

Senior Division, Percy Janes First Novel Award  
Joshua Goudie, St. John's  
**The Last Portrait (an excerpt)**

Sara makes for the water with the newborn asleep against her chest. A touch of her nose to his forehead and she's breathing him in. They've not been in the province a week yet the ocean winds have already combed threads of sea salt through his sweet, downy hair. Both scents - at once unmistakable - are completely at odds as they mingle in her nose. With her eyes closed, Sara is imagining a trick knot, watching the thin, delicate threads coming apart as she tugs the two ends together. The boy and this island - they are a pair of notes that refuse to harmonize when sung.

There's a new heft to him this week, one that pries at her folded arms whenever she lifts him off the floor. As she follows the snaking dirt path down to the skeletal wharf, Sara is counting her footsteps, noting how many she can take before shrugging him in tighter. Four. Four. Seven.

He's two months now. Ought to be supporting his own head though Sara can't tell if he's yet gotten the hang of it. Whenever she holds him, her hand instinctively moves to cradle the wobbly little apple in her palm. She's found she can direct his gaze by placing her middle finger into the tender whirlpool at his crown.

Her bare feet print oatmeal brown tracks across the sun-bleached stretch of birch trunks that extend one after the other out over the water. When the trees that now form the rungs of the wharf still dotted the coastline - their tall silhouettes like rows of a waiting choir - the harsh winds had whipped and pulled their young stems, ensuring that not one would ever fit snug against its neighbour. In the hollow between a pair of crooked planks, Sara watches the waves breaking against the wooden posts, the erupting spray darkening the dry lumber on contact. If she stuck out her tongue she could taste the salt on the mist.

She resists the urge to dangle her legs over the water and takes a seat a few feet from the edge. With one eye pinched against the sun, Sara tips her head over her shoulder to trace the horseshoe shape of the bay. Ever so slowly, she lolls her gaze until the world inverts and the crashing waves are suspended above the tiny cove. Behind her, houses lay scattered across the landscape like a handful of dice tossed from an open palm - each resting place as random as the number on its face. Her house is there, tucked at an odd angle among the others along a hillside street. Sara signed the papers a day earlier and spent that first night running her hands along the floorboards, tracking down every carved roman numeral that confessed a mismatched wood grade. Deep etchings in the walls mark the heights of someone else's children.