

Meninas

for Amy

The first thing I saw every morning when I walked out of my apartment door was myself. In a tall window, in an alcove, a deep alcove, standing with my cane, gathering breath and encouraging the legs before walking on. The light came streaming through from behind me, so the window mirrored me and there I would be, greeting myself with a familiar and embarrassed half-smile. I would expect this greeting, so that I began to say "hello", sometimes "hiya", to the bravely smiling face. And it replied: the alcove made an echo, and I could finish the "hel" of "hello" or the "hi" of "hiya" before the other face said it back to me. And to me, still on my way to my morning coffee, the face saying "lo" or "ya" moved with the face saying "hel" or "hi". So the sound fit the face; that's what it said. After a week or so, of course, it didn't seem like this at all. I'd open my door and there he would be standing in the alcove, and we'd say hello to each other.

There was one slight difference between me and me. The window narrowed near its top and there was a shelf, just by my shoulder. Often there was a bird perched on that shelf, on my shoulder so it seemed. A magpie, one of those tough and cynical black and white birds that flourish in northern Alberta, sure of who they are. And as I said hello to me he would nod his head and open his mouth as I did. Hello.

The window mirrored because of the snowdrift behind, reflecting bright white light into it. From way back, with an intensity that reminded me of the snow when I was a child, walking easily and facing the blue sky of the future. The answer seemed to come from a brighter more optimistic me, seen through the reflecting and distorting alcove of memory.

The routine had now become familiar. Hello, hello, magpie. I opened the door. There was me, smiling back. I said hello. Hello came back, a pause, later than usual, raucous. And from *my* shoulder, right by my ear. I jerked; I flung my cane up, into a shower of broken glass. I dropped the cane and stepped forward without it, surprised at my legs' response.

A moment later I was outside. The window was behind me, and the magpie was rising, its iridescent wing stripe lifting into the morning sky.