

I THINK I SMELL LIKE ALCOHOL. I'm sitting, eating a doughnut and thinking about last night. I wonder if my liver is O.K.; if I keep this up, I'll kill myself. No, if I keep this up, I'll become my mother. I play with my silver cross earring while I try to write. My hand gets smeared with black lipstick. It's my Goth look—it looks good on me. I like feeling dark. Outside it's raining. At least I smell like alcohol; Jason, who is sitting next to me, smells like dirty clothes and chewing tobacco. I see a wad of it in his cheek. I'm writing about the tooth fairy.

Yesterday I wrote about bombs, deodorant, bats and mouldy suitcases. The day before that I wrote a poem called "Death Chicken." The poetry teacher really dug "Death Chicken"—she read it to the class then she hung it on the wall, after Jason illustrated it with a gruesome chicken of his own. Jason has always been good with anatomy and you could see the chicken's bones.

I feel the coffee going through my body. I have to talk. I start talking to the girl sitting next to me. Marie is wearing flannel pajama bottoms and red flip-flops. I wonder if she didn't have any clean clothes or if she was just too lazy to put on jeans this morning. Her stringy hair wisps around her face like a halo. She scowls as she concentrates and scribbles on the pad of paper the poetry teacher gave us. She has dark circles under her eyes. Must have been a hard night with the baby. The other day she wrote about a ten-page essay about the birth of her daughter. I could have done without all the details (some of them were pretty gross), but the poetry teacher liked it. She wrote about when she went into labour and her boyfriend told her to get the hell back to sleep, that she was faking it. Her boyfriend is a real jerk. I would never let the father of my child treat me that way—at least I hope I wouldn't. Three of the girls here have babies. That's why they're at an "alternative" high school. Me? I'm here for lots of reasons.

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WHEN I LEAVE SCHOOL, IT'S STILL RAINING. Because my car isn't working, I have to walk along the highway to work. I work at the Sleepy Nook, a little motel on Highway 10, the same road our school is on. Mr. Jenson is in the office as usual. He's a religious man with a birthmark smeared on his left cheek, not a good-looking guy, but decent. I get the cleaning cart out of the storeroom and open up the first room.

Room 129 is a mess. Blood seems to be everywhere—on the sheets and in rags in the trash can. I’m sort of used to blood now, which is funny because I used to be squeamish when I first started the job. I turn on the vacuum cleaner first. I start to sing, “I’m the lizard king, I can do anything . . .” Vacuuming is my form of meditation. I once saw a program about Indian swamis. Isn’t that a great word—swami? It just makes you feel good. But anyway, these swamis on the program sat in their orange robes meditating for three, four hours at a time. For awhile I tried to meditate for an hour a day, staring at a candle as I sat cross-legged on my bed in my room, but then it slipped to fifteen minutes and then to nothing. When I was little and Mom was still in pretty good shape, she used to be into all sorts of “alternative” things, which sort of alienated her since we’re in the middle of nowhere—cow town. But I liked the way she would practise yoga on our living room floor and feed me special milk that was really made of soy. Now I’m lucky if she gives me money for a Big Mac.

I wonder what my mother is doing now, but then again she is probably living the saga that she lives every day. I could tell you about how beautiful she was when I was a young girl, but the story would just make you sad. So I will get to the brutal truth—she’s getting loaded with Brian, her boyfriend, at a bar downtown. She has dark eye shadow on and she sits at a stool smoking. Brian pays for all the drinks at first—in fact, at first it is all happiness. She plays keno and even wins some money, just fifty dollars, but hey. She may eat something at the bar—pizza or just snacks. But then every night there seems to be a turn when ugliness overtakes both her and Brian. Maybe she flirts with one of the eighty-year-old bartenders or maybe she makes a joke at Brian’s expense, but anyway she will end up on the couch at home alone. And then she will talk and talk to me about Brian or else she will ignore me completely or worst of all she will say that she wishes I wasn’t even born.

I try to block it out. I think of the swamis, about how light it would make you feel to be wrapped in the bright orange fabric. Someday I’m going to ask a swami if vacuum cleaning is like meditation. He will either think I’m crazy or be complimentary because I came up with something. After vacuuming, I start cleaning the bathroom. Working at the Sleepy Nook has taught me a lot about patience. It takes discipline to go down the row of motel rooms and clean each one as if it’s the first. I used to cut major corners by the time I got to the end. The last rooms were lucky if they got new toilet paper. But I try to focus now; I try to be perfect. Which is weird because I’m not a perfectionist or anything. Some days I become more interested in the work than others. Some days I become

involved. This may sound silly, but I pretend to be the guests. I read their receipts and note what type of beer is in the trash can—Becks or cheap American beer like I drink. If someone is staying a couple of days, I may even try on their clothes. Sometimes I lie in their messed-up bed for a few minutes—especially if I saw the customer and they were good-looking. But more than anything I try to figure out their story. I try to piece together why they are staying at this motel out of all the motels in the world on this particular day. Sometimes it’s obvious. They are construction guys who come and stay for several months working on a bridge or they are families who are just driving through for summer vacation. But then there are always what I call the “mystery guests,” people who are just in Beresford, South Dakota, for no particular reason, except if they are *meant* to be here.

Today, I’m not really focused on the guests as much as I sometimes am. I work in a mechanical fashion—vacuum, clean bathroom, tidy up shoes, etc. After I’m done, I call Jason. He arrives in fifteen minutes in his pickup truck.

“Cold one?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say.

“How can you drink every day?” he asks.

“Because it’s free,” I say.

“Yeah, because you’re a girl,” he says.

“I can’t argue with that.”

He hands me a Coors and I press it to my cheek to feel the coolness.

We drive out Highway 9 toward the reservation. On the rez there are miles and miles of roads to go where no one will bother you. Last year one of the kids from the rez who went to our school committed suicide. His name was Zach. It really messed all of us up for awhile because he was this great person. I mean, he was an awesome basketball player, had been on the varsity team and everything at his old school before he got in trouble and had to go to our school. When he got here he was pissed at first (I think he thought we were losers), but then eventually we became good friends. We used to do dumb things together like put three random letters together and think of all sorts of expressions that would go with the letters—like “Dope Gone Bad” and “Dumb Gorgeous Blondes” for “DGB.” We made lists of those things that sometimes went on for ten pages. I still don’t understand it. I mean, I know he had problems and all (his mom was similar to mine), but he had talent. The strange thing is that when it happened, the FBI got involved and actually came to the rez. There were rumours that Zach was running dope from the rez out of South Dakota. Some people said that before he went to our school he was doing it and getting by on his good looks

and clean-cut image. Some people said that's why he came to our school in the first place. But I always believed Zach when he said it had to do with getting in a fight because of a racial slur. He said a kid had insulted him and he'd punched him in the face. And it's true that he was very Indian-sensitive and aware. At our school he was doing an independent study on his tribe. His hair was just getting long enough to braid when he died.

For the rest of the night, we drink and drive. Oh, we smoke a lot too. As we start to get more blitzed, it becomes a challenge to drive straight. I've rolled my car five times. I start to feel excited and free. Not bored. It's not like they say—that alcohol dulls the senses. My mind is a leopard, a jewel. I feel my heart beat with a perfect thud. I know that Jason is feeling the same way because when I look over at him he is loose and grinning. We plow down the street; we ride so fast I hold my breath at times. I want to count every star. We don't get out of the truck all night. Sometimes we whoop, sometimes we whisper and sometimes we sing with the tape player. Then I fall asleep. I wake with a jerk when the truck pulls up to my house. I run up the steps, tipsy and happy, and make a dizzy line to my room. I fall on my bed, then I take out my notebook and write because I have kept a journal for as long as I can remember. I'm too drunk to write anything good so I just write Jason's name in large kindergarten scroll. I don't know why.

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"LINNY, ARE YOU ASLEEP?" asks the poetry teacher.

Another day has started. The woman is in tan overalls—velveteen. She looks like a bashful child. She looks too excited—how she has looked at me ever since I wrote the chicken poem. I know that look and I'm wary of it. All my life, I've gotten that sympathetic look from teachers and other "concerned" adults. It makes me embarrassed. So instead of being nice I say, "I'm bored."

It's like I've punched her in the stomach. She steps away from me quick—rabbit-like, if you want a simile, and believe me, she wants a simile.

"But, Linny," her voice wavers, "don't you want to write about your family?"

Her voice is bad. For a poet, her voice stinks. She rubs her hands on her overalls. I bet they're sweaty.

"I don't have a family," I say.

"Write about me," says Jason, "but I'm going to write about my dad, whose been married five times."

I think about Jason and his dad's new wife, Lee. Lee rides a motorcycle and is into health food. When I think of how weird Lee is, I feel sorry for Jason. Jason is

chewing tobacco again. I also know that Jason has to take care of his three sisters a lot, has to change diapers and is expected to be his mother's on-call babysitter.

"Can I write about when I chewed tobacco and swallowed it and it was in my mouth—all sick—and then I brushed my teeth five times?" I ask.

"Sure," says Miss Poetry, relieved, "write about anything, and I'm sure it will be interesting."

And I have to admit that makes me feel good because I can tell she means it. I need a smoke, big time. I start writing about chewing tobacco. We have all written about cigarettes, screwing and love. She lets us write anything. I like to watch everyone else pause, think and write again. It's fun seeing the guys get involved with something like this. The hamster runs in his wheel as we scratch our pencils against our pads of paper. We have lots of pets in the classroom—hamster, lizard and parakeet—maybe to help us through all our hardships. Maybe animals or poetry will save us. After writing about tobacco, which I simply name "Tobacco," I write "Storm" on the top of my page because it is still raining. Even though Miss Poetry tells us not to write a title first, it's how I like to do it. When I told her so, she said, "That's fine." I think she'd say "that's fine" to about anything—as long as I produced. She's a poetry slut. I giggle. Our pencils keep scratching. Who knows what shit everyone's writing about their family? Is Dylan writing about when his mother ran over him in the driveway in her car? Is Sara writing about her father having sex with her sister? These are things I somehow know, although I shouldn't. What would Zach write if he were still here, baseball cap backwards, sitting there all slouched? What could Miss Poetry herself be writing? Maybe about the hopeless state of the rich, although maybe she's not rich, it's hard to tell. I look up at a poster of Shakespeare. Recently I saw the movie *Shakespeare in Love*. I think of Gwyneth Paltrow's breast, then I scold myself. I'm not a lesbian. When people don't shave their legs, it's disgusting. That's what I think about when I think about lesbians. One of the girls at the juvenile home had pit hair so long it could be braided. She dyed it pink. It was so disgusting. She used to take pictures of herself in her room holding up her arms, letting the pink hair droop down to her breast. It was like a freak show. It was freakish in the way that body hair can be freakish—sprouts of it leaking out of bikini bottoms, fuzzy hair on a man's balding head, ear and nose hair. If I had lots of nose hair, I would get one of those devices they advertise on TV. I title my third poem "Hair" and start working.

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THERE IS HAIR ALL OVER THE SHOWER. Not only that, but the disgusting thing is it's Miss Poetry's hair—possibly her pubic hair! I've been cleaning this room for weeks, but it only dawned on me today when I recognized a book she read in class—*The World of Poetry*—that it is her room. One thing I have to say about Miss Poetry, Miss Writer-in-Residence, is she's a slob. Her books are everywhere, as are her clothes, and the table is covered with jelly beans, lip glosses, apple-sauce and balled-up packages of TheraFlu. I suddenly feel bad, realizing she must have a cold.

I pick up *The World of Poetry* and lie on her bed. I go to e.e. cummings, someone she read in class today: "nobody not even the rain has such small hands." It's raining outside, splashing against the window. I don't understand how the rain has hands, but I feel a welling in my throat anyway. It's strange how words can do that to you. Sometimes I like words even when they're just ingredients on a cereal box or directions on how to shampoo your hair.

I wonder where she is? She must do something around town, when she's not teaching us, but it's hard to imagine what—maybe driving that clunky Buick she has. She's only here for a month. I wish it were longer so I could get more into it. I look at the front of her book, "Ilene Chase." Ilene, I think. I hadn't really paid attention to her name before.

Her sheets smell musty and sweet. Like sweat. I wonder if she has long armpit hair. And why am I obsessed with such a minor thing? I sigh. I see myself in the slanted mirror. I stick my tongue out. I look purplish in the light. I get a cigarette and try to look glamorous, lying back in Ilene's bed. My socks are itchy so I take them off and throw them on the floor in her tangle of clothes. And then—please forgive me, as William Carlos Williams wrote (I'm not so stupid, eh?)—I open up Ilene Chase's purple spiral writing notebook:

*And sometimes I think
of her pale, bold body—
pink skin,
to drink, like milk
like a glutton
or nursing baby*

O.K., some things strike me about this poem. But first, I have to admit, I drop my cigarette I am so surprised and then I catch my face in the mirror—shock, quiet—is she a lesbian? A few pages later I come across a letter that has been scratched out and doodled on:

Dear James:

You were the first and best love of my life. The only? I try not to think about swimming in the lake together because it only makes me sad. You should see where I am right now. In the middle of fucking nowhere (excuse the language), but guess what? I absolutely LOVE it! If we were together still you would meet me here and we could ride on these deserted roads. James, literally you don't see anything for miles and miles. I adore the nada-ness of this place . . . Oh, and the kids I'm working with are most impressive!

The tan overalls are in a heap on the floor. Reluctantly I put the purple spiral notebook down and get up to clean. We're not supposed to move personal items so I'm careful to keep her items in the same disarray—the deluxe soaps, the gels, sprays and deodorants. I put these on my body, then I walk out into fresh darkening air.

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I'M SITTING AT THE BAR on the rez with Jason twenty-five minutes later. It's almost dark, but you can still see the shapes of things in the distance. The grain elevators rise boldly against the sky and the sight calms me as I sit here sipping a Coors.

The bartender, Reggie, looks guilty as he serves us, but I guess he does this because we're the only people in the place. I notice a new black-and-white picture up on the wall—it's of Zach in his basketball uniform. In the picture he looks serious, as if he's heading out to war.

Jason and I play pool for awhile, then we sit back down. That's when I see her—way down the road, jogging. It's Ilene and she's moving faster as she runs toward the bar. She lifts her legs high and her head is thrown back, as if she would rather be looking at the moon than jogging.

When she comes into the bar, she doesn't notice us right away. She acts real giggly as she asks Reggie for a glass of water. When she does notice us, at first she seems like she's going to get angry because two of her favourite students are drinking beer rather than doing the homework assignment she gave us, but then she smiles and comes over.

"Hi, Linny, hi, Jason," she says.

She sits down at a stool and starts to twirl around. Her little legs look funny, engulfed in the big basketball shorts. We make small talk and I want to ask her about the poem and letter that she wrote, but of course I can't do that. I'm surprised that she doesn't comment on the beer, but I feel myself wondering about

how much I drink, anyway. Her thoughts are being conveyed by the way she watches my hand, by the way she comments on my silver bracelet, which clinks against my bottle.

When she leaves, I feel sad for awhile. I really could have talked to her about a lot of things.

Maybe that little abandonment is why I find myself all over Van when he comes in the bar. Van is too good for this small town. I'm sure that when he leaves, he'll become a doctor or something. But right now, he's just this hot guy with hair that he dyes this cool shade of blue. Every girl kind of wants him, but he's Amy's. Normally I would not go after him, but as the night wears on, I find myself flirting with him more and more. When he asks if I want to go driving, I find myself waving to Jason, who says, "You shouldn't go, Lin."

But I answer, "I'm not chicken, Jas. I'm not scared of nobody."

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ON THE LAST DAY OF ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE, I chew my nails. I can't stop crying. It was a mess and I'm sorry. I can't stop the pounding in my brain. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Another storm, a tornado warning, has just been announced over the radio and the sky is pure black. Black like a bat, like emptiness. I feel safe with my classmates, but the pets are freaking out, running in their cages, shivering, trying to hide.

On the blackboard, Ilene has written neat piles of words—"cartwheel, yellow, tempest, Spam, chicken, exit, lonely, sky, blue, Buick, red." These are the words that we get to choose, and now we're supposed to use them to make poems.

I start a letter. Fuck poetry.

"Dear Amy: I think this is the end of our friendship. I have fucked up too many times. Nothing could repair it now. I'm sorry for sleeping with your boyfriend, especially now that you're pregnant."

There is nothing poetic about my note. Is life poetic? You tell me.

Ilene frowns at me. She wants me to read the poem she handed out. I have so much anger I just want to run, I just want to curse, but instead tears start pouring down my face. I leave the class, then the school, disgusted.

During the school day I drive in Jason's truck and drink. When the day is over I go to work. I chew a lot of gum so Mr. Jenson won't smell my breath.

"You need to completely clean 129. She's checked out."

I think of Ilene and my heart beats faster. I run to her room, then decide on discipline, not fire. I should clean the other rooms first. The day goes by too slowly,

although I'm hurrying. Finally I get to her room. I take off my clothes and sit on Ilene's bed, with her sheet wrapped around me. The sky is just so gray, so dismal. I've turned on the TV. On *Oprah*, forty-plus women talk about their lack of a sex drive. Rich women whose husbands wait patiently for their wives' libidos to kick in. I can't imagine not wanting to fuck. I put my legs into a crossed position and think of the swami. Follow your breath. Slowly in and out. Oprah begins to fade and I begin to feel lighter, buoyant. Although I should see nothingness, should be gazing into infinity, I see Ilene, running down the road at the rez. I hear the thump of her feet on the mud.

Oprah has just said good-bye to millions of Americans when the tornado warning comes on. "This is a message from the National Weather Service. All homes in Clay County should be evacuated. Go to the nearest shelter or basement immediately." I panic. I run to the window and pull back the thick curtain. And then I see the tornado. It's coming towards us—or me because it really is just me.

I stumble to the bathroom, suddenly feeling drunk. I get into the bathtub. The walls, the world is shaking. I wish Jason were here or Zachary. I wonder where they are now. Even Zachary. Where death is. I wonder where Ilene is, if she has pulled over by the side of the road somewhere, waiting out the storm. Thinking of her alone makes me even more upset.

I will stop drinking, I think. I am sitting naked in the tub and I see myself looking back at this moment in twenty, thirty years. My skin is so pale—that is what I notice from my time in the future. I pull my knees up to my chest. Then I kiss my left knee and my right knee.

"I cannot get through this, not alone," I write in my head, and I picture her remark in red pen, "This is eloquent."

HEAVE By Christy Ann Conlin. Doubleday Canada, 2002.

CHRISTY ANN CONLIN'S FIRST NOVEL, *HEAVE*, STARTS off with a bang. Serrie Sullivan is fleeing her wedding, and although we won't know why until the end of the book, it's reason enough to keep reading.

As we travel away from the wedding and back in time with Serrie, seeing her upbringing in a beautifully painted Nova Scotian landscape, we learn that the protagonist is a 21-year-old angst-ridden small-town girl who's suffering from more than just a case of wedding-day jitters. In fact, she has dropped out of university to partake in a three-week substance binge in London, England. A dangerous series of blackouts, close encounters with shady characters and inebriated calls to her hometown clergyman put an end to Serrie's trip and bring her home with barely a cohesive memory to her name. Stripped of her dignity and sense of self, she returns to her parents' house to recover and is placed into a rehab facility.

Serrie's escapades are rounded out by an eccentric cast of family members and friends who both prop her up and cut her down. Her gentle father, Cyril, whom we learn has also suffered from alcoholism, quietly builds a collection of outhouses on the front lawn; her mother, Martha, and Aunt Galronia, a duo of overbearing control freaks, add daily to Serrie's grief; her caring yet distant brother, Percy, is enviably successful; and her wise old Grammie is the only person who truly understands that Serrie is trying to get her life back on track. While Serrie's friends and family are a little off the wall, they ultimately exude kindness and sympathy despite their common middle-class struggles and are undoubtedly the backbone of this novel.

As we delve further into Serrie's past, we are provided with a picture of a typical small-town life—family gatherings, involvement in the church, summer camp—memories that carry through into Serrie's present-day state of mind as she struggles to discover the person she will become. As she slowly regains her work ethic and meets her husband-to-almost-be, it becomes clear that *Heave* is a classic coming-of-age tale, only it's marked with dark undertones—uncertainties and injustices that seem to scar Serrie in her well-intentioned efforts to get by. And just as the story starts with a bang, so it ends with a series of shocking events that occur in the last several chapters.

Although a grand effort on Conlin's part to recreate a Nova Scotia that is obviously close to her heart, this novel has several flaws. The main problem hinges on the placement of cataclysmic events at either end of the story. By structuring the novel this way, the author teases the reader to the extreme—offering little of succulence between the dramatic beginning and the shocking ending. And when the most exciting parts do finally roll around—a rape, a drowning—there is little detail to make up for the prolonged wait. As the protagonist's behaviours throughout the story rely greatly on a critical piece of history that comes to light only at the end of the book, the revelation is such a relief it's unfortunate it wasn't made sooner. Finally, myriad typos and spelling errors make *Heave* that much more of a chore to read. It's a decent effort, but unfortunately falls a little short of the mark.

SOUNDING THE BLOOD By Amanda Hale. Raincoast Books, 2001.

READING AMANDA HALE'S FIRST NOVEL, *Sounding the Blood*, is like plunging through murky depths of ocean and emotion—an intermingling of voices and sounds and feelings housed in the bodies of people and whales and spirits. With a decidedly lyrical quality to each chapter, the book echoes the whalesong that surrounded the B.C. Queen Charlotte Islands in the early twentieth century.

Sounding the Blood is both beautiful to wade into and difficult to tread without bobbing backward and forward in an attempt to get to know a large cast of characters. Although divided into small chunks—short chapters narrated in the first person by distinct personalities—it is difficult to recognize each speaker in the unlabelled chapters without spending considerable energy trying to decipher clues to their identity. It is a task that, unfortunately, detracts from pure enjoyment of the tale.

The story unfolds primarily on a whaling station at Rose Harbour, a station built on blood and suffering and inhabited by a crew of migrant Japanese and Chinese workers. It is the summer of 1915, and Leo Slaney has arrived with his wife and daughters from Newfoundland to manage the butchering operation. As whales are reeled in for the slaughter, various characters confront their own demons while dealing with the hardships of their lives at the turn of the century.

Leo and his family might not qualify as dysfunctional by current measure but in their world surely suffer from a lack of some intangible comfort, each struggling with the consequences of the decisions each has made. Leo's wife, Nora, "has turned in on herself like the eardrums of whales, scattered all over the

beach” as she mourns the recent death of her youngest child. She lives in the past and withdraws from her husband, who wracks his brain and his heart for ways to bring her back.

Leo’s daughters, too, are growing up and away from him—like Isobel, for example, who, at age sixteen, has followed her heart rather than convention and fallen in love with Kenji Shibata, the Japanese foreman’s son. Their secret stolen moments together culminate in an unwanted pregnancy—a lethal mix of blood.

Meanwhile, Lee Sun and Yamamoto Kazuo are whalers engaged in battle with their own dragons. Disgusted by what they must do for a living, they swim against the current of their desire to return to their former lives. Kazuo aches for the wife and child he hasn’t seen in eight years. Sun craves the comfort of his family and a woman. And in their desperation, both wind up taking the lives of other men and killing more whales than they can bear to remember.

Blood is omnipresent throughout this story—blood of the whales, of the aching heart, of families, friends and foes. But ultimately, it is the ties of blood that prevail, at least for the Slaney family, as they emerge from a long dark winter in reconciliation and in preparation for a new life. “Truth lies in the darkness, in the heart of each of us, sounding our own blood,” concludes Nora.

Sounding the Blood is an ambitious and impressive debut novel, intricately woven against the stain of memory and history, yet ultimately difficult to experience and enjoy to the fullest.