EDITORIAL

THE WORKS OF ART WE LOVE to experience and reflect upon are often astonishingly graceful, to be sure; but it might also be said that they offer us images and scenes of remarkable awkwardness. Think of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, the famous painting made all the more famous by Auden's reading of it in "Musée des Beaux Arts." The painting shows us "white legs disappearing into green water," as Auden has it, but the characters in the picture just go about their ordinary business, paying no attention to this mythological event. Even in scenes of martyrdom, Auden says, we are likely to find that "the torturer's horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree." The pattern I am trying to identify is alluded to with great beauty and simplicity by the speaker of Philip Larkin's "Church Going," who, having parked his bicycle outside the splendid old edifice he is visiting as a tourist, finds himself moved by the eloquent silence when he steps inside: "Hatless, I take off / My cycle clips in awkward reverence."

I begin with awkwardness because it is a feeling, a coloration, a resonance that emerges from a surprising number of the poems and stories printed in this issue. It is implicit in the very first poem, Elana Wolff's "Strand," which begins by asserting that "Love is not a word that comes amenably from my mouth." Both of Wolff's poems are best read out loud, because they are constantly playing with sound, including the awkwardness of some of the sounds we like to, or feel obliged to, make. Roger Caldwell's poem, "Of Gods and Men," makes awkwardness explicit. The speaker surmises that, for an Olympian god, coming down to earth wouldn't be all that attractive: "His godliness would seem just awkward, / be cause for laughter if he hadn't wings / to raise him to the heights again." This passage, like the Auden poem, challenges us to rethink the relationship between the divine and the human. And the curious final stanza, which begins "As for myself," takes us yet a step further on this journey. I recommend the adventure.

Awkwardness is inescapable in much of the fiction printed here. Claire, the third-person reflector of Leah Jane Esau's "Rich Life," finds it

difficult to "do the awkward kisses on both cheeks" with her French father-in-law because she was "raised by an older British couple" who didn't indulge in gestures of intimacy. This tiny technical detail is a clue which helps us to understand why Claire comes to see herself "as a woman who didn't quite fit." Linda Kirkby's "Margy-Lou" explores the awkwardness of old age—of no longer being the person you once were. In Sam Shelstad's "Frank," Alice sits at the bar by herself, waiting for her lover, and is interrupted by a stranger. "And it probably looks like I'm a prostitute," she thinks, "because why else would I be sitting here all dressed up with this ugly man." It's not only the female characters who find themselves in awkward predicaments. The title of Wayne Yetman's "The Back Seat" is a metaphor which stands for Gary's maladjustment—a sad and lonely condition that he has been unable to remedy ever since Angel, the mother of his daughter Sally, left him, taking their daughter with her. As in this case, and many others, awkwardness often arises from a difficult or unresolved family situation. Unless I have seriously misread "Grampy's Secret" by Margaret McLeod, "a guy named Tommy" who first appears in the last line of the poem surely got there by being the male object of Grampy's homoerotic desire.

One of my favourite movies of all time is "Days of Heaven," directed by Terence Mallick. I mention this because it is a brilliant example of how apparent awkwardness can turn ugly. Among the devices used to achieve this effect is the immature narrative voice: the female protagonist's younger sister, a girl of perhaps twelve, tells us a story that she is not yet capable of understanding. A similar narrative technique is used in two of the stories printed here, both of which push embarrassment into disaster. In J. Baketel's "Loot," the narrator is a sexually inexperienced high-school girl who asks us to appreciate her naïvété even as we learn (long before she does) that she has been targeted as the victim in a premeditated rape scenario. I've said more than I should have about this story; please read it rather than my description. And the same holds true for Astrid Blodgett's "The Night the Moon Was Bright and We Ate Pigs and Brownies and Drank Fizzy Beer and Didn't Remember Much At All, in the End." Here the female narrator is even younger (she says she's eleven), and the consequences of her innocence even more threatening.

And at this point I should admit that much of the writing here deals not with awkwardness at all, but with violence, even shameless violence, and death. Robert Cooperman's poem about Berthe, "The Discovery of

a Murdered Gentile Woman near the German Town of Speyer, 1195 CE," represents violence at its most shameless. The speaker of the poem is the local butcher, who slits the throat of a Jewish girl without a second thought. The last two lines imply a lurid sexual motivation for what has gone before. Lindsay Clayton Day's "Nim" brings us into contact with politically motivated violence less historically remote, but geographically and culturally strange. These are texts that provoke us into a kind of bewilderment bordering on despair. To turn from them to Edward Lobb's "Resurgam," a poem about roadkill, is almost a relief. And there are more nuanced approaches to death in these pages, too. I'm thinking of Nadja Lubiw-Hazard's "The Bone Seeker," which begins with the simple sentence, "My daughter drowned last summer." And I must mention the last story in this issue, Matthew Bin's "Tempo Rubato," which I read as a deeply sensitive work of mourning performed by a seventeen-year-old boy (Thomas) for the loss of his older brother (Edward) in the early stages of World War II.

If you are among the authors I haven't singled out for comment, let me offer at least a word of praise: your work is printed here because it struck more than one member of the editorial team as exceptional. Indeed, one of the special joys of editing this issue of *The Dalhousie Review*, for me, has been the inescapable conviction that the quality of submissions that writers send to us is extremely high. In addition there's a kind of nostalgic joy that arises from returning, as Guest Editor, to a journal that preoccupied me between 1997 and 2004. This time it is a brief encounter; I am helping to bridge the gap between the last Editor (Carrie Dawson) and her successor (Anthony Enns). Two of the Associate Editors, Ian Colford and Meghan Nieman, gave me the generous gift of their advice. Jennifer Lambert, whose work on behalf of *The Dalhousie Review* I have known and admired for nineteen years, once again made the demanding role of Production Manager look effortless. Working with Jennifer is always a pleasure, and that is why my final word of thanks is to her.

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