

# **The First Room**

**(A Radio Drama)**

**by Cliff Burns**

## Cast:

*First Voice* (Official Version)

*Second Voice* (Eternal Child)

*Third Voice* (Rational)

*Fourth Voice* (Skeptic)

*Other* (Demiurge)

# The First Room

*“A part of us never leaves the first room we occupy.”*

-Nicholas Christopher

*SOUND FX: The distinctive ululation of a train passing in the night, doleful minor chords that once struck, carry a long, long way.*

## FIRST VOICE:

When I was a child, our family lived just across the road from the main CN line. I can remember standing beside the tracks with my sisters, waving at people in *ViaRail* passenger cars as they went by. Wondering where they were going and making up stories about their exotic lives. That was probably the beginning of it for me...

## OTHER:

*Point of Interest*

I grew up in a place where spaceships travelled at the speed of light and words could literally come to life. Spent the best years of my life under a tall, prairie sky, next to long tracks that ringed the world. Prone to mental lapses, fugues; spells and absences. Spying on my parents as they killed and mutilated their love, while I took notes for later reference, wetting the bed 'til I was ten years old.

## THIRD VOICE:

A solitary childhood can be instrumental in the formation of a creative personality and one can cite numerous instances of painters and artists of all disciplines who...

## SECOND VOICE:

*(Overlapping)*

--at night we'd be in bed and a train would go by and then we'd wait for it to say 'good-bye'. That's when it blew its whistle further down the track...

*SOUND FX: Train releasing a mournful, departing note. But the call is drowned out by voices rising in argument. No words can be determined, just expressions of rage and disillusionment. And then sounds of violence, breaking glass, objects being hurled and overturned, screeches of anguish.*

--we'd cover our ears and go under the blankets. Some nights we'd miss the train because they were so loud. And then it would suddenly go quiet. My sister whispered: "*D'you think he'll kill us too?*" And my heart just *racing* because my bed was the one closest to the stairs, which meant...*I'd be first...*

OTHER:

The night shutteredbolted

small whitefaced mice and fierce beating hearts

throats clutched and minds frozenimpenetrable

...and the immortal unkillable father

prowlingcreeping, prying at the windows,

pounding on the doors

his babies *still* tucked and waiting

in grownup shivering beds

## THIRD VOICE:

Anthony Storr talks about the exaggerated sense of helplessness some children feel, which can lead to a desire later in life to control and master as many facets of their existence as possible. The adult versions of those children make great efforts to impose order on their world, intent on making reality conform to their vision of an orderly, comprehensible universe that...

## FOURTH VOICE:

*(Overlapping)*

--used to piss the bed, remember? Too chicken to go downstairs and use the john. Scared of what you'd see. So instead you just laid there, in your spreading mess, enduring the shame and the spanking you were sure to get in the morning...

## SECOND VOICE:

He'd *roar*. Like a monster. He'd be outside, trying to smash the door in—

*SOUND FX: Shouts and indecipherable threats, impacts that rattle the house.*

There were big butcher knives stuck in the door. To keep him out...

*SOUND FX: A body hurling itself against a sturdy door, more bellows and oaths.*

...and he'd be *roaring*...

*SOUND FX: A cry from outside, rising into a scream, transformed into the whistle of a passing train.*

OTHER:

*Mental Cruelty*

One morning the werewolf came home and found the locks changed and all of his belongings piled on the front lawn. As he gathered everything up, he shouted terrible things at his family cowering inside. When the police came, he bit and scratched at them until they had to use extreme force to subdue him. After he was taken away, one cop stated confidently: "I wouldn't worry about it, ma'am, we'll hold on to him 'til he cools off..."

## THIRD VOICE:

Childhood recollections are often distorted and cannot be granted any kind of objective status. The significance is in the *feelings* that are associated with a memory rather than the particulars of the actual—

## FOURTH VOICE:

*(Overlapping)*

--scared of your own shadow, so afraid someone will *see* you, single you out. The humiliation you'll suffer. So you do your best to fade into the background, disappear. Or, at the very least, become invisible...

## FIRST VOICE:

*(Unperturbed)*

We were right on the edge of town so there was plenty of space, lots of empty fields to play in and garter snakes and frogs and tadpoles. A typical prairie boy's menagerie.

## SECOND VOICE:

I *hate* bugs, 'specially wasps and hornets and most of the time I stay inside,



watching TV and reading grandma's *Companion Library* books—

FIRST VOICE:

--and, of course, there were bike rides and picnics and we were always exploring, having adventures and inventing games to amuse ourselves. We weren't rich but I don't remember feeling deprived or—

SECOND VOICE:

--one summer I read *The Wizard of Oz* thirty-four times. I stayed up all night, reading by the light coming from downstairs. Or sneaking the flashlight. As soon as I finished, I'd go back to the beginning and start over again. I never wanted it to end, I just *loved* the story and living in that world...

THIRD VOICE:

The attractions of a rich fantasy life for an isolated or emotionally deprived child are obvious. The imagined world is endlessly fascinating whereas reality is, at best, mundane or, in a worst case scenario, a living hell. With every variety of existence in between.

## FOURTH VOICE:

Ever seen those Third World kids? The ones with the swollen bellies and fly-encrusted eyes? Those are the people I have pity for, okay? I'm listening to this whiny, self-indulgent crap and it just makes me wanna—

## FIRST VOICE:

*(Oblivious)*

My parents both worked so most of the time my sisters and I were left to our own devices. We learned to become self-reliant and amuse ourselves and, as a result, I think we were probably more independent and creative than most children. So, although in some ways my childhood was difficult, it also bequeathed to me those gifts and abilities that have enabled me to create these narratives and authentically portray people at their best...and worst...

## OTHER:

*God's Power For Fathers*

My father called them "family compacts". He would summon us to the table, usually after supper, and one by one he'd *list* the many ways we had

supposedly wronged him. You always hoped that you'd be one of the first. The longer it went on, the more abusive he became. By the time he got to the last of us, he'd be frothing at the mouth. Years of counseling helped me figure out why he did those things. It was all that underlying frustration and rage. A lifetime of thwarted ambition. We were created in his accursed image and, therefore, in his eyes, made from inferior clay.

#### THIRD VOICE:

Again, one must proceed with the utmost caution, keeping in mind that the account of the alleged "victim", while compelling and emotionally wrenching, is but one version of events, evidence without corroboration, and therefore must be regarded with some degree of--

#### FOURTH VOICE:

*"I once knew a man of no name  
Who was quick to accuse and to blame  
But his manner turned grim  
When fingers pointed at him  
Demanding proof of his claims..."*

## THIRD VOICE:

The immature or infantile personality finds it especially difficult to distinguish between reality and fantasy and is therefore not a credible witness, as much as we may be affected by their harrowing stories of—

## FOURTH VOICE:

In other words it could be all made up, right? Total bullshit! The product of a—waddayacallit--infantile mind. Somebody who never grew up, never had any friends, just sat around, hiding from the world.

## SECOND VOICE:

*(Petulantly)*

I don't need friends. I don't need *anybody*....

## FOURTH VOICE:

Yeah, right. Just you and your bloody *books*.

## FIRST VOICE:

(*Undaunted*)

I was an absolutely voracious reader. And completely indiscriminating. Anything I could get my hands on. Zane Grey, Daphne DuMaurier, *Harlequin Romances*. You name it. At some point my grandmother acquired the complete *Companion Library*. They have two classic kids' books, printed back to back. *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Prince and the Pauper*. *Hans Brinker* and *Black Beauty*. I read every last one of them. My mind was so hungry, eager for any kind of—

## SECOND VOICE:

...*escape*...

## FIRST VOICE:

(*Faltering*)

...uh...sustenance...to feed my growing imagination. There was no notion of high and low literature. Like every one else I read for diversion and, uh, escape. Invented worlds are always more interesting. Who wants to live in boring old Saskatchewan when you can walk the streets of the Emerald City and live, at least for a few hours, in a place where *anything* is possible...

## SECOND VOICE:

--very first day of kindergarten and this kid, David Lee, he's Chinese and his mom has to *drag* him to his desk and he won't let go of her, pulling on her clothes and *screaming*—

## FOURTH VOICE:

--you find a spot, against the wall or by the fence and you *watch*. Staring around you at all the activity, kids in flight. Everyone laughing and playing and having fun. And there you are in your little brown, buckskin jacket, there's you, all by yourself...

## SECOND VOICE:

--they're yelling at each other in Chinese and "David" is the only word I can understand and he won't let go of her and his eyes are huge and white and that's when the rest of us look around for *our* parents and realize—

FIRST VOICE:

She was gone...

THIRD VOICE:

Gone?

SECOND VOICE:

*(Almost inaudibly)*

Gone.

*SOUND FX: Elementary school playground; children running and playing.*

FOURTH VOICE:

*(Tsk-ing)*

All by yourself...

## SECOND VOICE:

--this one Indian boy, Curtis Tippetat, got in two fights during recess and his parents came and got him. He never came back.

*Sound FX: A kid calling: "Hey, kid, my friend wants to fight you..." Jeering and taunts.*

## FOURTH VOICE:

Terrified of getting picked last or striking out or dropping the ball or throwing like a sissy or getting tackled too hard or nailed by a line drive...

## FIRST VOICE:

Nobody's childhood is completely idyllic so I don't think you should put too much stock in one's upbringing or environment or what have you. To me, the important thing is *surviving* childhood. That's the trick. If you can manage that with a modicum of dignity, the world of adults should be a snap.



## FOURTH VOICE:

It's not like anybody *tortured* you. Nobody held you down and—

## SECOND VOICE:

I'd have spells, times when everything faded out. I couldn't hear anything,  
I was in this empty, white space...

## FIRST VOICE:

I was a dreamy kid, always drifting off in class. Not being deliberately  
insubordinate or disrespectful, just not that interested in what was going on  
so...off I'd go. Into my own private wonderland.

## THIRD VOICE:

A relatively commonplace tendency among children who—

## SECOND VOICE:

Sometimes I'd fall asleep on my desk and Miss Haynes told me there were dark circles around my eyes. She wanted to know if there was anything wrong. She was my favorite teacher.

## FOURTH VOICE:

You wanted *her* to be your mother.

## FIRST VOICE:

--school is, by and large, a mechanism for socializing children and one learns to get along or else fade into the background. I suppose I was a bit of a loner but I used my time to read and familiarize myself with writers and artists who were rebellious and iconoclastic. And, of course, as a teenager and a self-proclaimed outsider, I found that terribly attractive—

## FOURTH VOICE:

You were a *freak*. How many friends did you have? How many parties did you go to?

FIRST VOICE:

*(Rattled)*

--and—and there are other compensations to an introverted life, including—  
ah--the opportunity to create, to—to make up stories and--and express myself  
artistically. Almost as soon as I could write I was scribbling things down in  
those old Hilroy notebooks—

FOURTH VOICE:

Oh, bullshit!

FIRST VOICE:

...although that might be a slight exaggeration...

SECOND VOICE:

I want to be an astronaut.

*SOUND FX: Armstrong and Aldrin conversing with Mission Control from the  
surface of the moon. Static-filled, long distance exchanges.*

--before that, I wanted to be a cowboy like Gene Autry and then, for a little while, I wanted to be a train engineer...

*SOUND FX: The call of a far-off engine.*

FIRST VOICE:

I really feel that my entire childhood, the good *and* the bad, was, in essence, a training ground. It was then that the central core of my imagination was formed and when my creative muscles began to manifest themselves and you can really begin to see a foreshadowing of what was to come.

THIRD VOICE:

--in some cases an insular personality can lead to profound narcissism, a self-regarding tendency, an intellectual and emotional solipsism. A feeling that one is unique, special—

SECOND VOICE:

I'm not special...

## THIRD VOICE:

--while other individuals use their creative gifts to compensate for feelings of inferiority, worthlessness. They immerse themselves in their work in order to stave off bouts of depression and anxiety. By throwing themselves into some artistic endeavor, they hope to avoid or at least delay—

## FIRST VOICE:

*(Persisting)*

The essence of what I do...at heart, I'm a storyteller. That's it. There's no special significance or—or—you shouldn't read too much into a particular work and assume that it's anything more than a well-told tale. I don't write non-fiction, I don't do memoirs, but much of what I'm saying is *emotionally* true. There's a distinction, and I admit that, but I would also argue that truth takes many forms and each should be accorded at least some--

## FOURTH VOICE:

*(Disgusted)*

Even after all these years, still shuckin' and jivin'. Refusing to take a long, hard look into the deep, dark night of your rotten soul—

## SECOND VOICE:

I make stuff up because it's *fun*.

## FIRST VOICE:

Writing, the act of creation, is all about the shared experience of being alive and conscious and aware of every tiny detail around you.

## SECOND VOICE:

I'm good at it. My poem won a prize at the Bounty Fair—

## FIRST VOICE:

When I was in Grade Four, one of my poems won first prize at a local fair—

## SECOND VOICE:

*(Insistently)*

*Third prize.*

FIRST VOICE:

...and I still remember the tremendous sense of empowerment that gave me.

SECOND VOICE:

*(Doubtfully)*

*I guess...*

FIRST VOICE:

It was built around a metaphor, this idea of night as a blanket of stars,  
wrapped around the earth—

SECOND VOICE:

It was about an owl.

FOURTH VOICE:

*(Derisive laughter)*

## THIRD VOICE:

Memory isn't a solid, tangible thing. It's fluid, malleable, not necessarily a reliable source if one is seeking a truthful or accurate account of—

## FIRST VOICE:

The judges singled it out for special praise—

## THIRD VOICE:

No point of view is omnipotent, no narrator, however forthright and candid, completely reliable. And sometimes memory lies...

## FOURTH VOICE:

*A-men!*



OTHER:

*Endangered Species*

I want to be granted the rights of an animal.

I want to be preserved and protected.

I want there to be laws against hurting me.

I want to live in my own natural habitat, guarded 'round the clock.

THIRD VOICE:

Perhaps Jean Anouih is right and the “object of art is to give life a shape”.

FIRST VOICE:

I believe it was the French playwright Jean Anouih who said—

FOURTH VOICE:

*(Muttering)*

Oh, *brother...*

*SOUND FX: Another sad, lingering wail, the train somewhere between Broadview and Grenfell and making good time.*

SECOND VOICE:

*(Whisper)*

Do you hear that?

FIRST VOICE:

I'm not writing about myself. My characters *aren't* me. To me, that would be the height of self-indulgence--

THIRD VOICE:

--symptomatic of a narcissistic, infantile mentality as well as—

FIRST VOICE:

I'm *not* an autobiographical writer—

THIRD VOICE:

--well, of course, *all* writing is essentially a form of autobiography—

## FIRST VOICE:

This isn't like those dreams, where everything is an extension of the dreamer.

I make things up, I tell lies.

## SECOND VOICE:

It's not *nice* to lie.

## FIRST VOICE:

There are things you remember, firm, concrete memories and they exist, they're real. And you can build off them, use them to add certain details or nuances to a scene and help bring it to life. For example, I have a *very* early recollection of my grandmother; I can see her with almost perfect clarity. She was always the first one up in the morning. She'd contracted polio as a child but still managed to get around pretty well, even strapped into those big leg braces—

## SECOND VOICE:

She'd light the heater—

## FIRST VOICE:

The kitchen was heated by this gas unit—probably propane. She'd get up and light it so the main floor would be bearable by the time the rest of us came down. She used a wooden match and there was a blue flame. I can see it very clearly: her face, her hands, her hair...

## SECOND VOICE:

It's *so* cold some mornings. In the winter, when the wind creeps under the doors and through the cracks. Snuggling deep in our heavy quilts and listening to grandma moving around downstairs, making porridge—

## FIRST VOICE:

Looking back, I guess it was pretty primitive conditions. This big family living in such close quarters. It wasn't a shack but there was no running water, everyone crowded together—

## SECOND VOICE:

Grandma, mom and dad, us kids—

## FIRST VOICE:

--eight of us, so there wasn't a lot of room to spare. Under those conditions, nothing can escape your notice. You see and hear *everything*, there isn't much privacy and sometimes it was impossible *not* to eavesdrop and become aware of things that we—we were likely better off not knowing.

## OTHER:

*A Million Little Pieces*

There's no such thing as a "true" story. Everything is recorded through our senses and, as a result, our perceptions are highly subjective. *My* recollection of an event will differ sharply from that of other observers. Memories aren't tactile but they *are* elastic. They can be altered by time, emotions, physiology. Conscience is the worst revisionist of all. There are some things we will not allow ourselves to look at...refusing to believe, despite all evidence to the contrary, that we are guilty of the crimes for which we stand accused.

FOURTH VOICE:

Let's get this straight: you had a roof over your heads, three square meals a day, what else do you want?

FIRST VOICE:

I think my parents did their best—

FOURTH VOICE:

You bet they did!

FIRST VOICE:

But...like many of their generation, I don't think they were equipped to take on so much responsibility. Five kids. And the pressure of that, added to the age difference and the drinking—

FOURTH VOICE:

Enough already! Some things should be kept private.

FIRST VOICE:

--but that's—really it's ancient history. Best left behind me. I don't want to be one of those people who spend their entire lives blaming their parents for their failure—

FOURTH VOICE:

Oh, *that's* rich...

FIRST VOICE:

I like to think I'm a lot more mature and grown up than that.

*Pause.*

*SOUND FX: Far-off train whistle.*

At a certain point, you have to reach a rapprochement with your parents and acknowledge that, while they may have acted out of folly and stupidity, there was never any *malice* behind what they did. Mothers and fathers tend not to be monsters—

SECOND VOICE:

...*mine* was...

FIRST VOICE:

(*Hastily*)

--although they—their acts may, in some cases, be quite monstrous. But, still, one must be prepared to forgive and—

SECOND VOICE:

I could hear him hitting her, the sound it made...and the time when she threw the spoon and broke his wrist—

THIRD VOICE:

--events which become magnified in a child's impressionable mind, creating a disturbing and seemingly authentic memory that has all the emotional impact of the real thing—



## FIRST VOICE:

There comes a time when you have to move on with your life. Why keep going over the past, reliving each and every real and imagined injury or offense? Sooner or later you come to the realization that some things can never be known and...certain questions have no answers.

## SECOND VOICE:

We kept asking each other: *why doesn't she leave him?*

*SOUND FX: Violent argument; distorted voices, a rising chorus of threats and accusations.*

## FIRST VOICE:

I think my mother, in particular, bears deep scars from those years. She had a truly terrible life. And...sometimes she took it out on us...

## SECOND VOICE:

That still doesn't make it right.

## THIRD VOICE:

--these unresolved feelings of frustration and powerlessness often manifesting themselves years later, a legacy of pain and undirected fury that can poison families for generations...

## OTHER:

*Journal Entry*

June 28, 1996: I am choking on bile. Rage and rampant fears plague me, colour my relationships with my wife, children. There is a feeling of helplessness, of being inundated, overwhelmed, not able to accommodate what the world is throwing at me...

## FIRST VOICE:

I think what I like most about being an author is the sense that I'm in control of the universe I'm creating. It doesn't have to conform to anyone else's version of reality, it's entirely a product of my imagination and therefore *my* vision is predominant. That confers an enormous amount of power. In my hands a character can come to life...or die screaming...

## THIRD VOICE:

--a psychology of deeply rooted fears and neuroses supplies excellent source material, a well of dark energy to draw from when creating—

## SECOND VOICE:

*(Whisper)*

--imagining him coming up the stairs, watching through the banister as he makes the turn. Then four more steps and he's standing there, looking down at me—

## THIRD VOICE:

--some say the source of these fears stretches back to the primordial, a tremor from eons past, a psychic memory from an ancient dawn—

## FOURTH VOICE:

--or *maybe* it's just plain ca-ca.

FIRST VOICE:

My father died suddenly when I was in my early teens...

FOURTH VOICE:

*(Exasperated)*

Here we go again...

SECOND VOICE:

He was drinking again and we were waiting for him to come home—

FOURTH VOICE:

Just another sad story in the naked city. Don't act like it's the equivalent of the Twin Towers coming down.

## FIRST VOICE:

His death changed my entire life. A complete paradigm shift. After that, nothing seemed fixed or permanent. He was there...and then he was *gone*.

## SECOND VOICE:

*(Softly)*

...gone...

## FIRST VOICE:

It destroyed any notions of permanence or security I had. In one fell swoop, the man was spirited away and there was no warning, nothing I could do...

## SECOND VOICE:

I told them I didn't want to see him like that. I got really mad about it. And so when we came in, the coffin was closed.

## THIRD VOICE:

Death, particularly the death of a parent, is difficult for a child to assimilate. There's a sense that the safety net has been snatched away. It can be a rude awakening.

## SECOND VOICE:

This one lady told me my dad was with God. She said I should be happy for him.

## FIRST VOICE:

It shook me out of my childish complacency and it made me question *everything*. Faith, God, love, the meaning of life. And part of those explorations involved putting words on paper, trying to exorcise my doubts and fears or, at least, place them in some sort of context where I could come to terms with what I was experiencing. Initially, that meant poetry—

## FOURTH VOICE:

--pathetic, navel-gazing, juvenile *crap*—

## FIRST VOICE:

--very earnest stuff and most of it truly dreadful. But there was clearly passion there and soon I was looking around and observing my friends and then I started writing about them, things that were happening to us--

## THIRD VOICE:

--the narcissist feels a sense of detachment from ordinary human affairs and a marked reluctance to engage in close, intimate relations with other individuals. He feels little kinship or loyalty, except when it serves his interests. He has friends, but only on *his* terms....

## FIRST VOICE:

And then when my grandmother died, this woman who had helped raise me, that sense of impermanence and cruel, arbitrary fate was only magnified. No one was safe, anyone I really cared about was fated to die, sooner or later, and

I felt completely powerless, deprived of even the illusion of self-determination--

FOURTH VOICE:

Still only thinking about yourself...

FIRST VOICE:

...and, naturally, that led me to brood about my own mortality and what my purpose was, a conversation that, in one form or another, still goes on today.

*SOUND FX: Train whistle, gradually diminishing.*

We're survivors, all of us. And some of us choose to document our journeys with words or pictures. Doing our best to bring some sense of order or design to a terrifying, virtually infinite universe, finding some aspects of it so intolerable, we have to *remake* it—



OTHER:

*(Overlapping)*

*Journal Entry*

January 5, 2002: My continuing existence is a testament to the power of imagination.

*I dream, therefore I am.*

A rich, idiosyncratic fantasy life. Thoughts you wouldn't believe.

I see invisible things and hear invisible voices.

Sometimes I can predict the future.

My hands can make magic and my words contain the breath of life...

FOURTH VOICE:

Listen to him: he doesn't want to *play* God, he wants to *be* God...

THIRD VOICE:

--merely the compensatory behavior of an individual completely lacking in—

FOURTH VOICE:

Shut up!

THIRD VOICE:

*(Outraged)*

*Well!*

*Pause.*

FIRST VOICE:

There's always a sense of paralysis as you begin. Will the words come? Has the well finally run dry? The gnawing fear that thought provokes is...beyond description. But it helps, sometimes, when I remember how I felt that first time I read *The Wizard of Oz*, the sense of wonder that absolutely possessed me.

OTHER:

*(Reciting from The Wizard of Oz)*

*On and on they walked, and it seemed that the great carpet of deadly flowers that surrounded them would never end. They followed the bend of the river, and at last came upon their friend the Lion, lying fast asleep among the poppies. The flowers had been too strong for the huge beast and he had given up, at*

*last, and fallen only a short distance from the end of the poppy-bed, where the sweet grass spread in beautiful green fields before them.*

*"We can do nothing for him," said the Tin Woodman sadly; "for he is much too heavy to lift. We must leave him here to sleep on forever, and perhaps he will dream that he has found courage at last."*

SECOND VOICE:

That part in the poppy field. That really bothered me. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Going to sleep and never waking up. The framed picture over my bed, the one with the prayer that goes "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take". What does that *mean*? Some nights I'm afraid to close my eyes. Afraid something's waiting to steal my soul away...

FOURTH VOICE:

None of this is any big deal, all right? Nobody's suffering is unique or--

SECOND VOICE:

...lying there...in the dark...

## FIRST VOICE:

My childhood informs and adds colour and intensity to my work. All those hours I spent in the company of books, the comfort and companionship and *magic* they imparted. I honestly don't think I could have made it without them.

## THIRD VOICE:

Somewhat hyperbolic perhaps but—

## SECOND VOICE:

I heard him tell her once that if she ever tried to leave him, he'd kill us.

## FOURTH VOICE:

But you're still here, right?

## FIRST &amp; SECOND VOICES:

...still here...

*Sound FX: Old style film projector is switched on, its works rattling, reels turning, simulating reality at 18 frames per second:*

OTHER:

I can see myself the way I appeared back then. Brushcut, slightly built. Pale and shy, reluctant to make eye contact--

The image flutters, like one of those eight millimeter movies we used to project onto a bedsheet in our basement.

People and places jump into focus, crude splices causing abrupt juxtapositions: small, underlit rooms and startled faces. A blue swing set. Caragana bushes and a furious, barking dog. There are missing frames, scratches on the emulsion...

The boy has a large, round head and a bleak, fatalistic outlook on life. Charlie Brown, in the flesh. Posing stiffly in a field near his home and then next to the railroad tracks. His demeanor awkward, self-conscious. The scrutiny almost unbearable, like a light so bright, it *burns*...

*Sound FX: Film melting and breaking, the broken end drawn through the projector and popping free, flapping on the spinning reel. The frame filling with white light...*

FIRST VOICE:

I guess when it comes right down to it...I make stuff up because it's *fun*.

SECOND VOICE:

Hey! *I* said that!

THIRD VOICE:

The poet Charles Simic once wrote: "The father of our solitude is a child."

*Sound FX: Train whistle, growing faint.*

SECOND VOICE:

*(Joyful)*

Do you *hear* it? Good-bye, train! Good-bye...

*Sound FX: Train whistle.*

*Fading away...*

*Acknowledgements:*

An abridged version of “The First Room” aired nationally on CBC Radio’s *OutFront* program (February, 2009), produced by Kelley Jo Burke.

The author referred to the following books during the course of writing this drama:

*Solitude* (Anthony Storr)

*Churchill’s Black Dog, Kafka’s Mice* (Anthony Storr)

*The Wizard of Oz* (L. Frank Baum)

*Dimestore Alchemy* (Charles Simic)