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REAPPRAISALS:
CANADIAN
WRITERS

DOMINANT IMPRESSIONS

Essays on the Canadian Short Story



Edited by
Gerald Lynch and Angela Arnold Robbeson

University of Ottawa Press

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Introduction

CANADIAN CRITICS AND SCHOLARS, along with a growing number from around the world, have long recognized the high achievements of Canadian short story writers in this at-once oldest and newest of the genres. However, these critics have tended to view the Canadian short story as a recent phenomenon, as a product of the post-1960 rise of Canadian cultural nationalism. Or such well-intentioned critics focus exclusively on one kind of Canadian short story: the exquisitely crafted modern story, say, that highest achievement in prose fiction of concision, indirection, and unhappy endings. Or they focus yet more narrowly on contemporary fiction, the postmodern short story, like narcissistic children who see their older siblings as fumbling attempts toward this present perfection. *Dominant Impressions* intends to counter such mistaken views by addressing the question: What are some of the literary and cultural antecedents of the Canadian short story? The exploration of possible answers to this question, in terms of the new scholarship and criticism presented here, should help toward establishing a continuum of the Canadian short story from at least the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

Attempts at distinguishing among genres, let alone prose fictional forms, are most often productive only of categorizing ends. The many expert contributors to *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989), perhaps the single most useful text on the genre, can be said to arrive at a tautological definition of the short story as a story that is short. We don't intend this observation as a wholly facetious compliment. In these times of rampant genre confusion such elementary observations, if not this one especially, are often those of lasting usefulness. And genre theory can be a labyrinthine thicket

indeed, covering ground that, at one end, categorizes compulsively with a neoclassical dedication to the rules and, at the other, would do away with the whole notion of identifiable genres. When the generic status of even the novel can be made to appear questionable, it is perhaps most sensible to adopt Alistair Fowler's conception of genre (derived from Wittgenstein by way of Dugald Stewart) as kinds of literary works that share a "family resemblance": "Literary genre seems just the sort of concept with blurred edges that is suited to such an approach. Representatives of a genre may then be regarded as making up a family whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all" (41). Familiarity and common sense tell us when we are reading short stories and, to turn a slightly different observation of Mavis Gallant's, as Canadian readers we know when we're reading Canadian stories: the author is Canadian or/and the setting is Canadian; Mordecai Richler is a Canadian writer, Montreal is a Canadian setting. Ergo, *The Street* is a book of Canadian short stories.

That said, it might nevertheless be observed that among prose narratives there are short stories, longer stories (novellas), and the longest (novels). It remains a fact for those theorizing the short story (*Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* provides ample testimony) that much of what is most lastingly productive was said with Aristotelian precision by Edgar Allan Poe in his mid-nineteenth-century review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. Working out of the same Romantic-*Symboliste* aesthetic that has made the lyric the dominant poetic form since, Poe asserted the primary point that short stories had to be short enough to be read in one sitting, else his chief aesthetic virtues of unity of effect and dominant impression are lost. Thus was first uttered the mantra of twentieth-century literature classrooms and creative writing workshops (especially those adhering to New Critical principles): every word of a short story must count toward the tell-tale tally. To this end—and Poe implies as much—short stories might better be composed backwards. Thus too the short story, and most obviously in its high-impact modern manifestation (the version most readers know, from Chekhov to Joyce to Norman Levine), has often been said to be closer to poetry than to the traditional novel (which further lends credence to the concept of genre confusion).

Inarguably there is much to recommend these sketched first principles of short story construction and study, these strongest family features of the genre: those of brevity, concision, unity of impression and effect. But they do not tell the whole story of the Canadian short story.

It remains a pleonastic fact that short stories must first of all be *short* (though even this word is a relative adjective; and the historical variability of

attention spans, not to say of posteriors, might well make us wonder just what duration Poe had in mind for a single sitting. Moreover, this qualifying of the genre's key term "short" supports Fowler's observation that, when it comes even to the most basic definitions of genre, "to begin is almost to end," because even with as supposedly distinct a genre as tragedy, "the common features are few and indistinct" [39]). But doubtless the time it takes to write a short story had as much to do with the form's popularity among nineteenth-century Canadian writers as the time it takes to read one. In this way, the two activities—time to write, time to read—are creatively related, attaching author to audience in the formation of a new genre and the making of literary culture. Or put concretely, in a pioneer country such as nineteenth-century Canada's especially, populated early on by besieged mothers and fathers beleaguered by trees, who apart from such a maverick as John Richardson could find the time to write novels? Interestingly, this lack of time as a result of domestic responsibilities was being given still in the mid-twentieth century by such Canadian women short story writers as Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro as the main pragmatic cause of their writing short stories instead of novels. Such considerations of length, especially as regards available time, may not be theoretically exciting, but they do remind us that the short story is a product of context and culture defined in the most inclusive way. As readers and critics—old and new, historian, historicist and post-structuralist—we ignore this ground of literature at the risks of falling into prejudice or receding into historical irrelevance.

In his landmark study of the Canadian and New Zealand short story, *Dreams of Speech and Violence* (1987), W. H. New argues that the short story is the marginal genre. In historically marginal cultures such as Canada's and New Zealand's, writers have found the marginal form accommodating of their situations and ambitions. Canadian and New Zealand writers use the short story, perhaps all unconsciously, as a kind of cultural-political protest, subversively, and with a sophisticated irony that remains mostly lost upon the central, dominant, financially rewarding, self-regarding cultures in which they need to succeed (America's and Australia's). New's theory has about it the ring of truth. Tested in pseudo-scientific fashion, it can be proven elsewhere. Ireland's writers, working on the margins of the dominant English literature culture, have thrived not only in the form of the short story but also in what many of them still consider the colonizer's language. The Americans dominated the form—with Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville—when in their so-called Renaissance they were defining and asserting their culture's value as against the British; in other words, when as a culture, they were feeling most marginal. And consider: the British have been lacking in great short story writers (with D. H. Lawrence being the most notable exception).

Foregoing further definitions, then, and without distinguishing among such mini-forms as the sketch, the anecdote, the tale, the short story, and so on, we might simply observe the enduring centrality of the short story in Canada's literary history. Our first internationally acclaimed author was a writer of short stories: Thomas Chandler Haliburton, a colonial man whose *Clockmaker*—the Sam Slick stories—testifies to a keen, not to say an anxious, awareness of his position on the margins of two great cultures. Moreover, the first series of his *Clockmaker* forms a story cycle, and this form, the story cycle, has come increasingly to dominate the genre of the short story in Canada. The comic-satiric sketch and story at which Haliburton excelled continued to flourish through the nineteenth century, and by far the most important nineteenth-century magazines for its dissemination were the highly influential *The Week* (1883–96) and *Grip* (1873–94). Although primarily an organ of social and political culture, *The Week* regularly published short fiction and the literary journalism of Sara Jeannette Duncan in her “Saunterings” column. *Grip* published a great number of parodies, sketches, and satires of the kind that would later win Stephen Leacock international acclaim (in fact, Leacock published his first comic piece in *Grip* while still a student at the University of Toronto). And the work of some other of the prolific writers of comic stories, such as James McCarroll (pseudonym Terry Finnegan), is recently being recovered and valued for its contribution to the development of the Canadian short story.

The romantic short story also flourished in a popular magazine culture that included such publications as Montreal's long-lived *Literary Garland* (1838–51), Susanna and Dunbar Moodie's *Victoria Magazine* (1847–48) out of Belleville, Halifax's *Mayflower* (1851–52), Toronto's *Anglo-American Magazine and Canadian Journal* (1852–55), [Rose-Belford's] *Canadian Monthly and National Review* (1872–82), *New Dominion Monthly* (1867–79), and *Canadian Illustrated News* (1869–83), to name but the most successful. Short stories were contributed to these publications regularly by such writers as Eliza Lanesford Cushing, Harriet Vaughan Cheney, Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, May Agnes Fleming, Rosanna Mullins Leprohon, Ethelwyn Wetherald, Susan Frances Harrison, Agnes Maude Machar, Louisa Murray, and Joanna Wood, to name but the more prolific and those who are becoming better known. The short stories in these periodicals, pioneering a somewhat alternate Canadian literary culture, were written predominantly by such women who thrived on the margins of patriarchal society. Their stories are not “merely” sketches, or effusive romances, or amateurish (and therefore dismissable) in any sense. They are fully realized short stories as accomplished and important in their historical-cultural contexts as any that came before or afterwards. Failure to appreciate this work in its own terms is the (our) genuine failure of imagination.

In 1896, at the beginnings of the modern story, Duncan Campbell Scott published his seminal story cycle, *In the Village of Viger*, comprising a virtuoso's gallery of nineteenth-century story forms, from folk tale to Gothic to local colour—and again with most being romantic rather than realistic in mode. At about the same time, Charles G. D. Roberts invented the so-called realistic animal story (with help from Ernest Thompson Seton); and Sara Jeannette Duncan continued publishing stories, many of which (such as the title story from her masterful *The Pool in the Desert*, 1903) are equal to those of Henry James in the niceties of their psychological realism and to those of William Dean Howells in their attention to the particularities of place.

Canada's next most famous writer after Haliburton is of course Stephen Leacock, and Leacock was not only a humorist too, like Haliburton, but in his fiction also a writer exclusively of sketches and short stories. After him, through the Modern period, the Canadian story continued to fare well in the hands of such practitioners as J. G. Sime (*Sister Woman*, 1919, a story cycle), D. C. Scott, and Raymond Knister (in 1928 Knister dedicated the first anthology of Canadian stories, which he edited, to Scott). Frederick Philip Grove's *Over Prairie Trails* (1922) remains a signal achievement of the period and genre (*Trails*, another story cycle, is mixed genre actually, what now is called creative non-fiction). Morley Callaghan performed his own version of a Hemingway pruning of prose even as he moved the modern Canadian story into an urban setting.

The mid-century saw a great number of writers who would go on to achieve international reputations as novelists, such as Robertson Davies and Margaret Laurence, first come to attention as writers of humorous sketches and psychologically realistic stories. They were able to do so in popular weekly supplements to newspapers such as the *Star Weekly*, in magazines such as *Maclean's* and *Saturday Night*, and in literary periodicals such as *Queen's Quarterly* and *Tamarack Review* (the latter of which was edited by Robert Weaver, a key figure in the development of the contemporary Canadian short story), which provided a venue for writers too numerous to name during what was both the heyday and swan song for short story writing and reading in Canada. Ironically, the well-crafted modern short story as well as the popular version were probably assisted in gaining this high point of reputation in the early- to mid-twentieth century by the falling off of literary attention spans (short stories *are* short), before the full occupation of an electronic mass media bent on rendering literary pursuits obsolete and drawing off the advertising revenue that was the lifeblood of magazines.

It needs to be said that many of those Canadian novelists who first found success in the short form are better in it than in the novel. Some of

the causes of this irrational development from good short story writer to middling novelist may be the same as those given for the attraction of the short story in the nineteenth century: constraints of time, the relative risk involved as compared to the time spent on a novel, market considerations given inflated importance by publishers' delusions about what readers want. Whatever the reasons—and they would include mistaken perceptions of aesthetic merit and the megalomaniacal tendencies of modern life—the novel early became and remains the form in which fiction writers feel they must prove themselves. And publishers do encourage them to think so: both Laurence and Munro had to resist pressure from their American publishers to turn story cycles into novels. Although it is critically cockeyed to see the short story as the apprentice work of future novelists, readers might well wonder about the kind of novels that will be (and are being) written by writers who have not learned to hone their prose and trim their tales in the discipline of the short story. One palpable observation: novels have certainly been getting bigger and baggier at the end of the twentieth century, reverting to the dimensions of their nineteenth-century ascendancy, when minute representationalism was understandable given the unavailability of photographic and cinematic versions of events. But if literary attention spans have been dwindling, and they have, we might well wonder: Are these all-new jumbo narratives being read at all? Or are such tomes not perhaps being bought and displayed as quaint cultural kitsch, like man-size hookah pipes in the smoke-free home?

Regardless, many of Canada's most accomplished novelists do continue to write short stories that are among the best being published anywhere (and the names Atwood, Shields, and Vanderhaeghe come readily to mind). The form would seem to hold an enduring attraction for Canadian writers indeed, even if very few collections of short stories are published any more by Canada's major commercial publishers, and by fewer and fewer of our literary publishers. Everyone wants a novel, it must seem, and publishers' declarations that story collections do not sell, and therefore cannot be successfully published, become self-fulfilling prophecy. New's theory of marginality helps explain the traditional (and to some extent) lasting appeal of the short story for Canadian writers. What, then might its weakening, assisted by (im)purely commercial marketing interests, portend? That Canada's is no longer a marginal culture? That the concept of a marginal culture no longer applies in our netted world? Or that, as a distinct culture, we are drifting closer to the expanding American centre, that place where incisive irony bewilders and where literary fiction, like all else, is successful or not in terms exclusively pecuniary and megalomaniacal—that place where the title of Alice Munro's masterful cycle of stories, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, was changed to *The Beggar Maid*, because

the American publisher found the original idiom too mystifyingly Canadian. Tellingly, Munro's original title points to the question of identity, the revised one to somewhere else.

To the end of recognizing and outlining a continuum of the Canadian short story, the following essays present new criticism and research on such subjects as the distinctive cultural contexts of some important nineteenth-century women writers; the shaping influence of *fin-de-siècle* *symboliste* aesthetics; and the determining role played in the lives of earlier Canadian readers by the nineteenth-century young adult short story. Essays dealing with the early twentieth century consider the heretofore overlooked importance of social(ist) realism in the short fiction of the Depression years; the legal vocabulary of Morley Callaghan's short fiction (Callaghan having been a lawyer who never practised law); and, in an essay paralleling the one on the nineteenth-century young adult story, compelling findings on the wide influence of the popular (that is, general-interest magazine) short story of this century. Thus the ground will have been prepared (the way contextualized) for four essays that assess the short fiction of five of Canada's most popular and respected writers—Margaret Laurence, Sheila Watson, Alice Munro, Alistair MacLeod, and Timothy Findley—and one that examines the concept of the hero in contemporary Canadian short fiction.

Essentially, then, this volume offers essays toward a long overdue historical and cultural re-contextualizing of the Canadian short story based on new scholarship and criticism. Its coverage is wide-ranging and our ambitions for it doubtlessly overreaching. As one unavoidable consequence of our determination to reach back to the beginnings of the Canadian short story, many subjects and short story writers could not be mentioned or are only touched upon. It is hoped that our repeated use of the word "toward" will eventually be justified by the publication of other individual essays, collections, and monograph studies widening the range and describing particular features of the extensive ground outlined here and waiting to be mapped. And finally, in recognition of the fact that there could be no scholarship or criticism without short stories and their authors, we give first place to an essay by one of Canada's finest short story writers of the younger generation, Bonnie Burnard, a meditation that gives us privileged insight into the prismatic relation between fiction and reality in one short story; and we conclude the book with an essay by Alistair MacLeod—the Canadian short story writer's short story writer—on his view of the tradition in which he writes.

In closing, the editors thank our colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Ottawa for their generous advice and

assistance, particularly Glenn Clever, Frank Tierney, Seymour Mayne, John Moss, Camille La Bossière, David Staines, Klaus Peter Stich, Gwendolyn Guth, Linda Morra, Jonathan Meakin, and Chair Keith Wilson. For commentaries on the symposium papers that began *Dominant Impressions*, we thank Sandra Campbell of the University of Ottawa and Tracy Ware of Queen's University. And we are grateful to the Faculty of Arts Research and Publication Committee and the University Research Fund of the University of Ottawa for generously provided funds.

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It Almost Always Starts This Way

BONNIE BURNARD

I GUESS I BELIEVE THAT the only thing the writing of a short story really requires is an altered state of mind.

Achieving an altered state of mind has never been much of a problem for me; there are those with my best interests at heart who would argue that it has occasionally been far too easy. I cannot remember a time when this was not true, although I do remember when I learned that this inclination would have to be managed.

When I was perhaps eleven, on Friday nights my best friend and I used to go uptown in our small town to the Kinetto theatre to watch whatever mindless Hollywood pap was on offer that week. On one of these nights, near the end of a long forgotten movie, there was a scene in a very large, very impressive parliament. After some crucial and startling dialogue, all of the men in the parliament stood up and began to applaud and shout. Sitting in my seat in the Kinetto theatre beside my best friend, I too began to applaud, whole-heartedly. I have no idea what stopped me from standing and shouting as well; restraint, I like to think. My best friend turned to me in the dark of the hushed theatre and said, "Okay, that's it."

Of course you get used to living a certain way inside your head. And you get used to pretending to be alive primarily and vigorously in the here and now, which I sometimes think of as passing. And if you're very lucky, you get to realize, to make real, some of the people and phrases and thoughts and images that give birth to themselves inside your head; you get to write a bit of fiction. But how do you discover the stories that will hold these people and phrases and thoughts and images? With me, it almost

always starts in reality. It almost always starts with a true story, true events and places.

For a while, I have been aware of a horseshoe cluster of stories sort of parked in the side yard of my brain waiting to be written. I'm going to use those potential stories to try to examine how I write, how I make a story. This exercise spooks me not a little; I am afraid of losing the stories if I approach them analytically, with cold blood as it were. Analysis of a raw story can be a clumsy, rough, ham-handed thing. But perhaps the very best potential stories are tough and patient and kind of loyal; perhaps the ones that slip away have no grips, no natural adhesion. And who wants them?

So here is a true story, or a cluster of true stories. After my first collection was published I was sent on a reading tour in British Columbia. I was two days in Vancouver and then I was driven by a woman, a librarian I think, to White Rock, for an evening reading. It was February. It was raining. The plan was that I would spend the night in White Rock and then the librarian would pick me up in the morning and deliver me to Mission for the next gig.

I was tired and, not being much of a public performer, anxious to get to a place where I wouldn't have to talk to anyone for a while. The hotel chosen for me was down by the shore in White Rock, with only the train tracks between it and the lapping water. The building was frame, painted white I think; even from outside in the parking lot the wood seemed thin, insubstantial. I was escorted into the lobby where I registered. My hair had got wet running across the parking lot and was quickly becoming extremely curly, which can sometimes set me off. Anyway, the librarian wished me a good night's sleep, said she'd pick me up at eight and left to go to her own warm home somewhere. I climbed the stairs.

The room was small with a low ceiling, it was dingy and damp. The lock on the door was one of those push locks that can easily be sprung with a credit card. The carpet was worn but still thick enough in places to host a substantial life system and the spread on the bed was ready to be ripped into dusters. But what's it matter, I thought, checking the sheets, which were clean. What's it matter when you're really tired. So I undressed, showered in the mouldy shower, put on my nightie and got into bed. This mattress isn't too bad, I thought. This is going to be fine, I thought.

In a few minutes I heard the first rumbling. Someone across the hall, someone a good size, was drunk or angry or both. He began to mutter things, loudly. Questions mostly. Although I couldn't hear the specific words, I could easily enough recognize that lift at the end of a sentence that implies that something is wanted in response to the words that have been said. I turned over, assuming he'd wear himself down in due time.

He didn't, but I was soon distracted. Lying there watching the rain stream down the window, having lived a life exhibiting no patience whatsoever with people who snuff and snuffle and fuss around about such things, I found myself suddenly sneezing repeatedly with something like gale force. And my head, as my mother used to say, had filled up. It was the mould. Of course it wasn't just in the shower, it was everywhere it could get a foothold. Why wouldn't it be? I got up to get the box of tissues from the bathroom and when I climbed back into bed the sheets felt damp to me, as they hadn't before. I was cold. A train was approaching. And the guy next door was becoming extremely impatient with his absent friend or wife or brother, really fed up. By this time it was perhaps midnight. The train rolled on by, the window panes quivered. I tried to dream; I tried to put my brain to sleep by offering it the images it likes best. I sneezed some more. Eventually the box of tissues was empty. I got up and switched on the bathroom light: one-thirty. I took the roll of toilet paper off its thing. Enough, I thought.

I got dressed, stuffed my toothbrush and nightie into my satchel, went down to the front desk and asked for a cab. The desk clerk, a dark haired man, let's say medium build with a tattoo on his neck, asked in a tone of voice more belligerent than concerned if something was wrong with the room. I unrolled some toilet paper, blew my nose and reassured him that everything was fine, I just needed a cab please. I didn't hand over the key. I had already determined on the way down the stairs that if morning ever came I would be in the lobby to meet the librarian at eight, rested and discreet. I would not let on that I had changed hotels. I certainly didn't want her to think I thought I was too good for this one.

The cab driver seemed to be about my age, maybe forty-five. As I approached the car he leaned way over and opened the back door for me from the inside, asked me, Where to? I said could he please take me to another hotel, something inland a bit. I sneezed. I unrolled some toilet paper. Hmmm, he said, with his long right arm draped across the back of the seat. He began to drive slowly up the hill away from the shore. The rain streamed down my window like syrup.

He wanted to know where I was visiting from. And what did I do for a living? I usually lie in circumstances like this but for some reason, fatigue maybe, I told the truth. And then the next question came, as it always does: So what kind of thing do you write? Regretting my brief moment of truthfulness, I lied.

By this time he had cruised around downtown White Rock and we finally pulled into the lit-up parking lot of a promising looking motel; this one white for sure, one storey high, stretched out wide into the dark on

either side. Buddy of mine runs this, he said, I'll see if he's got anything left. He shuffled through the rain and ducked under the overhang and just as he was about to pull the screen door open, his buddy came out to meet him, to stand with him under the overhang. They stood side by side, looking directly ahead out into the rain, bending over their cupped hands to light their cigarettes. One of them, my driver, was long and lanky with arms held tight to his sides; his buddy was squat and solid, bigger in his movements. Not tonight, I heard. Last one went a half hour ago. So there were no rooms. But we were going to stay put until the cigarettes got smoked, the talk would last as long as the cigarettes. There was quiet and then I heard: There's the place out-of-town. And then the response: Yeah, well. And just before I opened the car door to indicate my impatience: Says she's a writer.

Back on the road again, we drove past what was called our last chance. No vacancy there either. I checked my watch: two-fifteen. It occurred to me that there are worse things than spending the night sneezing in a damp bed listening to an angry drunk, but instead of saying could you take me back to where I came from, I asked about the place out-of-town. Just how far out was it? Oh not that far, I was told, but people don't like it much. Why don't people like it? I asked. Aware that a visitor can sometimes have a hard time understanding how a place works, he was patient. It's been bought by East Indians, he said. It used to be owned by my buddy's aunt and her husband but they had to pack it in and there aren't many buyers for a place out-of-town. I'm very tired, I said. Please take me there.

The lights were on in the small front office. I asked the cab driver to wait and when I went inside I was met at the counter by a young man, a young husband, who had been sitting in an armchair with a paperback novel, the title of which I couldn't read. He'd been sleeping a bit from the look of his puffy face. But he was happy to see me. Yes, he had some rooms. I paid him and was given a key.

This motel, which not too recently had been painted a medium, minty green, disappeared lengthwise back into the dripping trees. It was two storeys high with a long narrow balcony. After we drove around to one of the staircases and I paid the driver and got out, he said through his open window that maybe he should walk me up. I said no, that was all right.

In the morning, I called another cab. By eight I was back where I began. I'd slept well, considering. The librarian was none the wiser.

When I started writing this down, perhaps an hour ago, it was my intention to tell this anecdote to you truthfully. But in this first telling it has already begun to attract to itself small helpful lies. Rereading, I see that these lies appear more in connection with the detail than in the hard facts

or in the order of events. And maybe they are not lies at all but only honest attempts at precision, precision mattering more than truth.

So I guess this is how a story begins to design itself. Of course if I were to try to turn this material into publishable fiction, I would have to be receptive to whatever lies turned up; I would have to trust these lies. And each fact would have to earn its keep because I don't like to make room in my fiction for useless facts. And in the interest of shape, the order of events might have to change into a different kind of order altogether. The shape of the story could be modelled on anything, an unexpected stand of spruce, a wet city street cutting into a hill, a sinking ship. I don't allow myself to think too directly about this shape business.

And I would have to try to guess whose story this wants to be. I mentioned earlier that I thought there was a cluster of stories here and, from this initial contemplative distance, that's still how I see it. If I went in closer to the material, the stories would begin to break off, or break away. Each character would become a potential nucleus, ready to draw some of the material to itself. It would likely be at this point in the process that I would begin to hear a narrative voice, a tone or narrative attitude.

The first potential nucleus is the librarian. I am certain that she wouldn't be a vehicle for me, for my thoughts, she wouldn't be me at all. She would be a true, unrelated "she," a true other. Anything would be possible. She could be relentlessly rude to the writer; she could hate her job, hate fiction in particular. She could have had an abortion the week before, the father already a family man, rough luck. She could have breast cancer, lots of women do. Or she could be a sincerely pleasant person who wants only good things for everyone around her, which might get on the writer's nerves a bit. She could be a talker, a careless driver. She could be the cause of an accident between an innocent logging truck and an old Lincoln, before she gets rid of the writer or after.

There is the desk clerk. That tattoo on his neck. Perhaps he served some time in prison. Maybe the navy. Not likely. But he would be rough trade, or appear to be. Maybe he would have a male lover who comes to work with him, who hangs around in the back, who is beautiful and slow-witted and bone lazy. Maybe they met in Jasper and the entire story has to move in flashback to Jasper. The mountains would be stunning, and described that way, without apology. Lots of light on the snow and the rock, blue-white light and blue-black shadows. Maybe someone in Jasper was dying of AIDS and a promise had to be broken, maybe he had to be abandoned to his family, his mother useless, beyond consolation, his father, a small man, utterly defeated by sadness. Three deaths then, in the mountains.

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