's walnut-coconut muffins, his father's pilfered Red Cap beer. Donny and Leonard drooling Tootsie Roll spit from the overpass onto passing windshields. Remembers the massassauga rattler that cornered Leonard and Donny scared off with madman yelps and a sumac branch. Stealing cigarettes from Loblaws, stealing hockey cards from the Esso. Donny's loyalty—always—every single time they were caught.

Remembers Donny—clearly—for the first time in memory.

Leonard's stomach revolts at the coffee. Making it to the side of the bank—Royal Bank with its golden lion—he spews out bile into a box containing presumably obsolete cheques. Royal Bank lion? *I'll show you lion*, Leonard roars. Or roars in his mind. Roars as the bitter bile sings his sinuses.

The world is my oyster, I shall not want? Hah!

A laugh of the illest humour. Utterances such as this came often from Ferguson, apropos of nothing they'd been discussing. *It's a new dark age*, the grim man continued, *Time of great liars, blindness, greed. So where have all the lovely losers gone?*

Leonard was no stranger to rhetoric. He recognized questions that soured at answers. Leonard teethed on his Styrofoam cup, making impressions, staring like Ferguson out to the lake where a lone windsurfer in a thermal suit cut brief white wounds in the water's chilling blue.

For, mark my words, the liars aren't the losers. The liars are the winners! That's why they lie!

Okay. So? But Leonard kept silent, but for the sound of his teeth as they punctured the rim of the cup. The bitten portion funnily remained attached, the perforations' arc interrupted by tiny bridges of steadfast white.

Strikes him he once knew a man in fossils—fossils and taxation—expert in both. Contracted gum disease, tragic, fascinating. Impressed on Leonard the need to floss. Could read—or so he claimed—from a person's bite their diet, age, cavities. Calcium deficiencies. Oral fixations. Things best left unspoken.

Even Christ in the final estimation a loser

Leonard refixed on Ferguson, only to find Ferguson staring fiercely back. Leonard was surprised to see moisture welling in his colleague's eyes. The air was mild; they had not been drinking. Leonard wondered if his own eyes were playing tricks. Ferguson appeared to shudder, but it softened to a shrug. Ferguson cleared his throat with some effort.

Christ, Van Gogh, Geronimo ... losers all, in concrete terms. Not bad company, given that. Look at Van Gogh—worth millions now ...

Geronimo! What Leonard then whispered, if animatedly, and risked a grin. What they yelled, as children, jumping out into water.

What? said Ferguson.

Not a warm *what*.

Leonard blanched. His view grew blood-clouded. This had not been a *what* of generosity, of engagement, hope or possibility. *What?* in conversation has sprawling application, but, when warmly offered, signals interest or concern. This did not. It danced with contempt. And Leonard needed less contempt in his life.

Has not eaten. This perhaps why? The vomit, the spew upon the bank. Stomach lining in acid bath—bile—bilious beyond belief. Catastrophic? Maybe, with time. Cat in the gut trying to claw its way out. Cat in the bag? Cat in the hat? Catgut for tennis racket strings. Racket, ratchet? Who's to say? *Cat got your tongue?* Cat-e-gory. The word for zero in tennis: love.

Three hours anyhow, conscious, erect, to all intents and porpoises passing for a person. Incognito? Hard to say. Reasonable facsimile? Difficult to say.

Came upon the city just before dawn. *Rise and shine*, some voice had said. [Ferguson's? No, uh—no, we think not.] This morning the gulls, that too woke him, the gulls at a carcass not far off. Once Leonard could manage to stand, he had hoisted his bag of bones and teetered over to where the gulls were at work eviscerating a massive carp. Grey-green aspect, dirty chartreuse, with running sores, mouth and gills laced with tumourous bumps. As if thrown up. As if having thrown itself—which got a bit too close to home. To identify with a suicidal carp—no, there are better ways of being in the world.

He'd dug in his heels and felt them sink. Stood there much longer, he'd have likely returned—as is, of course, inevitable—to landscape. Instead he directed his feet to move and, in spite of his suspicion of a whim-riddled god at work in his workings, eventually they did.

The laundromat nears. Proof he is moving. He slows it down. He slows it all down. To function unnoticed takes some work. He slows to a crawl—a *creep*—a subtle inclination in an as-yet indecipherable direction. The laundromat is empty, except for an old Polish woman sorting through orphaned socks, making pairs that if not exactly matched can at least front harmonious guise. Leonard takes a seat by the window from which he can monitor the door of the bakery across the street. The Siege of Roncesvalles, 1986. In seventeen minutes they'll open, give or take a day.

Pang of hunger. Curious word. Not ping or pong or peng or pung.

He scans the aisles, the counters, washertops, but the place is immaculate. In the garbage he spies some soap left caked in the bottom of a yogurt container. Considers, gains the faintest recall of once having given in to such temptation. Recent? Must be, can almost taste the chalky perfumed essence of pulverized ash, of creature fat, of soda scum pickling his tongue, the hope for sustenance gone up in lather, up the nostrils, heave of the innards, spurt and gag and lurching ooze. No, not something he's hungry to repeat.

He picks up a tabloid in the hope it might steer his mind away from the rumblings of his gut. The words go by in a chequered stream, in both eyes and out the mouth. Word process. Nothing else for it. *See it, say it, see it, say it*. Checking for lies, for spelling mistakes, for hidden meanings, for failures to mean. Is then stopped by an item in the corner concerning

Ferguson

Ferguson's body

There is that moment just before sleep. Logic is deranged. Associations tumble.

There comes that pattern, that series of lines, of textures, colours, shapes, vibrations—perhaps even numerical *sequence*—all of which suggest to him *Leonard*— identity or essence or distinguishing mark, through the mud and blood and mist and excretions ... his signature at the gate between worlds.

And, as always, he is ushered through. He is known and accepted. He feels, in truth, welcomed. It does not matter to the denizens of dreamland what foulness he sheds at the threshold before entering. Here he is Leonard of the glorious gesture. Here he is Leonard of both act and intention. He may swim or walk or run or fly. No one dares say otherwise.

It's pleasant.