

## Remembering the Dead

*A Short Story by Claire Rothman*

Maude sits alone, completely clothed in black and sipping wine. The wine is white. Yellow really, from green grapes, but called white. Warm and sour going down. Warm as summer, making her head light and swimmy.

She sits on a deserted terrace, elbows on cold marble. It's November although you'd never know it. A pale sun washes the streets. It has been so soft this year, caressing, lulling her. Her favourite season in Montreal. Usually filled with violent shifts, strong winds. This one so gentle, golden all through October, November, and gentle.

Maude squints into the sun. A group of people are standing in a park, underneath a bronze angel. The angel hovers above a soldier, green hand upon his cheek. A great amplified voice says, For those who have died. The words are caught up by the wind and brought to Maude across the empty terrace. A microphone squeals and Maude thinks of death. So many boys died far from home, left to rot in fields of clay.

Ceux qui sont morts. Death in two tongues. All tongues go suddenly still, heads bow. From where she sits, Maude can see stains of red on their lapels. Bleeding hearts. As if the pins holding their poppies had pierced right through.

Two figures stand wiping at their eyes. Two mothers weeping. Old, white-haired. They look on beside rows of men in uniforms, stiff, reverential in the thin November light. The drums start like drops of rain. They build slowly, filling the street until the noise is huge, like gunfire. The men's feet start. Someone shouts and the cadets surge forward in one body lifting hard black boots. Rat-a-tat. Girls in dark green, arms swinging, hips bulging, march stiff as dolls, as wooden puppets. They are so ugly, faces long, breasts and buttocks bursting the seams of their men's clothing.

Around the statue they march, past the terrace. The crowd breaks up, drifts off now to march with the cadets. Old ones with ribbons, badges, knees up, chests out, bleary-eyed, still keeping time. They push their faces forward. Chins up, stern. Rigid limbs. Rat-a-tat. Limbs in time. Rat-a-tat.

The two old women follow. One hides her face in a dark veil. Her legs are like the legs of a bird. Thin and brittle. Snap like twigs when you get that old. She looks at Maude and whispers. Chuchotement. A dried leaf flies up and hits Maude in the cheek. She jumps flailing all alone out on the terrace. The women stare and frown and Maude sits again, sheepish, and pulls her glass towards her over the smooth stone table top.

Maude!

Bob, hair white and streaming, is half running towards her across the street. He is dragging someone by the elbow. A big man with yellow-white hair. Merde. He always brings his friends. Beer-swigging with all their opinions.

You're all in black, Bob says, breathing hard. Remembering the dead? The two men laugh.

He is right. She is all in black. Maude thinks of black panties that Bob cannot possibly see. Black stockings, tight black jeans, dark boots, a large black sweater that swamps her small frame. No bra. Her face is pale as a moon ringed with a rust halo of hair.

He does not kiss her but as he sits down, reaches under the table. Warm stroke on her thigh. He smiles, eyes shifting quickly from her, and introduces the friend.

Arnold has greased, half-yellow hair. Longish. Stained fingers and teeth, small filmy irises. He is a columnist for an English daily and might be in his sixties. Arnold lights a cigarette and even before it burns down is lighting another.

Maude is glad they are on a terrace. The

smoke drifts aimlessly and spills onto the street. Their words scatter with the smoke. Scatter like so much seed or dust. She must not think of it. Her breasts are swollen, tender, full and ripe as autumn.

The mayor's too old now, Bob says. It's just as well he's stepping down. A bent old man. Have you seen him lately? Arnold nods his great streaked head. Twenty-nine years in office, Arnold says. Long time for anyone. I bet that's more years than you've been alive, he says to Maude.

Keep talking and you'll lose me a girlfriend, Bob says and laughs his big, man's laugh. She's our side of thirty.

Maude sips at her wine and tilts her head back into the sun. Orange globes swirl on her eyelids and summer slips deep down inside of her. First mouth, then throat, then belly. Bellyfull of warmth. If she kept it she'd swear off drink, swear off bars and blustering men breathing smoke.

More beers. Bob's colour rises. He's a Scot who loves his scotch.

He's a drunk, Bob says. Spineless too. Shifts like a weather vane. Christ you breathe and the man changes direction.

Careless talk. Maude doesn't know who they're attacking. Arnold tosses his head, his long teeth grinding peanuts.

Bob loves to talk. When liquor's in his blood he has no shame. He'll say anything. It cost him his marriage. A job. When they first met, months ago, it had thrilled her. Now she knows it's not him, not courage, just booze.

Bob speaks French when he's drunk. It forks his tongue and turns him loose and wild. All French except for the wife who was a Scot, like him, and a lousy cook. But the mistresses are French. Bob the hedonist. French women, French food. Loves and eats.

His family is grown now. The children are scattered here and there. English kids are like that. Catch onto any wind that

blows through the city; touch down in Toronto, New York, wherever. That's where they are. The wife left to marry a dentist. The youngest is with her. One child settled in Toronto. Another, an actor, is in New York. Maude has never met any of them. She just hears their voices when they call, and she's seen photographs of children posing in a park.

Bob never speaks about his children. Once he said he should have stayed a bachelor.

Montreal's an old whore, Arnold says. A speck of nut flies from his lip onto the table. A warm old whore that everyone loves. No matter who runs her she'll always be the same.

What would you know about whores? Bob says, laughing.

Maude breathes. Her breasts shift slightly, heavy on her chest. She has never felt so full. She thinks of seed pods, milkweed pushing to burst. Brown husks with white spidery fibres inside. Silk hiding seed, exploding silently in fields. She wants to see it grow, this fullness in her belly.

The city runs itself, Arnold says, and wipes froth from his fine lip hairs. Has for years, he continues. Men just like to flatter

themselves they have a say.

Maude's eyes meet Arnold's. His words are wise. Too bad about his looks.

Take this so-called new government, Arnold says. New men with so-called new ideas. Just watch and see in ten years if anything has changed.

But things do change! Maude thinks. They do. She never would have thought she'd feel it so strongly. Before, when she was young, she'd loved carelessly; so many men. And once before, when she was twenty, this thing had happened. It had been in summer with that boy German. When she'd told him he had cried and cried, spilling tears. She'd had to hold him one entire night. She'd been strong then and determined. Then it was nothing. She hadn't wanted it. Simple as burning off a wart.

Hey, Bob says to her. You still there? You still with us? Maude nods and stares at her black lap.

She is thirty-three now. Thirteen years since the last time. Unlucky. Strange how this would pain her. She could feel it already. Like ripping out part of herself. Killing herself. Bob wouldn't cry. No. He wouldn't even want to know.

The sun is dropping. Long shadows fall

across the street, striping it in black. A mess of bottles clutters the table. Saucers spill ash and broken butts. Bob tries to light a cigarette in the wind. Fails.

Jeez, Bob says. Can't even light a goddamn cigarette. He is drunk. It's late, he says. Let's go. He puts dollars under a saucer and Arnold slips a large bill under a glass. They get up unsteadily and navigate through the tables, Bob clutching at the backs of chairs. Maude follows him. He is an athletic man and by the time they reach the street, is walking fine.

Hey you, Bob says, slipping his arm around her shoulders. You're a beauty when you're glum. Arnold looks away. They walk up the middle of a deserted street, three abreast, little Maude all in black flanked by two tall, white-haired men.

At the traffic light they stop. All three together, as if choreographed. There are no cars, but they are creatures of the city, creatures of habit. Maude looks down into a sewer. In the garbage and the leaves a fleck of red catches her eye. It is a poppy stuck in the grating; its pin and black centre fallen off, lying there, scarlet, bright as blood.

# The Ride

## A Short Story by Chris Wind

Dear Sister—

How I wish it was you lived closer to Coventry! It has been less than a fortnight since our last visit, but so much has happened — that I must tell you — Do you remember that discussion we had, prompted by my journey through Mercia?

Well, as soon as I returned, I talked to Leofric about the absolute necessity — moral *and* economic — of lowering the taxes. I described to him everything I had seen just as I described it to you: the bordars and cottars living in poverty on their little piece of land, in their thatched wooden huts without any comforts; their meagre clothing, that we are a country of wool producers and traders, boasting the finest weavers guild, and yet the people of the land are so poorly clothed; and their

