

The New Orphic Review

Editor-in-Chief
Ernest Hekkanen

Copy & Associate Editor
Margrith Schraner

Managing Editor
Michael Connor



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Canada

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 38 books. The most recent are *Shadows on a Cave Wall*, *Kafka: The Master of Yesno*, *The Life of Bartholomew G.*, *Heretic*, *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street*, *The Big Dave (and Little Wife) Convention*, *Up & Coming (In Seattle)*, *Man's Sadness* and *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*. Hekkanen is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* and *Contemporary Authors* in the States.

The Luddite's Lament

Ernest Hekkanen

LONG-TIME READERS of *The New Orphic Review* will notice that the 10th Anniversary Issue looks a lot more professional than its predecessors. Gone are the lumps along the spine, caused by my hands-on binding technique, because, you see, I used to personally bind each copy of *The New Orphic Review*, using a wooden jig, a drill, a needle and thread, and carpenter's glue. Gone is the cover that used to crease upon opening the review for the first time. Now the cover is laminated, and for all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from similar literary magazines.

What, pray tell, has come over the publisher of *The New Orphic Review*? Has he finally stopped kicking against the pricks? Has he capitulated? Has he fallen in with the authorized purveyors of literature?

Not at all. He is the same iconoclast, the same eccentric visionary beholden to no one, the same man whose sympathies lie with the Luddites of the early 19th century. When I first started to produce New Orphic titles (this would have been back in the mid-1990s) I did most of the production work myself. I did the formatting, the page pasting, the cover production and the binding. I would have done the printing as well, but I couldn't afford to purchase a printing press. So, I did the next best thing; I assembled the prototype of each book and took it to the printers to be photocopied, I laboriously cut the flats in half, sewed the loose pages together and bound them so they assumed the appearance of a book.

It was the only way I could stay in the literary game, and it was fairly cheap, too. In the summer of 2000, my Associate Editor, Margrith Schraner, and I moved to Nelson, British Columbia, where the printing costs were somewhat steeper – due, I suspect, to Nelson being so far off the beaten track. Just the same, by cutting costs to the bone and squeezing

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every penny put into production, New Orphic Publishers and its subsidiary, *The New Orphic Review*, were able to break even most years, and on the rare occasion, were even able to make a small profit.

As a publisher, I pride myself on being financially independent (it's a deeply ingrained Finnish trait I can't seem to eradicate), which is not the case with most publishers in Canada. Most publishers are heavily subsidized by Canadian taxpayers. They receive grants from various funding agencies – the Canada Council, Provincial Arts Councils, Canadian Heritage, you name it. For those publishing houses, the costs of production are defrayed to the point where they are negligible, which makes it viable for the houses to stay in business. But the various funding bodies also make certain that the policies of the publishers remain within certain well-defined parameters. For instance, there has to be a certain percentage of Canadian content.

Readers of *The New Orphic Review* have brought it to my attention that few Canadian writers appear in its pages. That is true. The reason so few Canadian writers appear in the pages of our magazine has to do with the fact that I receive very few manuscripts from Canadian writers, and most of those aren't worthy of publication. I think I know the reason why Canadian writers avoid sending me manuscripts. It's because I can't afford to pay my contributors. I can't argue with that sort of reasoning. Indeed, whenever I receive an excellent manuscript in the mail, no matter where it comes from, I wonder to myself why it was sent to *The New Orphic Review* rather than to a magazine that pays. I suspect it has something to do with the fact that there are so many writers and so few quality literary magazines, although I can't prove to you that my suspicions are correct.

But back to my lament. Following the events of 9/11, printing costs rose quite steeply here in Nelson, as costs in general have risen quite dramatically across North America. Late last year, my managing editor informed me that the past five issues of *The New Orphic Review* all went into the red, with the result that I started to look around for cheaper ways to produce the magazine. It is now less expensive for me to send each job to Blitzprint in Calgary than for me to apply the hands-on techniques of the past.

But, as the old saying goes: *in a little, in a lot*. To effectively communicate with Blitzprint I had to upgrade my computer, my programs and my skills. I even had to get on the Internet, something I was loathe to do for a very long time. I was dragged kicking and screaming onto the congested information highway (I suspect, to become yet another fatality somewhere down the turnpike). As a result of all this upgrading, New Orphic Publishers now has a website at:

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The above address will take you to an index titled **neworphicpublishers-hekkanen**. Click on the *The New Orphic Review* file to find guidelines

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for submitting manuscripts to our magazine. Or click on one of the many pages describing books printed under our New Orphic imprint. Or click on the 'About Hekkanen' page to learn more about the editor and publisher, who, incidentally, spends far too much of his free time dreaming of becoming a tenpin bowling champion (his creative mind must be working on a possible book). Or click on one of the recent editorials he has written for the *NOR*.

Shortly after getting an Internet account, I sent Gerry Henkel of the *New World Finn* my e-mail address. He congratulated me on entering the age of electronic wizardry, and then he added something to this effect: "Now you, too, can tell your grandchildren that you once had an e-mail address, back before Peak Oil struck."

As a backup to my current method of producing *The New Orphic Review*, I have started carving tiny letters out of wood and devising a hand press that relies on human power alone. It is my hope that the Luddite in me won't take exception to such resourcefulness.

In a little, in a lot!

Raised in Napa Valley, educated at UC Santa Cruz, and a resident of San Francisco for over two decades, GARY PEDLER qualifies as a true Bay Area denizen. Yet after an escape from his role as a white-collar wage slave, he plans to make frequent forays to other parts of the globe. With his first novel behind him, Gary is working on a collection of linked short stories that includes *What Friendship Means to Me*, and, to his surprise, a musical.

What Friendship Means to Me

Gary Pedler

THIS WAS ALAN'S first visit to Tom's house, though they'd been friends during most of ninth grade. The house was a small, wood-framed building with the look of a one-time farm house. It was painted white, and an American flag hung above the front porch. Tom answered the door when Alan rang the bell. The two boys were almost the same age and height. Both had gray-blue eyes and straight brown hair, Alan's worn a little longer.

"You going to be OK taking a hike in those?" Tom asked.

Alan followed Tom's gaze over his collarless red short-sleeved top, the navy blue corduroys with flared bottoms. "Sure," he said. "We're not climbing Mt. St. Helena, are we?"

"No," Tom shrugged. They were both dressed in clothes they might have worn to school, but Tom's weren't as fancy, straight-legged pumpkin-colored pants, a plaid shirt. "And you brought a toothbrush and stuff like that?"

Alan held up his knapsack. "Right here." Not only was he visiting Tom's house for the first time, they were going on a hike together, something they'd never done before, and after that, Alan was spending the night. Packing so much into one occasion made Alan nervous and excited, which more than the other, he couldn't say.

Looking around Tom's living room, it took Alan a minute to notice something odd about it, for the odd thing was an absence rather than a presence. Unlike his parents' living room, this room contained almost no books, and no newspapers or magazines either. Tom's mother came in, a slim, soft-spoken woman in a pale blue dress. Tom introduced her to Alan, his manner gentlemanly.

"It's nice to meet you, Alan," Mrs. Davis said. She stood a little ways

away from him and didn't shake his hand.

"Alan plays the piano," Tom said to his mother.

"Do you?" said Mrs. Davis. "Would you play something for us?" She gestured toward the ancient upright.

"Sure," Alan said. He hated situations like this, but had prepared for them by memorizing a Chopin prelude, the shortest piece of music he possessed. It was easier to sit down and play this tiny prelude, which only lasted half a minute, than to go through the tug of war of refusing, and being asked again, and refusing again. After he finished, like every other adult under these circumstances, Mrs. Davis said, "That was very nice." She didn't ask him to play anything else; one dollop always seemed to suffice.

* * *

Tom had visited Alan's house in early May. Although Alan had friends, managing to see people outside of school had always been a hurdle for him. To get Tom to come over, he finally used as an excuse that he wanted to hear him play his guitar.

Tom joined Alan on his bus ride home that day, sitting beside him on one of the hard, dark green seats. Late afternoon Californian sunlight slanted through the dusty window. It fell on Alan's lap, where he held a couple of school textbooks and Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, the lettering on the spine worn away by many trips between home and school. The voices of the other kids burred around them. "I can do a cartwheel" . . . "Have you seen the new boy?" . . . "Wait until I tell my sister" . . . "Did you type to music today?" . . . "Isn't that boss?" . . . "Sit with that guy." "I don't want to sit with a *guy*."

At ten past three, the bus started off down the street. As it paused at the first intersection, a couple of Tom's friends walked by. They waved at him.

"What do your friends think of me?" Alan asked.

Tom grinned aimlessly. "Oh, I don't know."

"Come on, Tom."

After much hemming and hawing, "Well, I guess they think you're kind of a fairy in sports, but otherwise a nice guy." Tom grinned again and looked out the window.

They sat in Alan's living room, on one of the wool rugs his mother had braided, surrounded by comfortable Colonial-style furniture. Tom played his guitar. Which was to say that he launched again and again into *Malaguena*, then faltered and came to a stop after the first dozen bars, which were apparently all he'd ever learned. "Let me try that again," he kept saying.

Alan began to wonder if Tom intended to spend his whole visit this way. Finally, he laid his hand over Tom's to stop his playing. "What is it

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you wanted to tell me?" Tom had promised to tell him something when he came over.

"You want to talk about that *now*?" Tom said.

Alan continued to cover Tom's hands with his, liking the feel of this. "Sure. I suppose so."

"It's really not all that important."

Lifting his hands at last, Alan took away the guitar and placed it in his own lap. He waited.

"Guess," said Tom.

"Guess?"

"Guess what it is I want to tell you."

Alan sighed. "I can't imagine. Is this how you hold it?"

Now it was Tom's hands, long-fingered and a little rough, that were touching his, changing their position on the guitar. "Well, there's this girl that I kind of admire 'from afar.'" Whenever Tom used language that was out of the ordinary, he placed it in quotation marks.

"Who?" Alan said.

"I don't even know her name, but I've watched her, and she seems nice. Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not in love with her or anything. She's not my dream girl. I'm not going to marry her. I'd just like to get to know her better and see what happens."

"So that's what you wanted to tell me." Alan was surprised. The only thing he didn't like about Tom was the way he talked about girls. Grinning, his voice full of suppressed laughter and excitement, Tom would leer at one of the girls in World History and whisper to Alan, "Oh, I'd give her about a two, compared with these other dogs anyway." Tom talked about girls more than anyone Alan had ever known, and almost always about how he rated their looks. Now for the first time Tom was admitting he was interested in a girl, not dismissing her as a "dog."

"I don't see why you shouldn't be able to get to know this girl," Alan said. "There are a thousand ways into a person's life." He believed this as he said it, though at the same time he was aware that he himself had never been very good at finding those ways.

"She seems like a nice girl," Tom said. "Not like the others."

Alan smiled. "Not like Carry Runkel?" Carry was outspoken about sexual matters; Tom called her aggressive, brazen. He was even more disapproving of the "hard" girls at school, the ones who wore shiny black windbreakers, drew thick lines under their eyes, and affected a tough, knowing air.

"No, not like Carry," Tom said. "A nice girl."

"Are you going to the dance this Saturday? Maybe she'll be there and you can talk to her."

"I don't know if I'm going," Tom said. "I'd have to ask my parents."

"Ask your parents?" Alan wouldn't ask permission from his own par-

ents merely to attend a school function.

“It’s just that I’ve never been to something like that before.”

“Like what?”

“A dance. My parents don’t really approve of dancing.”

“They don’t approve of dancing?” Alan had never heard of such a thing.

“Not for us anyway. The people in our family.”

“What’s wrong with dancing?”

Stumbling, Tom explained that it wasn’t so much dancing itself his parents objected to as the things that often went along with it. Drinking, a “loose” atmosphere.

“You mean they’d forbid you to go to a *school dance*?” Alan said.

Tom admitted his mother wouldn’t actually forbid him, but she would be disappointed if he went. Alan thought the attitude of Tom’s parents very strange. He made a few sarcastic remarks, then talked about other things.

* * *

“You want ham and cheese, or just cheese or just ham?” They were in Tom’s kitchen, and Tom was making them sandwiches to take on their hike. Alan wondered where Tom’s mother had gone. It seemed too small a house for her to have disappeared so completely.

“Ham and cheese,” Alan said.

Tom packed their food in his own knapsack and led the way out the back door. When Alan stepped into the yard, the hot June sunlight fell on him like a heavy slab. There wasn’t a breath of wind. The arms of a decorative windmill in a flower bed were perfectly still.

Tom and Alan started out by crossing an old walnut orchard at the back of the property. Soon, they came to a creek. The ground dropped down to a gravel bed where the creek ran in the rainy season. Beyond was what remained of it in early summer, a stretch of water several yards wide that dimly reflected the tops of the trees overhead. The creek was running, but discreetly, the flow visible only as a series of seemingly unchanging ripples on the surface.

“How do we get across?” Alan asked.

“Jump,” Tom said, as if this were obvious.

Tom took a few running steps over the gravel, jumped, and landed high up on the far bank. Alan ran and jumped, but his left foot splashed into the water and his right foot sank into mud.

Next, they came to a fence with a No Trespassing sign nailed to it. On the other side was a plowed field, its gray-brown clods of dirt mixed with the remnants of dried grass.

“We have to run really fast,” Tom said as he climbed over the fence.

“Why?” Alan asked.

Tom shouted over his shoulder, “Because of them!” and he sped across

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the field ahead of Alan. This answer was unnecessary, for Alan had already spotted two smallish dogs racing toward them from the right, barking fiercely. Alan ran as fast as he could across the uneven surface of the field. Tom reached the opposite fence and shot over it. Alan was less fortunate, and just before he came to the fence, one of the dogs took a short, sharp nip at his ankle.

* * *

A couple of weeks after Tom's visit to his house, Alan called Tom at ten at night. Alan's parents and his brother had already gone to bed, and he sat on the dining room floor in the dark. Tom was washing the dishes at his house — he always seemed to be doing the dishes when Alan called — and in the background, Alan could hear the sound of water running. He'd only called to ask Tom a quick question about their History test the next day, but their talk ended up lasting over an hour. When one ear started to hurt, Alan would shift the receiver to the other.

"Alan, are you mad at me or something?" Tom asked far into the conversation. "I can never get you to laugh in History anymore. You just frown and don't say anything."

Alan assumed a detached air. "You're doing what you want to. What say do I have about it? We aren't married."

"What am I doing wrong?"

"Nothing." Then, "I don't want to change you. What business is that of mine?"

"But I'm asking you. I want to know."

"All right," Alan said, "I'll tell you. You're acting like an idiot. People are starting to talk about you, the way you're always running around, acting goofy. Like last week when you pushed Frank out of his seat. And you're always saying the wrong things, like when you asked Melissa if she could move with all that make-up on her face. I know you're only kidding, but sometimes people take things the wrong way. What is it? Are you nervous or something? You seem skittish around the girls. They won't bite you, you know. You don't have to insult them." Alan stopped. He hadn't meant to say this much.

Tom didn't seem offended, though. "Do you really think that's how I'm coming off? I guess I'll have to watch myself then."

"Don't be angry," Alan said, even though he knew Tom wasn't.

Alan felt close to Tom at that moment, and he wanted to be closer still. They were reduced to their essences, two voices interweaving in the dark. "Tom, do you remember that essay on Friendship we did for English? What did you write?"

"Gosh, I can't remember."

"What do you think about friendship, though? What does it mean to you?" Alan knew he would have to be patient and let Tom reflect on the

matter as he spoke about it. Tom never considered questions like this unless he was asked.

Tom said, "A friend is . . . someone you do stuff with. Someone who likes what you like. You know, who has things in common with you. Someone you see a lot, I guess. You get along. You have things to talk about." He ran out of ideas. "I don't know."

"Don't you want more than someone you can do things with? Don't you want a friend who really understands you? Someone you can say anything to? One really close friend?" When Tom didn't respond immediately, Alan asked, "Haven't you ever had a best friend?"

"There used to be a guy I knew a few years ago. I guess we were best friends."

"Who was he?"

"He moved away. You wouldn't know him."

"Do you miss him?"

"I guess so. I still write to him at Christmas, but there isn't much to say. 'How are you, the weather is fine.'"

"Don't you want a best friend?"

"Oh, I've got plenty of friends."

"Yes, but no one best friend you can give your all to, who really feels for you. Don't you want that?"

There was one further question Alan longed to ask, but he kept it just under restraint. Once he'd spoken the words, there would be no going back, no way of denying them. If Tom wanted the same thing he did, surely what he was saying would be plain enough.

"I don't know," Tom said. "You see those girls. Best friends, then enemies."

Alan let the subject drop.

* * *

Tom and Alan crossed a road, another field, then climbed straight up a hill. Alan was hot and sweaty; his heart beat fast. The sun gave the impression of coming down very close to him out of the blue void of the sky. Its fierce light scorched his skin and hurt his eyes.

"Watch out for poison oak," Tom called to Alan.

Alan looked around. "Where?"

Tom gave a vague wave of his hand. "All over here."

"What does it look like?"

Tom responded enigmatically, "Leaves of three, let them be."

"The leaves on poison oak are in threes?" Alan remembered having heard this before.

"Usually."

"Usually?"

Tom said, "Most of the time, poison oak is a bush, but sometimes it

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looks like a tree. Sometimes it's red, sometimes it's green.”

Alan gave up trying to spot poison oak and just tried to follow in Tom's footsteps as much as possible.

* * *

Toward the end of May, the school organized a field trip to San Francisco to see a revival of *Knickerbocker Holiday*. Alan persuaded Tom to sign up with him.

On the afternoon of the trip, Alan directed Tom to the back of the bus, where the teachers up front were less likely to interfere with him and his friends. Alan had brought a pen and some paper, and the group wrote notes to pass around or make into airplanes. They waved at motorists. Leslie had her radio on. Everyone talked. “My God, why are we going to see this dumb musical when we could be seeing *Hair*?” . . . “Get your hands off me” . . . “Shh, this is my favorite song” . . . Frank Sitwell, whose placid good looks made the girls in World History swoon, sat in front of Alan and Tom. Frank made Alan swoon, too, but his way of showing it was to be annoying. He mussed Frank's neatly combed hair, which earned him a glance and a barely ruffled, “Cut it out.” Tom had brought his guitar, but his playing was drowned out by loud adolescent voices and the rumbling of the bus, and he stopped after a while. With the guitar resting in his lap, Tom's leg was often pushed up against Alan's. Alan enjoyed feeling it touch him, warm and alive.

After the show, while the kids waited for their bus outside the theater, Alan slipped away to buy a candy bar in a nearby store. Coming back up the street, he saw Tom standing near the curb. He wore the pumpkin-colored cotton pants that were the only pair he seemed to own, a yellow shirt, a brown button-up sweater, a beige tie. Alan studied his tall, bony frame, his pleasant face with remnants of childhood freckles—pleasant, though not exactly handsome, like Frank Sitwell's. Tom seemed set apart from the people moving up and down the sidewalk, even from the other kids in their group. He was like someone plucked from an earlier, simpler time and set down in the modern era. Yet his air of innocence, instead of making him vulnerable, appeared to protect him from his surroundings, from the city people and their wicked ways, the other kids with their sporadic attempts at sophistication.

Tom smiled, catching sight of Alan as he drew near. Alan wanted to give Tom something, but all he had to offer was the candy bar he'd just unwrapped. He asked Tom if he wanted a bite. Sure, said Tom. He returned it stamped with the shape of his mouth, his teeth leaving little marks on the chocolate. Alan placed his mouth over this, taking a bite of his own.

On the ride back to Napa, Alan asked Tom if he'd made any progress getting to know the girl he admired. Tom told him that, on closer inspec-

tion, he'd decided she wasn't that great.

* * *

Alan and Tom turned south and moved along the crests of a string of hills. At times there was a sketchy trail to follow, at other times there wasn't. The dry grass was so pale it was almost white, the oak trees as hard and dark as iron. Off to the left, the town stretched across the valley floor. Alan could pick out the county courthouse, the Episcopal church with its tall steeple. Beyond the town rose another string of hills. These looked like they were made from stone, smooth and brown in some places, rough and gray-green in others. Heat poured up out of the ground as well as down from the sky.

Tom walked ahead of Alan, his long legs carrying him forward effortlessly. He hadn't paused once or even slowed his pace since they left the house, as if in a hurry to get somewhere. It seemed to Alan that Tom was barely aware of him much of the time. He talked about climbing around these hills with other neighborhood kids when he was younger, tossing short sentences over his shoulder, but gave the impression of speaking to himself.

Just when Alan was on the point of asking if they could stop for a rest, Tom pulled up sharply and hissed, "Look!"

Sitting on the ground a dozen yards off was a very large bird, dark brown with a touch of red on top of its head.

"What is it?"

"A vulture," Tom whispered.

Alan saw that the vulture wasn't sitting on the ground, its claws were resting on—something. The vulture lifted up into the air, its big wings moving slowly.

Alan and Tom walked forward and found a dead animal lying on its side in the grass.

"Is it a raccoon?" asked Alan.

"No. Possum."

The head was still fairly intact; Alan could see a mouth with bared teeth, one eye. So was the hairless, coarse-textured tail. In between, however, was an only vague tangle of bones, most of them picked clean. Patches of fur were sprinkled around the body.

Alan scrunched up his face in disgust. "Did the vulture kill it?"

"Vultures never eat anything unless it's already dead," Tom said. "If you're lying in the desert dying of thirst, the vultures will come and wait, but they won't touch you until you're actually dead. They have a sixth sense about it."

That was nice to know, Alan thought, wiping the sweat from his brow. It meant that when he collapsed from exhaustion and sunstroke, and Tom walked on without even noticing, the vultures wouldn't start pecking at

him until he was actually dead.

* * *

Alan wanted to talk to someone older and wiser about his friendship with Tom. One day when his English class was working in the school library, he asked Ms. Felker if he could speak to her. They went into a small room off the library. Ms. Felker was rather boyish-looking, with close-cropped hair. She was the first woman Alan knew who called herself Ms.

Once he and Ms. Felker were alone together, Alan wasn't sure what to say. Should he ask, "How do I make Tom my friend?" Tom already was his friend, though, wasn't he? "How do I make Tom my best friend, the Friend?" That was nearer the mark. But it was too embarrassing to mention the particular person. In the end, Alan mumbled something vague and awkward. In his essay on Friendship, Alan had written about wanting "the deep and illuminating love and understanding of a single truly close friendship" and "achieving a union" with this one friend, so perhaps Ms. Felker could fill in some of the blanks.

Her way of handling the situation was to tell Alan a story about working in a summer camp when she was in college. She became friends with another counselor, Alison. The camp put on a show at the end of summer, and she and Alison agreed to write it together. At first, this was fun; but as time went on, they argued more and more.

"Finally, it was the day before the show. We barely managed to get through the last rehearsal without one of us blowing her stack. A thunderstorm was brewing—maybe that was affecting us, too. Anyway, after everyone else had gone to bed, we decided to take a shower. No one was supposed to be up at that hour, so we didn't turn on the lights in the shower room, just stuck a candle on one of the shelves. We kept going back and forth about the show, and getting angrier and angrier, and the whole time we were naked in this almost dark room taking our showers. Then — I don't remember how it happened, but our argument got physical. Probably one of those silly things where one person shoves the other, and that person shoves back. Then the storm broke, there was all this thunder and lightning, the candle blew out, one of us pushed the other or someone slipped, and we ended up together on the cold wet floor. And then one of us began to laugh, because it all suddenly seemed so absurd, and the other laughed, too. It all seemed so absurd, what we'd been arguing about."

Having finished her story, Ms. Felker fixed her brown eyes on Alan with a particular intensity. She clearly expected a response, but Alan was at a loss. He appreciated that Ms. Felker was speaking to him as an equal and sharing with him something from her personal life. Still, what he'd wanted wasn't a story, but advice.

"Did you end up putting on the show?" he said.

"Yes," said Ms. Felker with a laugh. "A lot of it was bad, and some of

it was actually pretty good. But it didn't really matter, did it? It was just a show at a girls' summer camp. It didn't matter, not compared to other things, things that seem much more important now."

Perhaps Ms. Felker guessed that Alan was still puzzled, for she ended by telling him, "I don't know how much what I've said will mean to you, Alan, but if it shows you the difficulties someone else has had with a friend, it may help."

* * *

"Here it is!" Tom cried, coming to a stop at last. He'd said he had a special place to show Alan. Alan had hoped to find a spring bubbling out of the ground, or a meadow with wildflowers. Instead, there was just an especially large oak tree, with bark cracked like the bed of a dried-up lake and prickly, metallic-looking leaves. Shards of broken beer bottles glinting in the sun showed they weren't the first people to visit this spot. A short ways beyond the tree, the ground dropped away to a gap between this hill and the next, with a road running through it. On either side of the road was a ridge of loose dirt.

Tom pointed to these ridges. "We used to kick that dirt down onto the road when cars came by."

"My, you were destructive," Alan said a little sourly.

Tom grabbed hold of a branch and disappeared up the tree. Alan sat on a rock and brushed some of the dust off the bottoms of his flared corduroys, wishing he hadn't worn something so nice. The summer weather held a heavy hand over the landscape. It was quiet, still, everything immobilized by the heat. The grasses rustled faintly. One bird in a tree tried out a languid note. Another bird piped a slightly higher one. *Too, too, too.* A tear of sweat slid down Alan's back.

Tom dropped back to the ground. "I've found a beehive," he said. "You want to come see?"

"No, thanks," Alan said. That was all he needed to put the finishing touch on his day, to be chased by a swarm of angry bees.

Tom sat across from him on another rock and got out their lunch. Pulling two cans of soda from his knapsack, he said cheerfully, "Do you want me to run down the hill and try to find some cold water to put these in?"

"Where are you going to find cold water?" Alan asked, frowning.

"Down the hill somewhere." Tom gestured vaguely.

Alan rolled his eyes. "Even if you do find water, the drinks won't be cold by the time you get back here."

Tom shrugged and smiled, as if to say, I was just trying to be nice.

A few sips from his lukewarm can of 7-Up made Alan feel better. The path of his emotions took a turn. It was the thought that counted, wasn't it? and Tom's thought had been kind. Ridiculous, but kind.

"Can we go straight down this hill into town?" he asked, pointing. He

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didn't want to return to Tom's house the way they'd come.

"Yeah," Tom said. "I know a way."

"Then lead on, Daniel Boone."

* * *

"Are you coming to the track meet on Friday?" Tom asked. "It's the last one of the year, the big one, and I'm running a really important race, the long distance race. I'd sure like you to be there, for 'moral support.' Will you come?"

For once, Tom was asking *him* to do something. "If you want me to." Alan couldn't resist adding, "It does seem kind of silly, though. All that running around in circles."

At the meet, Tom threw the discus and won first prize. But this hardly seemed to matter to him; it wasn't the big race. That was all Tom could talk about to Alan as they sat on the lawn, Tom's long-fingered, dirty hands clutching the discus. Alan didn't think he himself had ever been as concerned about succeeding at something as Tom was at that moment. He wasn't sure what to say to him: I know you'll win, don't worry?

"I've got to win this race," Tom muttered, "they're depending on me, I need to start slow, then just at the corner, go all the way, yeah, I've got my shoes padded, I've got to win this race, I have those papers to do, my story for English, I have to show my parents that progress report . . ."

Tom wore gym shorts and a thin sleeveless running top. Alan had never seen so much of his body before. He was all skin and bones, bones that were long and knobby, skin that had a faintly gray tone. Skin and bones; a bundle of sticks.

"You look like a bundle of sticks," Alan said unthinkingly.

"A bundle of sticks!" Tom exclaimed. "A bundle of sticks!" He didn't seem so much offended by this remark as astonished that Alan would make it.

"Yes," Alan persisted. "A bundle of sticks."

Soon it was time for Tom's big race. Around and around the track he ran, along with a dozen competitors. Alan, who had worn his red shirt to help Tom spot him in the crowd, walked from one side of the track to the other to watch him as he passed.

At last, the runners reached the finish line. Tom came in third. Panting, he kneeled on the grass, his thin body heaving, his eyes wild. Alan and a few others stood around him. He wanted to cradle Tom in his arms and comfort him.

Frank Sitwell, who was also on the team, said in his lazy voice, "You could have done better, Davis. Why didn't you run faster at the end?"

Alan, not usually very outspoken, exclaimed, "Frank, why don't you just *shut up!*"

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* * *

Toward the end of the afternoon, Tom's father and older brother returned from Lake Berryessa where they'd spent the day fishing. When they came out the back door into the yard, Tom made the introductions.

"Pleased to meet you," Mr. Davis said. He was tall and lean like his sons, and spoke with what Alan thought of as simply a Southern accent. Mr. Davis extended his hand, and Alan shook it. Alan expected his grip to be firm, perhaps crushing, and was surprised to find instead that it was light, as if he was reluctant to make contact.

"And this is my brother, Mat," Tom said.

Mat said, "Hi, there," his hands stuck in the front pockets of his jeans.

"I understand the two of you went on a hike," Mr. Davis said.

"Yes," Tom said, "in Westwood Hills."

Mr. Davis looked at Tom carefully. "I hope you weren't tempted to take that convenient shortcut across Mr. Conway's property."

"No, we walked along the creek to Oakdale."

Alan felt his eyes widen at this lie. Tom was usually so honest. As if wishing to avoid further questioning on the subject, Tom said, "We saw a dead possum."

"Did you now?" Mr. Davis said without much show of interest. "How would you boys like a game of darts before supper?" He nodded at a dart board nailed to a walnut tree.

In a flash, Alan could see what would happen: he would play badly and be embarrassed; Mr. Davis would say it didn't matter, and of course it would. Alan made no attempt to get out of taking part in the game. It was like playing the piano for Mrs. Davis; one had no choice but to submit. Alan's darts sometimes landed on the ground, sometimes in the trunk of the tree, only occasionally on the target, and then rarely near the center.

"Maybe you should try throwing underhand, son." Mr. Davis gave a chuckle that was echoed by Tom and his brother. "Well, it doesn't matter," he said, taking aim with one of the darts. "It's only a game, after all."

* * *

When school ended, Alan worried he wouldn't see his friends over the summer, so he was glad when Melissa asked him to a pool party at her parents' house out on Dry Creek Road. He knew Tom had been invited, too, and at first he was going to call and suggest they ride out there together on their bikes; but then he didn't, wondering if he made a tactical error by always taking the initiative. Let Tom call for a change. Tom didn't call, and arriving at Melissa's, Alan found he'd ridden over with Frank instead. The two boys were horsing around in the pool, grabbing at each other.

People swam, played croquet on the lawn, ate potato salad and hamburgers. Alan found the party tedious and spent a lot of time playing through

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the sheet music of popular old songs he found on the piano in Melissa's living room. Suddenly he was seized by a daring idea. His heart pounding, he went into the bedroom of Melissa's brother, which the boys at the party were using as their changing room. Alan had read a tiny *Berkeley Barb* article in which a man talked about getting aroused by the jockstraps of good-looking guys, wanting to smell them, lick them. Alan found Frank's underwear and smelled it, kissed it, licked it. He wrapped it around his cock while he masturbated. He pictured Frank in his swimsuit, thought of this pair of underwear rubbing against Frank's body as he'd pedaled his bicycle a few hours ago. He imagined Frank walking in and discovering him, and one thing leading to another . . . But Frank didn't walk in, or anyone else, and Alan ejaculated into a piece of toilet paper that he flushed down the toilet.

* * *

Mrs. Davis told Tom and Alan they could eat their dinner on the back lawn. She conveyed they should look upon this as a treat, but Alan suspected it was more a sign of the family's wariness of outsiders. The food was tasty and unusual: pork that had been taken off the bone and shredded, a heap of leafy cooked vegetables that Tom referred to simply as "greens." Cheerful accordion music floated over to them from a neighbor's yard along with the shrieks of children at play. After they'd eaten, Alan helped Tom set up his pup tent on the lawn. They unrolled two sleeping bags inside.

It was evening. Shadows became soft, gauzy, grotesquely elongated. It was harder to trace their sources, as if they were detaching themselves from the objects casting them, taking on a life of their own. Odd bits of sunlight illuminated expected places in the landscape, reaching through the branches of trees, touching a trunk here, choosing one bough there to light. And wherever the sunlight did appear, it added gold to every color. Greens became green-gold, browns brown-gold, and the dry grasses fringing the walnut orchard were no longer white, but an intense burning gold.

The accordion music stopped and then the children's cries. The sun set quietly and unremarkably in the clear dry air. The sky turned first a paler and paler blue, then a darker and darker gray. The stars began to appear, mirage-like at first, so that Alan wasn't quite sure from one moment to the next whether he was actually seeing them. The trees around the lawn melted into a single, featureless mass. The only clear detail was the outline of their tops against the sky. The world expanded, growing bigger and more mysterious. A chair on the lawn dematerialized before Alan's eyes, disintegrating as the night came on.

Crickets began their rhythmic whirl. It was remarkably loud — if he ever tried to imagine the sound again later, Alan thought, he would almost certainly fail to make it loud enough, not believing this possible — and

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had the perfect regularity of something mechanical. The pulsing noise seemed to come from everywhere, the very air itself.

Tom and Alan went into the house to brush their teeth and change into their pajamas in the room Tom shared with his brother. Alan was careful to avoid looking at Tom as they undressed. Then they went back into the yard. There was the little tent. Alan opened the flap and looked at the two sleeping bags placed side by side, touching each other. He crawled in, followed by Tom. They lay next to each other inside their bags.

* * *

Alan went to another party a week later at Laurie Winyard's house on Jefferson Street. Laurie had told Alan he could bring Tom — as if we're a couple, Alan thought. Laurie had the record player on full blast, which made conversation difficult. Alan was bored, annoyed by the others for pretending they weren't bored, too, and annoyed with himself for feeling this way.

A half hour after they arrived, he whispered to Tom, "Do you want to go? This is a pretty lousy party."

"Yeah, I guess it is. But we can't go. It'd be rude."

Alan shrugged. "I'm leaving in five minutes. You can come with me or stay."

Five minutes later, Alan slipped out through the front door. Tom followed, mumbling over his shoulder, "We'll be back in a minute."

"What do you want to do now?" Alan asked once they were outside.

"I guess I'll go back in," Tom said.

"But Tom, you aren't enjoying the party. And frankly, I don't think you'll be missed."

"You're invited to a party, you accept, and you've got to stay and try to make it a success."

Alan was vexed that what was so plainly the right thing to do went against his own inclinations and that Tom had articulated the correct view with such clarity. Without saying anything more, Alan walked down the front path. Tom followed, but as they reached the sidewalk, George Lowry arrived on his bike. Tom turned around and went back into the house with him. Alan might have been induced to return inside with a little persuading from Tom, or at least his continued presence. Once Tom was gone, however, and with the added aggravation of seeing him chat with George Lowry as if nothing were wrong, all Alan could think to do was walk down Jefferson toward home. After quite a few blocks, he heard someone pound up behind him. It was Tom. This seemed like a happy turn of events, to have Tom run all this way to be with him.

Alan smiled. "What happened to your principles, Mr. Davis?"

Tom was breathing hard. "Actually, I'm just going to walk with you, then head back to the party."

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Alan stopped and stared at him. Whatever he'd thought about this mess of an evening, at least he'd imagined it was behind him. Then here came Tom, bringing it all back. "You're incorrigible!" Alan exclaimed.

Tom looked puzzled. Perhaps he didn't know what this word meant.

Anger swept aside all of Alan's other emotions, anger for all the difficulties he'd had with Tom over the last few months, anger at Tom for apparently having a certain amount of interest in being his friend, but usually doing so little to help things along. He thought of the times he'd asked Tom over, then waited for him in vain, only to be told later that he'd had to do a chore or go somewhere with his brother, or had simply forgotten.

"You're a nut!" Alan cried. "I'll never understand you. Something up there" — he pointed at Tom's head — "works differently. I just don't get it."

They walked a block in silence. Then Tom said, "I told Laurie you were sick and had to leave."

"Clever you." Alan was calmer now, repenting his outburst. "It wasn't necessary."

"She asked. I had to say something."

Alan wondered if he should have stayed at the party. Maybe it would have gotten better. Now all he had to look forward to was watching television with his parents or reading a book. "I'm sorry about what I said to you, Tom. Though I meant it; I really don't understand you." Finding himself deviate from the path of apology, he added, "But that's not your fault."

"It's OK," Tom said gently. "You were kind of mad." A pause, then, "Why don't you come over to my house tomorrow?" He seemed to work out the plan as he spoke. "Yeah, we could go on a hike, and maybe I'll find that place up in the hills I've been wanting to show you. You could spend the night. How about it?"

Alan brightened at this idea. "Yeah, that'd be great."

"Don't you have to ask your parents if it's all right?"

"No," Alan scoffed. "Why should I?"

* * *

"What shall we talk about?" Tom asked, leaning on his elbow, close to Alan. "Or would you rather sleep?"

It was dark outside, only a small amount of light spilling onto the lawn from the house, and even darker inside the tent. Alan could feel Tom's presence beside him, sometimes catch the peppermint scent of his toothpaste. It was getting cool outside, but it was warm within the little triangular space.

"I'd rather . . ." Alan began. But no, he wouldn't be the one to speak the words first; he didn't dare. At times like this, he would say to himself,

“Tom must be thinking what I am. He couldn’t act the way he does unless he has the same intention.” Then, turning a corner in his mind, a doubt would appear. Perhaps Tom truly was so naïve as to be unaware of how his behavior might appear to other people. Now Alan thought, “It’s up to him. I’d be content just to stay friends.”

A few seconds passed. Finally Alan said, “There is one thing we’ve never talked about. Religion.” Afterward, Alan would wonder whatever had possessed him to bring up this topic just then, but at the moment it seemed perfectly natural. “Whenever I try to discuss it with you, you tell me we don’t have time to go into it. Now we do have time.”

“Well, what can I say?” Tom stumbled along, trying to verbalize things he probably seldom, if ever, did. “I believe in Christ and God and — well, the whole thing.”

“The whole thing?”

“Yes. The Bible.”

“The Bible. How do you mean, you believe in the Bible?”

Tom was a little exasperated. “What else could I mean? What I mean is, I believe in the Bible.”

“As an allegory or — literally?”

A fidgety movement from Tom had kicked open the flap on the tent, letting in more light. Alan could make out a confused expression on his face. “I believe in the Bible,” Tom repeated.

“You believe in Adam, Eve, the apple, Noah’s Ark, walking on water, the resurrection?”

Hesitantly, “Yes.”

Alan had written a paper on the Gospels for World History, but he suspected Tom didn’t actually know very well this Bible he professed to believe in.

“The immaculate conception?”

This Tom knew about. “Yes,” he said.

Alan cast about for other implausible incidents. “What about the parting of the Red Sea?”

“Alan, if it’s in the Bible, it’s true. God spoke through the people who set down the Bible to give us His knowledge.” Tom made it sound like there wasn’t anything more to say on the matter.

“Christ said the one unforgivable sin was not to believe in God. Do you agree with that?”

“Yes.” Tom looked at Alan pointedly, as if begging him not to pursue this line of questioning.

“You mean, if I’m the best person in the world and happen not to believe in God, I won’t go to heaven when I die?”

Tom gazed at him hard and said, “No, you won’t. You must accept God and Christ in order to enter heaven. Being good or bad” — Tom paused as if struggling with a knotty point — “that’s sort of a different issue.”

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“So, if I’m a very good person and don’t believe in God, I won’t go to heaven, but if I kill a thousand people, am rotten and cruel and lustful, then repent on my death bed and accept the Lord, I’ll whiz right up there?”

Tom gave Alan a pained and reproachful look. “Yes.”

“That’s some just God,” Alan frowned. “But what if I were an aborigine and had never heard of the Christian god or Christ. I wouldn’t even have a chance to accept them in that case, so I couldn’t be sent to hell.”

Tom shook his head. “Yes, you would go to hell.”

Tom, restless, crawled out of the tent. Alan stayed inside, trying to take in the discovery that his friend was — as he saw it — a religious fanatic. He was rather appalled; yet, at the same time, there was part of him that liked hearing Tom speak in earnest about something for a change.

Alan joined Tom outside in the cool night air. The trees whispered around them. A bird sang sweetly.

“A nightingale,” Tom murmured.

There was silence. Then Alan mused aloud, “Well, in any case, I’ll never believe as you do. I can’t.”

“Don’t ever say that again!” Tom sounded both angry and frightened. “I hope you live a long life so you’ll have plenty of time to change your mind before you die.”

“How do you *know* the Bible is all true? You have to accept that on faith, and I just don’t have your faith.”

Tom hesitated, then said eagerly, “Alan, there are things I could tell you that would make you believe —” He broke off.

“Like what?” Alan was thinking vaguely of a television documentary he’d seen about the Shroud of Turin.

“If I wrote them down and you read them, you’d believe, too.”

Alan’s thoughts turned to flying saucers — but what could they have to do with the Bible? “Well, you just do that,” he said tartly. “Then we’ll see.”

“Forget I ever mentioned it. I can’t tell you.”

He couldn’t tell him? Alan stared at Tom, completely baffled. He crawled back into the tent and slipped inside his sleeping bag. Tom followed suit a short while later. Alan was tired, and having Tom beside him no longer seemed as gratifying after their argument. Soon he dozed off.

That night, Alan dreamed Tom lay backward over the hood of a car, naked. Alan took Tom’s cock in his mouth, but it remained limp. Alan kissed him. Tom’s mouth was open, but it was as if he were dead, his body cold, pale.

* * *

Alan didn’t get in touch with Tom after their sleepover, though he knew Tom and his family were leaving in a week to visit relatives in Arkansas. He wanted to see if, for once, Tom would get in touch with him.

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Four days later, Tom did call. He said he'd left his guitar book at Alan's house and asked if he could pick it up. He arrived panting, having run all the way from his house. "I can only stay a minute," he said. "I'm on my way to baseball practice."

Alan did his best to appear cool. There were many things he wanted to say, but couldn't. "First, you're going to sit down and write something in my yearbook," he told Tom firmly. "You keep promising you will."

"What do you want me to write?"

"Whatever you feel like."

"You'll just say it's shallow." Tom was always accusing Alan of thinking he was shallow.

"No, I won't."

Tom sat on the couch with the yearbook in his lap while Alan played the piano. "You won't like these pieces," Alan said, "but I need to practice."

"How do you know I won't like them?" Tom asked.

Alan only smiled.

After Tom finished scribbling in the yearbook, he said, "I'll write you while I'm away."

"Good."

"What do you want me to write?"

"Whatever you want to, I guess." When Tom asked questions like that, Alan would throw up his hands and say, "Do whatever you want!"

"Well, 'farewell.' I will write."

After Tom left, Alan read what he'd written.

Alan — I thank you for putting up with me. You've added much joy to my life. You're the only one of your type I've ever met before. I'm glad to know that there are people capable of possessing as much love as you do. You are one of the few people I feel like talking about practically anything with. Tom Davis.

Alan had expected Tom to fob him off with the usual yearbook platitudes. "It was great knowing you," "See you next year," "Good luck in the future." He was touched by what he found in their place. He spent a long time musing over these sentences in Tom's awkward handwriting, each like a line in a rich, but difficult poem, the meaning of which he longed to extract. Alan dwelt over the sentences and in some cases the individual words, one of which was "love."

* * *

Tom was out of town for all of July. Shortly before he returned to Napa, Alan left with his parents on a trip to England and was gone for most of

August. Alan's trip to England, his first abroad, was a wonderful dream, a revelation. He visited castles, cathedrals, picturesque villages, stately homes, the sorts of places he'd only read about in books or seen in movies. For half the trip, he and his parents stayed in London, and they went to the theater almost every evening, lapping up everything from *Oedipus Rex* to the latest Pinter play. Seeing how the citizens of another country lived made Alan realize that he and the people he knew were only following one particular way of life among many possibilities. The sound of the language could be different, the way the people dressed, their food, their homes, and, by extension, presumably how they thought about certain matters, their ideas regarding what was right and wrong, moral or immoral. Alan felt his mind and imagination grow by leaps and bounds during the trip. When he returned to Napa, it seemed provincial and prosaic.

A few days after he got back, the school year began. Tenth grade at Napa High School was very different from ninth grade at Redwood Junior High. The high school was much larger, with three junior highs feeding students into it. Alan felt he had more freedom to be himself, since there were so many other people and hardly anyone knew who he was. At the same time, he was rather lost and without his usual bearings. Certain battle lines were sharply drawn now, for one thing, between the budding rednecks and the budding counterculture types. Alan was on the fringe of the counterculture crowd, for lack of more suitable allies. He grew his hair long. He took his brother's old jeans and, in a spirit of combating waste, extended their life by sewing up the holes and frayed spots and covering them with brightly colored patches. People, usually other boys, but sometimes girls, would call him names — "faggot," "fairy," "woman." Alan caught the irony of girls using "woman" as a put-down, but it still wasn't pleasant. Beyond name-calling hovered a threat of something worse, getting beaten up. This never actually happened, but he was always aware that it could.

Alan kept few of his friends from junior high, partly out of choice, partly due to circumstances. Some people, like Carry Runkel, he continued to be friends with because he happened to have them in one of his classes. In ninth grade, Alan had had three classes with Tom. This year, he didn't have any, not one.

Alan ran into Tom once in early October and talked with him for a few minutes. He realized he missed Tom. Tom said he would call, but never did. A month later, when Alan tried calling Tom one night, Mrs. Davis said he was at a football game. A few more weeks passed, and there was a second chance encounter. Tom again told Alan he would call him. Alan didn't believe he would. Then, one evening while Alan sat in the dining room listening to the radio, he did call.

Tom told Alan about a party he'd gone to that Saturday night with a lot of jocks and attractive cheerleaders. One of the girls asked him to dance,

but he said no.

Tom's refusal to dance had once seemed rather quaint. Now it just seemed strange. "What *is* your problem with dancing?" Alan asked.

Tom offered his usual explanation. "It's against my morals. Not dancing so much as the things that tend to go with it. You know — drinking, taking drugs, 'looseness.'"

Alan gave a sarcastic sniff. "I just don't think you *like* to dance. Suppose you were alone in a room with a record player, without any corrupting influences. Would you dance then?"

"Would *you*?" Tom countered, as if this sounded odd to him.

"Sure," Alan said. "Why not?"

In the past, the two had always had so much to say to each other. Now, there were frequent lulls in the conversation. Alan didn't care and would look out at the moon in the cloudy sky; but the pauses seemed to bother Tom. He kept returning to the party. "A lot of the girls there were pretty," he said, "but some were real dogs." He went on in this vein, gleefully describing these girls' defects. Alan grew more and more annoyed. He believed he'd changed a lot in the last half a year — but had Tom? He seemed exactly the same, a ghost from Alan's past. He felt he didn't need anything from Tom anymore and was no longer inclined to be so forgiving. Besides, he was getting sleepy and wanted to go to bed. At last, he said abruptly that he had to go and hung up.

Heading for his room, Alan felt a twinge of guilt. Tom was harmless, after all. He'd been asking too much of him, he decided; he lacked sympathy.

On the day before Christmas vacation, Alan ran into Tom again as he was walking across campus. Tom had grown triangular sideburns, and his hair was longer, though not as long as Alan's. He looked to Alan like a wooden puppet, tall and angular, with long stick limbs. They stood talking for a few minutes about their plans for the holidays. While he liked Tom and found him appealing in some ways, Alan grasped that he wasn't in fact physically attracted to him — he could make this distinction more clearly now. He'd thought at times that he wanted to have sex with Tom, but he realized he'd never quite been able to picture it in his mind's eye, the way he could so easily with Frank Sitwell. He hadn't wanted Tom to be his lover, not really. He'd wanted him to be his friend, his best friend. Maybe Tom had wanted that, too, at one time, and maybe it would have worked out, if some things had been a little different.

The school year passed, bringing more changes. One day toward the end of it, when Alan was walking from Creative Writing to French, across the big lawn in the middle of campus, he saw Tom coming toward him. Alan was alone; Tom was with another boy. They passed fairly close to Alan, but he avoided Tom's eye and didn't speak to him. Something made him not want to, or warned him against it, he couldn't say which. And

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since he wasn't looking at Tom or his friend, he wasn't sure which one of them said in a very low voice, almost a whisper, just as their paths crossed, the one word:

“Faggot.”

Alan walked on. Like two currents coexisting briefly in the same stream, he minded what had just happened, was hurt and upset by it, and at the same time, he didn't particularly care, was actually amused, since, after all, what Tom or his friend had said was perfectly true.

THOMAS D. DRESCHER came to Canada in 1969 and now divides his time between his family home in Rossland, British Columbia and San Francisco, where he currently works. These little pieces are set in Rossland.

A Mountain Year

Thomas D. Drescher

Spring

Swallows sweep across the road —
in the distance,
blue mountains;
in her hands,
white cherry blossoms.

*

Twilight,
and the blush
of apple blossoms —
a kiss.

*

A yellow teacup
rests upon a moss green rock —
splashes of lilies
and drops of poppies
after the long spring rains.

Summer

Wind and dust
on the mountain trail;

a border of blue chicory
gives back the sky.

*

The full summer's moon
passes behind
a ponderosa pine —
at last a chance to sleep!

*

With summer's end
a rock tumbles
down the mountainside;
looking up, we see the bear
scrambling to escape.

Autumn

The cloud mist lifts
from off the branches
of the ponderosa pine,
and still,
the steady rain.

*

Trailing a pine cone
in his fur,
the dog
brings the forest in.

*

Rain in the mountains
spills from the leaves
and drips from the brim
of my old hat.

*

The long slender handle
of the axe,
a hint of winter
on the wind,
and wood chips
by the chopping block —
the snow will come
at last.

Winter

Bodies bent
Beneath the ancient
Weight of snow;
The bearded wisdom
Of the trees.

*

The transit of the moon
leaves frost
on the glass
and me
in my bed.

*

Tracks in the snow;
a dog howls —
left behind.

*

Through the wooden window frame
on this last night of an old year,
an icicle
clinging to the moon.

*

Echoing through the night,
the church bells ring,

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a husky puppy howls,
and a handful of firecrackers
bites the snow —
New Year's Eve
Upon the mountaintop.

BETH L. VIRTANEN, PhD, is Associate Professor and Director of the Department of English at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez where she teaches in the graduate and undergraduate programs. She has published creatively in fiction and poetry, and writes critically on Finnish North American Literature and on writing theory and pedagogy. In addition, she is the founding president of the Finnish North American Literature Association (FinNALA) which can be found online at www.finnala.com.

On the Treadmill in Bethel, Alaska

Beth L. Virtanen

THE EVENING SKY at 3:00 in the afternoon hovered darkly over the frozen earth visible through the picture window as Hilja walked on the treadmill in mid-December. The front of the house faced the road, a hard-pack dirt road that was crested in the middle, presumably to encourage run-off. During the summer that was possible, but in the winter, the road became an ice rink that shed everything, cars, trucks, pedestrians, like they were so much excess water. In Bethel, Alaska, Hilja learned quickly about the use, and more likely uselessness, of rubber-soled boots and woolen coats in the harsh arctic climate. The sun had disappeared, but Hilja continued her walk on the treadmill. Her goal was to walk three miles that afternoon.

Early in the winter, before it was “really” cold according to the Yu’piks, the native population of the region, Hilja had been inspired to address her weight problem by walking to work and to go grocery shopping. She started out from the house in a heavy woven wool coat that reached past her knees, her feet shod in rubber-soled, insulated hiking boots. On her head she wore a woolen hat, and she had a thick scarf wrapped about her throat. As she stepped out the door, closing it firmly behind her and against the stiff wind that blew across the tundra, the tiny hairs in her nostrils froze together and her eyes began to water from the sting in the breeze, causing her eye lashes to freeze together.

As Hilja stepped out from the shelter of the house and toward the roadway, the wind caught her fully in the face, causing her to pull the scarf up over her nose and mouth and her hat down into her eyes to protect them from the excruciating cold. Her pants at the knees froze and felt like card-

board against her skin, and the wind blew right through her coat, leaving her feeling as though she were naked. Less than a dozen feet from the front steps, she turned and retraced her steps into the house, her fingers already becoming numb in her knitted woolen gloves.

Inside again, Hilja leaned against the door for a moment, getting a grip on the magnitude of the cold. She removed the coat, scarf, and hat, and hung them on the hooks next to the door. Next, she clunked her feet together to dislodge the snow from the heavy treads and then sat on a kitchen chair to undo the laces. Back in the bedroom, she pulled out a pair of thick tights to put on first and then she pulled on a pair of silk long johns, top and bottom. Then she put on a turtleneck and pants and on top of the turtleneck a heavy woolen sweater. Finally, she dug in the bottom drawer of the battered dresser that came with the fully furnished rental to find a pair of woolen socks and some silk sock liners.

From the closet, she found her parka with the woolen fringe around the face of the hood and the drawstring about the waist and the bottom edge to tighten up to keep out the cold. Finally, she took up her hat and scarf again, but this time she added heavy insulated mittens over her woolen, knitted gloves. Feeling like a penguin and sure that she walked like one, Hilja went back outside to try to take that walk again. She opened the door and stepped out into the shed, pulling up her hood against the cold. From inside her cocoon, it was difficult to see where the stairs were leading onto the ground, but she managed to feel her way gingerly down the five steps.

Stiffly, she walked past the septic tank protruding from the ground, rejected by the permafrost. It was covered in ugly yellow foam that was supposed to protect it from the cold, but it was permanently heated with an element hard-wired into the fuse box to keep it from freezing. Water pipes protruded from the wall behind the septic tank. Every Thursday, the water truck came and filled the one thousand gallon tank that took up a quarter of the laundry room by itself. That was all the water she was allowed, and the first time Hilja ran out she learned to conserve. She remembered the first time she had visited her colleague Nancy at her home and had been disgusted by the obviously used toilet when Hilja had had to go. The next day, though, Hilja discovered just how far one thousand gallons would go if she ran the water when she brushed her teeth and flushed the toilet every time she peed. The water lasted until Monday, and the tank would not be filled again until Thursday. She had two days in which she could not flush at all, could not do laundry, could not wash the dishes, could not shower. She quit worrying about flushing every time she peed, and she learned how to turn off the water in the shower after she got wet and while she soaped up. She rinsed all at once at the end.

Down the steps and past the car that was permanently plugged in when it was not running, Hilja waddled up the end of the driveway and onto the

road. When she stepped in the icy, frozen tracks left by the car tires, she slipped and made no forward progress, so she stepped in the snow on the edge of the driveway and up onto the road. Carefully, she climbed up the small incline to the center of the road, and began to walk in the direction of the general store, a distance of about three blocks, but she struggled in the first few feet to walk along the crest. Even in her heavily treaded boots, she could find no purchase in the ice, and with each step in the direction she intended to go, she slid another step toward the side of the road. Ten feet later, she found herself struggling to keep from falling into the ditch next to the road where the garbage truck had left the dumpster. A raven stood on the rim of the dumpster staring at her as she struggled.

Like everything else in Alaska, the raven was huge, nearly three feet tall, with a wingspan as broad as Hilja's own outstretched arms. Watching the raven watch her, she had lost her tenuous footing and slid off the road and into the gravel road that led to the dumpster, landing on her back. Unhurt, she lay there for a minute looking past the ruff of fur around her face and up at the grey afternoon sky. It felt good to rest for a moment, but the croak of the raven reminded her that it was not the best thing to lie about in the roadway in the bitter cold, but at least her eyes were not frozen shut, nor were her nasal hairs fused together. The cold, though, made her windproof parka crackle as though it would break, as though it would shatter into hundreds of little pieces.

Hilja laughed to herself as she remembered her sense of vulnerability as she lay there on the ground. Outside on the frozen lake, she could see the lights from snowmobiles as they crossed the frozen surface. She increased the speed of the treadmill and drifted back into thought about her first encounter with a raven.

As she struggled to her feet, she felt the judgmental eyes of the raven upon her as though it might be wishing her to lie there, sleep, and forget to wake. "You go on, you," she muttered to it. "I'm not so wimpy that I can't stand a little cold." Seriously doubting her ability to walk the three blocks to the store, she stumbled back up the side of the road, her feet sometimes slipping and sometimes holding their grip, and turned back to retrace the twenty-five yards to the silver Toyota that she had had flown in by Airborne Express when she first came to Bethel. In Anchorage, she had had a battery blanket installed as well as engine block and oil pan heaters.

I should probably get a heater for myself, she thought, maybe those electric socks. She chuckled to herself as she tried to operate the door handle of the car with her big mittened hand. Her mitt was so big that when she had it wedged into the small depression for fingers, her fingers didn't come in contact with anything to pull against. The top of her mitt simply bent over when she pulled, doing absolutely nothing to open the door. She thought about taking her mitten off, but nixed the idea quickly and maneuvered her thumb under the door handle and pried it up and

open. The door groaned as she opened it. Like a lump, she landed in the driver's seat and fumbled for the keys zipped safely in her pocket. This time she had to remove the outer mitten to get her gloved hand into her pocket to free the keys.

She pumped the gas pedal down to the floor and let it off. Then she held in the clutch and turned over the engine. A low rrrrrr came from under the hood, a rrrrr noise that had no confidence or energy. Leaning over the steering wheel as though it might help the engine to start, Hilja held the key in the start position, and the rrrr took on a little life. There was a stutter, a small spark, and the engine coughed to life while Hilja gently feathered her foot on the gas pedal. Too much and it would drown, and too little and it would starve. After a few moments, the engine idled smoothly while the window frosted on the inside from Hilja's breath.

Sitting back in the seat, Hilja pulled her mitten back over her glove and waited for the car to warm. No sense in putting on the heater and blowing the cold air about. In the meantime, she observed palm trees etch themselves into the frost on her window and pondered her decision to come to Alaska in the first place. She remembered her interview in early May of that year, how sure she was that she would be fine there in Bethel in spite of the fact that all of the buildings rested on stilts to keep them from the permafrost and in spite of the fact that the academic campus of the college was a total of three elongated buildings connected by long, cold hallways, and that the dorm and other buildings were connected to the academic campus via a tangle of boardwalks on stilts. In May when things were thawing out, it seemed quaint and appealing with the allure of spring.

Again increasing the speed of the treadmill, Hilja reflected on the options she had had when she had graduated — none of them had been very good. At that time, there had been a glut of professors of English on the market, so job opportunities were few and far between. After graduation, Hilja had not wanted to hang around campus without a job, as many of her friends had done, so she made an effort to find positive aspects about the openings she did find. The job in Bethel had appeared to have some positive attributes. She just hadn't been aware of how silent the world could be in a place so far away from everyone she knew, but also a place where everyone else seemed busy with their own lives, too busy to notice that she was there alone.

It wasn't the campus that had attracted her, though; it had been the students and the slight smell of fish in the air. During the interview, she had gone to the cafeteria to eat with the students and faculty, and the whole place had a smell of smoked and dried fish, a smell that was connected to her own youth and the smoke houses used by the Finns to cure fish, a flavor preference that continued even into Hilja's generation. There was also something else, perhaps a kinship with the almond-eyed Yu'pik students who resembled the black Finns, or Lapps, in Hilja's own family

tree. In the dining hall, the young Yu'pik girls wore traditional tops over their jeans, a longish tunic top with a little ruffled skirt at the bottom. Hilja liked their ease with things of their own culture, the comfort with which they were themselves. She couldn't say the same for the non-Yu'piks who wore native clothing. They seemed out of place.

The name of the Yu'pik students fascinated her, Ishmael, Ruth, Thomas; all the students also had Yu'pik names that Hilja never learned to say no matter how hard she tried. Eventually, she ended up laughing with her students about her futile efforts. She also learned about their lives: Janet was given by her parents, who had had fourteen children, to an aunt who was barren; Matthew lost a brother in a huffing incident when he had sprayed Scotch Guard in a baggy and held it to his nose to get a rush; and Peter was imprisoned for shooting up his high school in a fit of rage and alienation. Janet shared other stories in addition to the one about being given away. She talked about fish camp in the summer when all of her village fished together and preserved the food to sustain them during the winter. Ishmael shared the story of learning how to hunt seals with his father and how he thanked them for giving up their lives so he and his family could grow up to be healthy. George, at nineteen, talked about his wife and young son and how his son would follow in his footsteps into college to become a fisheries biologist.

In the hallways, sisters and brothers of students would sometimes sit on the floor and carve works of art from ivory and wood. They would bring with them treasures they had made during the long winter months. Hilja always wished she was carrying cash when, on unscheduled days, they would clutter the hallways with their wares to the point that she had to step around them on the way to class. Sometimes, the empty eyes that looked back at her — eyes made empty by drug abuse or hard living — made her glad she did not have money with her to spend on the beautiful objects of art because she did not want to compound the problems they were already facing. Sometimes, the imploring in the deep brown eyes would make her cry to herself because she hadn't taken any money with her to work, for she understood their need. She was saddened by the thought that the families of the students she taught were so badly in need they had to practically give away what should have gotten them much more money. It was small consolation to know that she didn't take advantage of them when they were in so much need; however, it hurt her to know she couldn't do anything to make their lives easier.

Hilja refused to take money with her to school on principle. She brought her lunch from home and ate it in her office, or else she went across the hall to eat with her colleagues, Sarah and Omar, who gave courses in the Yu'pik language. Both were from a small village on the coast and both had attended the University of Alaska at Anchorage. They were employed as instructors, not as professors, because neither possessed a master's

degree, never mind the fact that there was no master's degree program in Yu'pik language anywhere in the world where they could acquire such a degree. Hilja didn't like the rules, but those were the rules, like them or not.

Dripping with sweat, Hilja glanced at the display on the treadmill. Two miles. She smiled. Maybe she would be in shape by spring. The winter and the darkness stretched before her interminably. She let her mind wander back to her interrupted memories about her first walk to the store. She felt that the memory was important, somehow defining, but one she didn't fully understand.

While she sat in the car with the engine idling, she had thought about what had brought her to that place. Suddenly, Hilja had been jolted from her memories by a black raven flying past the windshield. She noticed that the engine had warmed and that two small clear patches had appeared just above the vents of the dashboard. She turned the fan to full speed, and slowly the clear patches spread toward the roof. Carefully, she backed out of the driveway, accelerating as the car approached the incline leading up to the hard-pack dirt road that was slick with ice. She needed speed to back up onto the roadway. Fortunately, the bare, scrubby trees that lined the road had no leaves that blocked the view, and Hilja could see that the road was clear of traffic. In one smooth movement, she maneuvered the car onto the road and faced in the direction of the store.

In the two minutes it took Hilja to drive to the store, the car windshield cleared and she could see without any trouble. But the side windows remained painted with white palm trees and wild swirling patterns. In the store, Hilja stood a head taller than most of the patrons who were native Alaskans about her age, many of them the parents of her students. Occasionally, she would hear "hi teacher" from one student or another, but mostly they glanced at her and smiled shyly. Hilja smiled back at them and continued with her shopping, choosing to buy items that were already hydrated rather than having to buy water to lug home to reconstitute something that was dehydrated. She tried to find fresh vegetables, but that was a challenge. In the months she had been in Bethel, she had eaten more broccoli than she had in her entire life; it seemed to be the only green vegetable that was regularly available. Finally, she walked past the meat aisle to observe the steaks. It was twelve dollars for a New York strip and sixteen for a porterhouse. Hilja continued on to the ground beef. Tacos sounded good. She had found a tomato that was not too shriveled up. Lettuce was three dollars a head, but she thought it was worth the price and much less an extravagance than a steak would have been. Next week, she thought, when I get paid, it will be steak night at my house.

At the checkout, she made a mental note to order wine from Anchorage in the morning so it would be delivered by Airborne Express in time to arrive by payday so she could really enjoy her steak. That would be a real

luxury. On the way out of the store, she exited through the vestibule where a large group of people stood talking and jostling about to make room for shoppers coming and going. At first Hilja had wondered why they chose to gather there, but then it occurred to her that they each had a little flask under their coats and that the entryway to the general store served as a makeshift watering hole in the dry town of Bethel.

In the parking lot, Hilja located her car which was still running. Even after all the time spent idling in the parking lot, there was no improvement in the layers of frost on the side windows. The rear window was clear only because of the defroster she had left on while she had been in the store. She opened the back door and deposited her bags on the seat. Then she pushed the grocery cart back up the ramp into the entryway of the store where the locals were blithely sharing one another's company.

Back at the house, Hilja took the groceries into the kitchen and then returned outside to plug in the car, both the battery blanket and the engine and oil pan heaters, so that it would start in the morning so she could get to work. In the house again, Hilja struggled out of her outerwear and then put away the groceries. Finally, she went to the bedroom to change out of her layers of clothing. She pulled on long-legged jogging pants and a sweatshirt and limbered up before her evening jog/walk on the treadmill. At first she had placed the treadmill facing the television, but one Sunday she had almost fallen off because she had become too enthralled with a football game. She had executed a sympathy stretch to help a player over the line into the end zone and had nearly toppled onto the floor. After that, she had moved the treadmill so she could look out over the frozen lake. She discovered what happened every day in Bethel.

Across the lake, she could see the garbage truck come and empty the dumpster if she was home on Monday mornings. On weekdays, the UPS driver in his brown truck delivered packages. On Wednesdays and Saturdays, the hovercraft delivered mail up and down the river; Hilja could glimpse it as it passed near the house and just beyond the lake. When the river was breaking up or freezing up in the spring or fall, she saw the mail plane flying past to deliver the mail instead of the hovercraft that traveled across the smooth surface of the Kuskokwim River. In the evenings, she saw the comings and goings of neighbors. During the summer, she had watched a neighbor bend over in his garden to tend his rapidly growing vegetables. The quality of the vegetables in his garden made Hilja think twice about starting a garden of her own. In the summer, she also saw mothers going shopping on their ATVs, mostly four-wheelers, but occasionally a three-wheeler. Sometimes the mothers were alone, but nearly always they had at least two children riding with them. In winter, Hilja watched families en route to the grocery store on snowmobiles, whole families of five or six people on one sled, or three on a sled and three pulled behind on a toboggan.

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Now in the early winter, dogsled teams were beginning to train in preparation for the Iditarod. Each evening, Hilja watched seasoned dog teams track across the lake with their trainers standing on one runner and pumping with their other foot. She saw teams learning to follow commands while the trainer walked behind the sled, sometimes jogging and sometimes walking quickly. Today as she jogged, and she jogged very slowly, the display showed two and a half miles; on the lake, she saw a dog sled go by without a trainer. The dogs trotted in an orderly fashion all in a line, but no trainer followed. While she jogged, Hilja kept her eyes trained on the distance. Two minutes passed; then ten went by. Finally, after twenty minutes, a young man ran past at a quick jog. He had the appearance of having kept up that pace for quite a while, and his determination made it clear that he would continue to keep it up. Clumsily, a raven landed on the porch rail.

Hilja smiled and turned off the treadmill. She had completed her three miles, and now it was time for a taco and a beer. There was little else to do in the winter, and Hilja had no interest in venturing outside beyond what was required of her in terms of work and attending to necessities. She turned on the television and, except for the game, the evening stretched silently before her. Her world ached solitude.

R.W. MEYER is a Vancouver poet. His most recent book is *Being Here* (Lyre Press, 2004). His reviews and poetry have previously appeared in *The New Orphic Review* (Vol. 9, No. 1, 2006).

Anabasis (II)

R.W. Meyer

My dear Abraham, as the speed of light
becomes the speed of darkness,
I weep intransitively

For the dancing mad cows of the world
doing their unnatural jigs now that they are cannibals
eating the adulterated grains of high-tech fiddlers cashing in,

For thalidomide babies, the premature
heart attacks and cancers of pharmaceuticals
sold in rainbow-colored boxes to statistics
who are expendable
within certain margins
even if they are us,

For whales that once calved in our desert places
in peaceful bays—you can still find their bones
far inland—whales now swimming in cesspool seas
where we have shat out mercury and PCBs,
the planet's prehistoric oil and other razor blades.

Abraham, I fear soon I will not weep at all,

For the cougar's speed, and the deer's,
the wild horse, wolf, pig and boar,
the raven and the owl, hawk and pine snake,
the whole ark of our blessing, going
the way of the desert hen, the mad duck,

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mad goose, mad dog, and madman,

For all the going going gone
and we who are next—I am sure—
like the one string of the guitar which is all strings
the key that is broken
accompanied by drumbeats
of collateral damage and friendly fire.

Abraham, I no longer weep;
for we are the paid hands
of a head not our own.

As envy is the sweat of the rattle snake
and lust is the sweat of the rattle snake,
so gluttony is the sweat of the rattle snake
and sloth the sweat of the rattle snake;
as anger is the sweat of the rattle snake,
so greed is the mouth of the rattle snake
and pride the sex of the rattle snake,

So our women murder their children,
so our men murder their children,
so our children murder each other
now that innocent women have been
and been made to feel guilty,
now that innocent men have been
and been made to feel guilty,
now that innocent children have been
and been made to feel guilty,
and everyone is just another digit
in the great formula of grandiose calculators.

Abraham, I weep intransitively, nonetheless.

For where is justice on the benches of graft?
Promoting child pornography? Inebriated
murderers? The legislation by committee
of people within acceptable margins of death?
And cabinet privilege legislating crime?

And where is prudence? Gone out
the last exit of government surpluses,
mass credit and mass debt,

the mass bribe?

And where is fortitude? In the ahistorical minds
of moral relativists deliberately oblivious,
making it all easier?

And where is temperance? Not in the league
or the academy with their social promotions,
their capitulations to mediocrity
which like the imported prickly pear
wipes out native vegetation and intelligence,
that heartless dodo.

I weep, Abraham, for we are still waiting
for the first man—not this bevy of hucksters
lording it and dotting their coms
for us to learn all over again
what we have already learned over again.
But why wait? Why not be the man?
For right, Abraham, is always the *ultimo ratio*
and *noblesse oblige*, whatever the sex.
Though giants cultivate the small, the mean mean,
it is erect biography transcends all time.

For where now is faith? Where hope and charity?

On the streets of the ghetto where I live,
I bear witness to the slow suicide
of the walking wounded and have learned
the people of the destroyed land become
without food to eat permanent customers,
distractions to themselves

Abraham, I weep intransitively.

I left the city where I was born
in a caravan of one, for the earth there
was already white with the salt of progress
and no roots would hold in that terrain.
I soon learned the wounded are a dedicated people
and become what they despise: once good
and malleable, sophisticates in large
and sophists in small,
they are predicated on revenge.

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Their vision lacking, hind sight is blind sight;
their political correctness thought control;
theirs is the fascism of liberals gone amuck
in a tolerance that promotes the polymorphous
perverse, including the plague that decimates millions
now as it did antiquities.

Abraham, I left the city where I was born,
where the age of great statesmen was gone,
and cowards thrived on polite reprisals
no less devastated. But are petty partisans
beyond reproach? Do those who tow
the line of line men—so quick to condemn,
accuse and paint with their broad, discounting brushes—
murder poets of non-conformist verse?
Would that the deaf listened. Would that
they learn to weep as I weep
under the hobnailed boot of educated ignorance.

Abraham, at moonrise the sky waxes turquoise,
waned indigo, and I learn to vary
my heartbeat like the hare and falcon
according to the temperature, even though
dead heat depends upon the cold dead
to feel anything clearly. Though the dippers
keep ladling ladling ladling tar,
Cassiopeia dawns in the east tonight
as the earth turns to that conjunction
in harvest always.

Abraham, I have entertained princes over coffee;
I have held the hand of and kissed a princess
and learned to play, I who was never a child:
now I kiss the right shoulders of their fathers
whose names I forget with regret with regret.

But a man divided against himself cannot stand;
Nor can a civilization.
No matter the pay. Nor are the best fighters martyrs
but those are who left in life wage life.
Our innate sense of right and wrong wrongs us
only if we do not listen and our hopes die
like the hopes of the dead, once and finally.

Abraham, I weep intransitively and feel

the only ideas are those of the mentally ill
and other shipwrecks in this desert. Abraham, I feel
that I shall never be glad again.

My memory is gasoline in a broken bottle
in a wet paper bag over a fire,
and I am red as these sands, a scab
picked, ground fine and blown by the wind,
with troughs in deep shadow, crests spawning
dust like foam in the light.

But clearly, in this age, illness is
the only sign of health, the only clue,
though my health be the butt of medical insult.
Will I too, after cardiac arrest, become wise
or become an actor? Will I have the strength?
The will? The depravity? It is not ambition
but love, Abraham, should be
made of sterner stuff.

Therefore, Abraham, I knew a man once
loved a woman and that woman that man,
and that is all I know.

How strange. How rare.

How strangely common to know otherwise
the need to know and prefer it,
bleak and nasty, as the new Babylon
wrapped in smoke like a new dark age,
like a new old voice in a cloud saying,
“Every second a sucker dies
ten million million are born to take his place.”

Therefore, Abraham, is the earth alive
with minute detail, and I weep intransitively
except here in this refuge, this white desert of a page,
for love
can be too much as not enough
when all feel this way. And most
feel this way to calluses on their finger tips,
and broken nails are bitten
to the dawning moons
as the procession of slow suicides
and walking wounded lurch side to side

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on a national scale.

But Abraham, sometimes I think
those who live to seize the day
are already a slave to it.
Would that I could listen to
the soft petitions of desert hens
and learned men instead of all this
paid extravagance that enslaves:
Like glass I always want
the light to shine through.

Abraham, Abraham, done is the time of weeping.

And with what joy I close the door on the world
And prepare for the worst the covenant declares
As the new Babylon invades the old.

KAREN MALLEY earned a BA in English literature from McGill University and an MFA from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Her stories have appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Bottomfish Magazine*, *The Sonora Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Arkansas Review*, and *Antigonish Review*. She has completed two collections of short stories and a novel and is currently working on a second novel. She lives in Ashfield, Massachusetts.

Knotweed

Karen Malley

HERE'S HOW TO dig Japanese knotweed: First, you spy the red shoot, narrow your eyes at it, and position the shovel a few inches away from the red shoot. Sweat rolls down your temples. Don't stop to wipe it away; shake your head like a dog instead. You've been out in the garden digging knotweed all morning. The backs of your hands are starting to burn, and the back of your neck, and the backs of your ears, seared by those killer UV rays so much in the news lately. You tell yourself you should stop soon. You hesitate, one foot over the shovel, evaluating your position. You must capture as much of the root as possible. You jump on the shovel. You jump on it again. You hit a rock, reposition the shovel, and jump on it again, again, and again. You pry the shovel backwards, putting your whole weight into it. The root moans and snaps. You yank it out and beat it against the ground.

* * *

I'm thinking about digging knotweed this afternoon, as I walk to the Moose Lodge, because just before I left the house, I uncovered a knotweed root the size of my forearm. It's unusual for me to go to the Lodge in daylight, but today is the Installation of New Officers. I'm being installed as Prelate, whose duties consist of visiting the sick, the injured, the disabled, the housebound, the dying, the bereaved, and so on. My old friend Buffett talked me into running for Prelate because, I think, he wants it to be me who visits him when his time comes, though he knows — I've told him again and again — I'd visit him anyway.

There's a whole installation ceremony, but I don't mind. You can't have too much ceremony, in my opinion. The knotweed digging has something of the ceremonious about it. I have lived in my house, and with the knot-

weed, for four years. My wife has been dead for four years and three months. After she died, I vacated our little apartment and bought this house with our savings, because I thought what I needed was a bigger place with a garden. Every April, the red knotweed claws appear at the surface of the garden. They lay low for a couple of weeks, and then within hours, it seems, claw their way out and sprout leaves. After a few weeks, they are two to three feet tall; by midsummer, taller than the back fence; and once August rolls around, have grown hollow trunks the size of my forearm. Undeniable, now, victorious, they cast a solid shadow over the barren beds, and all I can do is wait for winter to lay waste to them.

I learned to dig the knotweed almost immediately upon moving in. I discovered that there are a number of parent plants with root balls the size of a human head. These plants send out offspring in horizontal directions, to explore and colonize. Then those plants sprout, take root, and send out more, so that each individual plant is connected, through a network of thick, tough roots, to all of the other plants. Therefore digging deep is crucial, though sometimes it's impossible to dig deep enough, as it was impossible this morning, and the root has to be left where it is. Once I have got a root, or a piece of one, I place it in the wheelbarrow. I always leave them in the wheelbarrow for a week or so, because if you leave them in contact with the soil they creep back where they seem to think they belong and burrow back down into the ground. They aim to survive. They aim to continue being what they are. They prefer growing to rotting. Don't we all. But I'm going to kill them.

Once, I was having coffee with a German friend in a French café, or an Italian or a Spanish café, I can't remember. This was twenty years ago. I was a fool. It didn't matter what country I was in. I was a dictator in the land of my own groundless disenchantment. I squashed some ants crawling around the rim of the sugar bowl with my spoon and secreted the carcasses in a napkin. My friend watched the procedure quietly, then looked me in the eye and quoted a French philosopher: *On choisit ce qu'on tue*. One chooses what one kills. I nodded wisely, then, but I was secretly ashamed, both for killing the ants and for not reading more French philosophy.

Would she say the same today, if she were to witness the daily knotweed slaughter carried out in my backyard? Probably, and I haven't read any more French philosophy than I had that day in the café, but now I'm not ashamed for having chosen to kill knotweed with such persistent savagery. Four years of digging up root balls, flat gray insects spilling from their orifices, has sapped me of all contrition.

It's a bright and lovely day, too early in the spring to get mean and hot in the afternoon. The sidewalk is mine. A light spring breeze cools my hot face. I am pleasantly dizzy. Thoughts hover over the sidewalk ahead, waiting for me to reach them. Recalling the German, I decide to take a shot at

waxing philosophical. Life consists of constant movement from ceremony to ceremony, I suggest coolly to myself. Between the ceremonies are only murk, disorientation, and shivering solitude. The silly grimness of the thought makes me smile. I drop philosophy behind me on the sidewalk and sink into a pleasant blankness.

Passing Cupid's, the local porn shop, I cross paths with Michael from the group home. He's so thin and fragile, yet he persists, he persists. As always, he stops and salutes me. I salute him back and he's gone.

I get to the Lodge and let myself in. I'm early. Everyone is behind the partition in the bar. The hall has been arranged for the ceremony. A row of chairs for the new officers faces the podium from the dance floor. To the left and right of that row, facing each other across the dance floor, are two wooden stands. Each one holds a rectangular marble brick with the letters L.O.O.M. — Loyal Order of the Moose — engraved on the front. Under each brick is a crimson velvet scarf with gold fringe. At each stand is a chair. I believe the one on the far side in the Prelate's station. Buffett will lead me to it after I have taken the Prelate's vow. Then I witness the rest of the officers' vows. Vows, vows, vows. I vowed to love my wife forever, beyond death, as I do still love her. I vowed to eradicate knotweed from my yard. Forty years ago at age ten, I took a vow of friendship with my friend Buffett, who was also ten. Our vow was that if one of us went to jail, ran away, or joined the army, the other would come too.

We did none of those things. After we graduated from high school, I backpacked around Europe alone and Buffett took a job at the Tap and Die. I returned after twenty-two months. I thought vaguely about going to college, but before I could get a grip on any specific plans Buffett got me a job at the Tap and Die too. I didn't hate it, and the money was good enough. We joined the Lodge. We lived in the same single-room occupancy house on Maple Street. Buffett still says I broke our vow by going to Europe, but I say no. I say the proof is, here we both still are.

My face is hot, possibly sunburned, yet the heat seems to come from inside my head. I feel like a flame. If there were a gas leak, my entrance would blow the Lodge to pieces, killing us all. Then that conniving knotweed would reclaim the garden, and there would be nobody to visit the sick. There would be no sick left to visit.

I pat my face, but my palms are hot, too, from rubbing against the shovel handle all those hours, I guess. They are hard and rough with calluses. They feel like someone else's hands.

I go to the men's room. The naked fluorescent light hisses and spits. I turn on the tap and splash my face. There are no paper towels. I stand at the mirror with water dripping down my face and off my chin. In comes Buffett, looking uncanny in an oversized pin-striped double-breasted suit that I'm sure is borrowed. He stares at my reflection, swiveling his head as he passes, and enters a stall. He shuts the door. His belt jingles, his

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zipper buzzes, and his pants fall to the floor. He hums a little. Then he greets me.

“Hey.”

“Hey, Buffett.”

“How’s things?”

“Oh, fine, good. You?”

“Same shit different day.”

“I hear that.”

“You been to the beach?”

“The beach?”

“You’re red.”

“Oh, no, nope, just out in the garden.”

“Oh, huh.”

He emerges more quickly than I’d expected and without flushing. I wonder if he really had to go. He often follows me places and pretends to have some business there.

“Hey, are you gonna flush?”

He goes back in and flushes. His gaunt hopeful face joins mine at the mirror. My face has begun to dry. I want to splash it again, after he leaves, but he just stands there looking.

“You ready for the proceedings?” he asks me.

“Oh, sure.”

“Nervous?”

“Oh, I figure we’re among friends, you know?”

My face radiates. Buffett starts towards the door.

“Not washing your hands?”

He comes back and washes his hands. I watch. His hands look larger than life. They wrestle, declare a draw. He finishes with the soap, rinses, dries his hands on his pants. Then he staggers to the door. He has to steady himself against the wall. Buffett was recently diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. It affects his coordination, causes him constant pain in his legs, and makes him tire easily. Eventually he will probably lose his eyesight, his speech, and the use of his limbs. He believes the MS is punishment for his sins.

Just last month the Tap and Die fired Buffett, because the shop manager saw him stagger and fall over a crate. He thought Buffett was drunk, and sent him home. I’m Buffett’s foreman, so I tried to intervene on his behalf. I told the old man it was the MS that made him stagger like that, and that Buffett was starting his injections soon, and that maybe then he could handle a desk job. But Buffett got his termination letter a week later. I told him to sue the bastards, but he said no. And that’s when he said the MS is his punishment for his sins. There’s no talking a man out of an idea like that.

He waves at me in the mirror as he leaves. I salute him. I’m pretty sure

I've never saluted Buffett before. I wonder if he's reminding me of Michael from the group home. I wonder if it's the MS that's making that happen. I don't want to pity Buffett the way I pity Michael. Pity is part disdain. To disdain Buffett, friend of a lifetime, forgiver of trespasses, is the real sin.

"Hey, nice suit, Buffett," I say as he opens the door. "Very slick."

"It's my brother's. The bastard let me borrow it."

He clamps his hands on the lapels.

"Puts me in the mood to behave myself."

The door swings shut behind him. The light spits nastily. My hair has fallen over my forehead. I turn the tap on again. I splash my face and wipe the water up onto my hair to smooth it back. I look in the mirror. I look like I'm scared of something. I hope the burning fades before the ceremony starts. I leave the men's room without letting my face dry. I won't be able to cool it off again until after the ceremony. I vow to put my mind to other things, because relief only comes once you stop waiting for it, although it doesn't always come.

I poke my head past the partition and into the bar. Buffett is seated two seats away from Charlene. Xiao-Ling is her name, but the Lodge calls her Charlene. Her presence here continues to astound me, though she joined almost a year ago. She's an exiled Chinese poet. She is a friendly and quiet soul whom the Lodge has evaluated, and perversely, being infamous in town for its collection of bigots, found acceptable. Unstupefied by alcohol, the Ladies of the Moose are more tolerant than the men.

I long to talk to Xiao-Ling, and to learn about her life. Once I did ask her about her homeland. She said, "I experience many violent bad thing in Chinese cultural revolution." I waited for a follow-up, but she only looked in the mirror behind the bar, keeping tabs on herself.

My insides jump like this whenever I see her. I forget she exists until she appears in front of me again. Today, I have the determination of a knotweed sprout and my mind pushes forward at a horizontal. I vow to converse with Xiao-Ling. I vow to say something memorable to her, something so memorable that she will have no choice but to say something memorable back to me. And that will be just the beginning.

"Hello, Xiao-Ling."

She turns, glances at me, turns away, smiles at me in the mirror.

"Hello there. Long time no see."

"It hasn't been that long," I say.

"Yeah, I know. I just learn expression 'long time no see.' I try it out."

"Oh, good. Are you studying English, then?"

"Just a little. I can't afford college class. They teach second language English at downtown library."

"Oh, good."

She nods. She looks into the eye of her drink. She steps back inside of herself and begins to close the door.

“You have good English.”

“You are a liar.”

“Better than my Chinese, ha.”

“Americans impossible to learn Chinese. Don’t even bother try.”

A curse shoots our way from the end of the bar. Guy Weatherly is over there playing Keno. He lost again. Keno is a losing game for him, which makes him hopeful in a desperate kind of way. He punches the Keno machine. Someone ought to tell him the machine is as innocent as he is. I think of the knotweed roots drying in the wheelbarrow. Guy curses again. His voice burns through the space between us. The lights flicker overhead.

“For shit!” he says.

He has drawn Xiao-Ling’s attention, along with everyone else’s. She turns her head and watches Phil the bartender ease his way down towards Guy. Guy calms down. Phil is the only one who can do it. Xiao-Ling’s head returns to center.

“Isn’t it funny for a bartender’s name to be Phil?” I say.

“Why?”

“Phil, like fill. He fills your glass.”

“Ohhh, I get it, good one.”

“You’re a liar.”

“Good joke for break ice. You want to break ice. You want conversation with Xiao-Ling.”

I don’t answer. I hadn’t expected so many words out of her, let alone for her to speak with such stunning directness.

“You want conversation with Xiao-Ling because Xiao-Ling Chinese. Chinese mysterious. I get it. I am young but I have lived a lot of life. I have wisdom as old grandmother.”

“I actually do want conversation with Xiao-Ling,” I say. “I freely admit that.”

My words are leaden. My head has begun to hurt. The burning gathers behind my eyes.

“Okay, fine. I have the mood for conversation. Today is my birthday. Good day for talking.”

“Happy birthday.”

“What you want to know? I not tell you everything.”

Buffett grabs me by the shoulders and shakes.

“You ready, buddy? Ready to take your vow?”

Xiao-Ling swims away. My head aches. It’s too late. My neck aches. She’s gone. Damn Buffett. She might as well be back in China. Damn Buffett. Damn him three times for good measure. But he’s right. They are ready for me. I slide off the stool and follow him around the partition and into the hall. He takes my arm and leads me to the row of chairs facing the podium. Each has an index card with a different name printed on it. With-

out unlinking our arms, Buffett leans down to read each one, leaning down close to the cards, so that I have to lean down with him. It could be his vision's starting to go.

"That's you: Prelate."

He hands me the card and releases me.

"Go ahead, sit down."

I sit down. He stands beside me with his hands in the pockets of his suit. He rocks back on his heels, an old habit.

"Careful not to lose your balance."

I'm ashamed of what I just said. It hurts his pride, and I am warning him only to avoid the embarrassment of him falling at my feet. His weakness is my weakness. His failure, my failure. I'm not a selfless man. Far from it. Buffett is, though, and that's the whole shame of the situation.

The other new officers shyly approach their chairs. Unlike myself they seem to know already where they belong. They don't sit down. They say things to each other. The new Governor, Emmett Ross, strides to his place in front of us and sits. His broad back strains the stitching on that burgundy polyester blazer of his. His purple neck wants out of that tight shirt collar. Nothing seems to fit anybody today.

As soon as Emmett Ross is seated, the others sit, holding their pot bellies in their laps. I've been sitting the whole time. I wonder if there is a rule that the incoming officers must stand until the incoming governor is seated. If so, Buffett would know about it. He wouldn't have seated me if such a rule existed. Or maybe he would have. Maybe he is looking to make a fool of me. I have never had such a thought about Buffett. It spins in my head. I shut my eyes, and the room spins around me. I can feel the ceiling lowering. I lean forward and put my head in my hands.

There is a pressure on my back between my shoulder blades. I sit up. Rory McGraw, the incoming Junior Governor — a nice enough guy, though I don't much know him — has put his hand there. He's just holding it there.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm not at my best."

"Can you make it through the ceremony?"

"I'm dizzy."

"Put your head between your knees."

I do. I sit there partially folded.

"Take deep breaths."

I take deep breaths. Buffett arrives and flips me back to a seated position.

"Are you sick?"

"Yes."

"Are you gonna get through the proceedings?"

"Yes."

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“You sure?”

“Yes.”

I should never have walked here. I think of Michael from the group home. I will walk back as slowly as him, and people passing by in cars will feel sorry for me.

“I ran into Michael from the group home this morning,” I tell Buffett, to keep him from saying “proceedings” again.

“Yeah, how’s he?”

“Same as usual.”

“Why you’re telling me that now, I don’t know.”

“Me neither.”

The microphone sings. Frank Keegan, the soon-to-be-former governor, is fooling with it up at the podium. Buffett slaps me on the back.

“You’re gonna be okay then,” he says. “Short and sweet.”

He’s telling, not asking, so I don’t answer.

Throughout the ceremony, Rory McGraw and Vince Vargas, the incoming Treasurer, prop me up whenever I start to sway. I clench my teeth against the cold. After each new officer takes his vow and Frank Keegan hangs his badge around his neck, Buffett is asked to escort him to his station. Instead of walking directly to the station, Buffett promenades each officer in a circle around the whole set-up before stopping at a station. Martin Schaefer mutters, “What the Christ?” Frank Keegan hears him and says, into the mike, “Looks like Buffett’s taking the scenic route.” Everyone laughs. We indulge him. I’m proud of him, in fact, for thinking this up.

As for myself, I fear falling, but when my name is called, Rory and Vince help me stand up. Buffett takes my arm and leads me to the masking tape X in front of the podium. I watch Frank Keegan’s chin rock on its hinges. I walk the gravel path that is his voice. It’s a long haul. He stops once to clear his throat. I am exasperated, desperate for an end to it. When he stops at last I just say, “I do.”

“I’ll just bring you straight there,” Buffett says in my ear as we link arms. We walk to the Prelate’s station, dragging behind us our shared past for everyone to see.

I pass out in the back seat of Buffett’s car while he drives me home. He wakes me up at the house and helps me get to the front door. He even takes my keys from me and unlocks it. He leads me to the bedroom. I fall on the bed, the covers fold themselves around me, and sleep slugs me between the eyes.

I was sick a week. The knotweed took advantage of it. I could taste it growing. There was a thunderstorm in the middle of the night, one night. I got out of bed to watch the knotweed dance in the rain. It waved mockingly at me, blowing me kisses, so I yelled at it out the window: “Weed! Weed! Weed!” The thunder batted my voice around for the fun of it. I

coughed and stopped yelling. My pillow-top mattress swung up behind me then and knocked me in the back of the legs. It spun back to the bed with me on it. I dragged the covers up to my chin. Outside the knotweed shrieked in ecstasy. I had a few thoughts before I was pulled under by the throbbing in my head. Who knows what they had to do with.

Finally, I broke the surface. I bade good-bye to the bed, showered, and dressed. I went out back. The knotweed shoots were all between six and eight inches tall. They surrounded the shovel as if about to carry it away. I picked it up and leaned it against the shed. I was still weak and insane around the edges. Now was not a time to dig knotweed. Now was a time to gather my strength. First, eat. Second, determine what day it was. Third, call the Lodge.

I did those three things, and was thus led to this beginning right here, which has me driving to the Lodge for my first meeting as Prelate. I'm thinking of Xiao-Ling and my unasked question from the day of the Installation. If she is there, I will ask it this time, though I don't know yet what it will be. There are always questions. I can't really help thinking them up. Then, I will set out getting Xiao-Ling to love me, which is not an unreasonable thing to want, although I tell myself I'm not holding my breath about it.

I arrive early again. Buffett's at the door. He was installed as Sergeant at Arms. Sergeant at Arms stands guard at meetings. He waits.

"Here for the meeting?"

I nod.

"You feeling okay? After last week?"

"Yeah."

"I was sick too."

"What happened to you?"

"My blood got thick."

"That's not good."

"They threw me in the hospital. I could have had a stroke. That's what they told me. At least you were home. The nurses are about ready to go on strike. They have their claws out."

"There are lawn signs out about it."

"There's no good reason. Nurses get paid a decent wage. Maybe I'll become a nurse. It's an easy life."

"I don't know about that, Buffett."

"I gotta be rehabilitated."

"Yeah, sure, but you have to think it through."

"Let's change the subject. It's no point talking about it to someone like you."

"Okay."

"Anyway, why not?"

"Why not what?"

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“Why not me be a nurse?”

“I thought we were changing the subject.”

“You just don’t get it. The meeting’s about to start.”

I don’t know why he’s sore. I can’t help that I was sick, any more than he can help that he was. I would’ve visited him as Prelate and as his friend.

I open the door. Xiao-Ling is at the bar. She has her hair pinned up with a clip. It looks like a fin on top of her head, the clipped-up part. I wave to her but she doesn’t see me. I approach cautiously. I take a seat next to her. She turns immediately to me and sizes me up.

“Ahh, hello, Prelate. How are you?”

“Fine.”

“You were sick.”

“Yes.”

“What made you sick?”

I notice that she’s using her tenses correctly. It makes me smile a little.

“I don’t know.”

“Virus? Bacteria? What?”

“I don’t know.”

“You should found out. Then you know.”

I don’t know what to say to that. I order a beer.

“What were you symptoms?”

“Oh, fever, headache, vomiting.”

“Ah-hah.”

“And some delirium.”

“I watched the ceremony. I liked it. You did pretty good. Let’s go for a walk. What do you say?”

I don’t hesitate long. I feel I better seize the day with Xiao-Ling. I better carpe the diem.

“All right, Xiao-Ling.”

I like just saying her name. I like saying it the way they’d say it in China.

We walk straight down Federal Street. We cross paths with Michael from the group home. He salutes us. We salute him back. I like how Xiao-Ling just falls into the saluting business.

“It’s funny how he’s always walking in the opposite direction from me.”

“Who is he?”

“Michael. He’s from the group home.”

“How do you know his name?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always known it. He’s just always been around.”

We go right to my house. It seems like she’s steering me there, though she can’t know the way, so it must be me who’s the one steering. When we get there the first thing I do is show her the backyard. Shy and proud as hell, I walk her to the garden to show her my work on the knotweed. I start

thinking as I look it over that I won't know what to do when the knotweed is gone. I won't know how to replace it. And I start wondering if I want the knotweed there just so I can keep killing it.

Xiao-Ling listens to my description of my digging method.

"Just poison it," she says, then turns and walks towards the back door. I follow her. I don't want her going in there first. There's nothing to hide in there, but there's nothing to not hide either, if that makes any sense at all. She turns and waits for me to go in first.

"What does the Prelate do, anyway?" she says as we go up the steps.

"Visits the sick and disabled."

"Oh, visits the sick and disabled. So I guess last week you visited yourself? You got any tea in your house?"

"Yes."

"You live here all by yourself? No wife?"

"No."

"No what?"

"No wife."

"I see."

She doesn't complain about the stale Tetley tea. Our conversation stops while I boil two mugs of water in the microwave. She looks around the kitchen. I look around too, as if it's no longer my own. Then we both stop looking around. We look at each other for a while instead. We look at each other in a real familiar way. Familiar, but I don't get a warm feeling from it. It's more like we've figured each other out.

The microwave beeps and I make our tea. We sit there fooling with the teabags in the water. She tries to sip it, but it's too hot, so she gets up and goes into the dining room and through it into the living room. She begins to hum. Then she stops humming. She stops moving, and for a long moment, it's as if she's disappeared. She's just standing there in the living room, and I don't like it. Finally she circles back around to the kitchen and stands looking out the side windows. What does she want?

"That your bedroom?"

Now she is looking straight into my bedroom, which is an add-on to the house right off the kitchen. I look in there too. The bed is rumbled. One end of the curtain rod has detached, so that the curtains hang askew. It looks like the bedroom of a sad and guilty man.

"Yes, that's my bedroom."

"That where you were sick?"

"Mostly."

"What wrong with your friend Buffett?"

"He's got Multiple Sclerosis."

"It will kill him. That's for sure."

I am shocked and afraid, as if it has never occurred to me before that Buffett will die from his MS, or that he will die period.

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“We all get killed by something,” I say.

“Sure we do. That’s what make the world a world.”

I don’t know what she means, and at the same time I know.

“*On choisit ce qu’on tue,*” I say.

As I pronounce these words, my questions for Xiao-Ling freeze up and die. Then she speaks in a new voice that seems to come from behind her.

“You are the Moose Prelate. You should have visited your friend in the hospital. You should do your duty.”

I don’t have any answer to this. I know she is wrong, yet her words make me ashamed of myself, and of my whole life, and I start crying. She gets up and leaves out the front door. I don’t watch her go. I sit for a long time looking at her empty chair and crying and thinking of my wife’s long death and mourning all of the losses that have built up in my life.

I stop after I don’t know how long. I get up and pour both mugs of tea down the sink. I sit down again and sigh with relief, because now I know Xiao-Ling and I will not love each other. Our hearts are just buried too deep.

ROBERT COOPERMAN'S latest collections—*A Killing Fever* (Ghost Road Press) and *The Long Black Veil* (Higganum Hill Books)—have just been published. His work has appeared in *Grain*, *The North American Review*, *The Comstock Review* and *The New Orphic Review*.

Robert Cooperman / **Four Poems**

Winter Bivouac in Germany: 1965

You shuddered on ground
frozen hard as meteors,
huddled beside a truck's exhaust—
vehicles kept running all night
so gas lines wouldn't block,
as your intestines had
from rations only a starving
rat might force down—
willing to risk suffocation
and a month in the guardhouse
for a whisper of warmth.

You commander refused
enlisted men the tepid shelter
of pup tents, reasoning
the canvas created silhouettes
deadly-visible to enemy fire
Officers slept in huge heated tents,
played poker in T-shirts, and drank beer.

You prayed to be shipped
to Vietnam, death from a bullet
or landmine preferable
to freezing solid as a tree limb
snapped by the weight of snow,
just so you could stay warm,
and take out an officer
before the V.C. got you.

In Russia

In Russia, though
his stained glass windows
brightened churches
with God's holy pigments,
he was a Jew
and had to serve the czar
for twenty-five years:

a death sentence
of beatings by officers,
forced marches,
and the Cossacks,
who had smashed
his heavenly gems,
tossed paint in his face
and laughed at a stupid Jew.

He escaped; in New York,
the Mafia and Jewish mobs
smashed the stained glass jewels
he created for synagogues
and cathedrals, demanded
protection money.

"No different," he spat,
until a synagogue in Tulsa
needed stained glass windows.
He married a young woman
from the congregation;
their sons more
like linebackers than artisans
who work in colors delicate
as rainbows that bloom
after tornadoes.

Squeezing the Heart

“Squeeze the heart,”
the lab technician instructs
on my annual blood draw;
it’s a solid rubber replica,
used along with the rubber tube
tied tightly around my lower arm,
so she can better see my veins.

I notice a piece of the auricle
is missing, maybe the work
of a small, gnawing dog
or the tech’s bored, visiting child.

I let the heart lie in my palm,
feel the rough edge of the eaten piece;
the very solid weight of it leads me
to think of surgeons massaging
that muscle back to life;
an act of dedication, craft,
the willingness to make a mess
of a fragile human body,
to make it whole and loving again,
if only for a little time.

And there’s the metaphorical organ
easily broken, or resilient
against all heartbreaking odds:
like the old ballads about true lovers
journeying for weary years,
returning, faithful, no matter
what temptations their women
felt in the beating of that gallant
symbol, when they embraced.

A Story of a Gun

Your father, returning drunk one night,
furious you'd doodled on a book,
went for you, his face redder
than the label of Scotch bottles,
his fists hard as work boots.

“Get away from her!”
your mother ordered,
crashed a bullet past his ear,
squeezed off another slug,
into the breakfront, shattering
a porcelain girl on a swing:
a gift one happy anniversary.

Sobbing and apologizing,
he wrestled the gun from her
and ran with the revolver
into the woods behind your house,
he said he'd buried it, cupped your face;
you shuddered, wanting to believe
he could change.

Five years later,
a cop knocked on your door,
told your father a teenager
had found the gun, used it
to kill herself, the serial numbers
traced to your father.

The officer laid it
in your father's sober hands,
trembling as if from an ungodly
week-long bender.

JIM MEIROSE lives in Somerville, NJ with his wife Mary Beth and her dog and his cat. His work has appeared in the *Alaska Quarterly*, *South Carolina Review*, *New Orleans Review*, et cetera, and has been short-listed for the *O'Henry Awards* and nominated for the *Pushcart Prize*.

The Keys

Jim Meirose

THE BLACK BUS pulls to the stop at 30th Street splashing the water from the gutter and stops before you in an oily haze. The door opens and you step across and up the well-worn steps. The driver's there on his perch in a white shirt and tie and black pants, and he glares down at you as though thinking—how dare you be here. You ignore his stare and your hand goes down in your pocket and there's no change there, but no keys again either—and you try the other pocket and it's empty too and you panic—you just had your keys but they're gone again, where could they have gone to, you try the pockets again but nothing's there.

You've lost the keys again. Your house key. Your car keys. You just had them again but you've lost them again—

Get off my bus, snaps the bus driver. Get off now.

And the bus driver's eyes push you back down the steps as you're thinking the driver doesn't have to be so rude why was he so rude—and you step back onto the curb and the bus door slides shut and the roar rises from the engine deep inside and the bus slides past gone in its dark exhaust cloud. You're on the curb in front of the old wooden church that doesn't fit this neighborhood of tall glass and steel buildings. You think where've I been, where could I have left my keys, I was at Gustav's and Macy's and on the sidewalks in between. A man behind you speaks.

I saw you go up the bus steps and come back down again—I saw you patting down your pockets you've lost something important haven't you—

You turn. The man's tall with a heavy five o'clock shadow and his thick-lipped mouth is going.

—my name is Matthew I could help you find—say what'd you lose

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anyway?

My keys.

I could help you find your keys.

He's breathing heavy looking past you through your eyes.

That's okay, I can find the keys myself, thanks, you say. You watch his eyes for acceptance of the fact he won't be helping you but it's not there. His hand goes up.

Oh, but it's no problem. Come on. Let's go.

Let's find them.

You turn and go up the street. He follows. Men in dark coats and a woman in a red scarf and more people are coming the other way all looking out toward where they're going. None of them look at you as you make your way past them and the wavy glass storefronts go by and the cars go up and down. Matthew's walking just behind you, talking.

We need to go back to where you've been. That'll be the way to find them. To go back to where you've been—

You nod. He's right you probably left the keys at Gustav's. Why you'd have taken the keys from your pocket you can't understand, but you might have—or it could've been at Macy's—Matthew goes on, his words riding your eyes going back and forth scanning the sidewalk.

—you've just left your keys someplace—but don't get me wrong, no—I'm not saying you're just another stupid clod who'd leave his keys someplace—

A long glass window slides by and another bus splashes past between stops and more people push past as he goes on.

—no. No. Please don't think I'm calling you a clod, I'm not, that's not what I meant. I meant you're no clod.

After you cross 29th Street a man in a green shirt comes out from a tall doorway and puts out his hand onto Matthew's shoulder and starts following. Matthew turns his head.

John, says Matthew—it's good to see you—

And it's good to see you, says John. John wears high topped boots with no laces.

Where you going, he asks Matthew.

Oh I'm helping this gent look for his keys.

The concrete beneath your feet's cracked and uneven.

Oh really—well sir—good to meet you—

You turn your head and nod and smile slightly then go back to scanning the sidewalk going past. You might have dropped your keys on the sidewalk—need to concentrate need to look everywhere. The two follow just behind you. John's loose boots scuff along the concrete. You pass by a large picture of a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman framed in gold in an art dealer's window as the two behind throw out words.

So John what's new?

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Nothing. Just got done playing a couple of games of pool. Hey—I'm in the market for a cooler—

A cooler? What kind of cooler?

A long limo with black windows splashes by in the street clogged with cars. Horns blare. People passing step back from the splashing.

A cooler to keep beers in, he says. I need it for up my place I got too many beers to keep in my little fridge—

Beers, said Matthew. You still drinking beers like a fish? You ought not to. That stuff's no good for you.

A group of tall priests come past with one nun, all talking and waving their hands and smiling.

Well, said John. Better than that poppy-based stuff you use.

Poppy-based stuff?

Right you're still on that stuff I'll betcha.

Maybe.

Matthew wipes his sleeve across his nose.

Poppy-based stuff, you think. An odd way to describe—well, God knows what drug. Just past 28th Street you come up to Gustav's leather shop. Across the avenue is a sign in a window of a religious items store saying THE WAY OF THE CROSS—THE ONLY WAY. You go in Gustav's and the door creaks shut behind you and the two don't follow, they wait outside. The walls of the long narrow shop are hung with leather strapping of all lengths widths and thicknesses and you go up to the counter and scan it as the short dark mustached man with the scar across his chin behind the counter speaks.

You were in here before—I told you to leave then—

No, you say. I thought I might have left my keys here.

The man's hand pushes out.

I don't want to hear it. Go on, come on, get out—

No need to be rude—

Get out.

Okay.

You turn toward the door and the sign above the door says LEATHER GOODS and you wonder why the sign's on the inside and not the outside as the walls of leather straps lead you to the door and you're out on the sidewalk. You wonder like always why the man had been rude and Matthew and John are standing there with a third man who's wide and squinty and holds a white hat. His arms wave as he speaks flopping the hat around.

So they said radios, he says. They said they needed radios for the cars the repo men brought back, I asked them what's wrong with the radios in the cars and they couldn't answer—

Hey—here you are, says Matthew as you come down the single step of Gustav's store. Say here—David—David, come up and meet our friend. He's lost his keys.

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David steps over and waves the white hat and pushes out his other hand for you to shake.

Good to meet you, he said, putting on his hat.

John stepped up.

David's a rum man.

David turned, eyes widened.

Rum man—what do you mean, I'm a rum man—

Just what he said, says Matthew, waving a hand. His heavy lips move slowly. You like your rum like John likes his beer—

John swipes his arm downward.

Now there you go again, harping on my beer—

Never mind that, says Matthew. Hey, he says, looking at you. Any luck? Were your keys in there?

No, you say, shaking your head. You keep wondering why the man had been so rude you were in his shop before you could have left your keys there people in the city are just rude, you think, always rude—

David's going to come along and help us too, Matthew tells you. Mind if he comes along?

No. I don't think I mind, you say, and then you immediately ask yourself why you said you didn't mind, these are perfect strangers total strangers why do you say you don't mind when you do why do you let people be so rude to you why why why when you've such a big problem.

Dammit, you've lost your keys.

Turning from the others, you move down the sidewalk and though they're following they don't talk until you come up in front of the wide stone basilica just past 27th Street.

Boy look at this place, says David.

Big. Wide, adds John.

And long. Real long, says Matthew.

But I never get tired of looking at the basilica do you?

Nope. Never.

Me either.

Nope.

You move on past the basilica steps toward the crumbling curb and just past the basilica a man in a hunting jacket comes up to Matthew, John, and David.

Simon! says Matthew. How you doing—

Right—hey look, John, says David. It's Simon.

Simon, says John.

Simon comes up with his hands in his pockets and his stubbly face glows red.

Hey—I didn't tell you guys, says Simon. The doctor told me there aren't going to be any scars—

That's great, said Matthew.

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Hey, you still play that twangy guitar? asks John.

Nah. No money in it, said Simon.

So where you off to now, asks David.

Simon pulls a hand out of his pocket and runs it back through his thick black hair.

I'm going for a haircut, he says. I could use one don't you think?

Oh I don't know—

Looks like you could go a little longer to me—

Yes sure hey there, say what do you think—

Matthew gestures to you.

Do you think Simon needs a haircut?

Simon's hair's a thick black mop on his head. He lowers his head for you to see.

I don't know, you say. Maybe you could use a trim.

Simon looks up with colorless eyes.

An honest man, says Simon. What's your name?

You say your name.

Good to meet you.

We're helping find his keys—

Right he's lost his keys we're helping find them—

You want to help, Simon—

Oh sure why not.

There's a great stain on the front of Simon's hunting jacket. You look away and walk off passing the basilica and they're all following behind as you scan the sidewalk from storefronts to curb and snatches of their conversation are peppering you all up and down your back.

—chicken for dinner—

—raid. That gets the damned bugs—

—clod. I'm sorry, I didn't mean you're a clod—

—pool. Long and deep. A lot of work in the summer—

—cooler with the central air all balanced like it is—

—poppy-based drugs—

—scars. There'll be no scars—

—twanging guitar. I told you there's no money in playing a twangy guitar—

—hair. Got to look neat. Haircut—

You cross 26th Street after waiting for a great green semi to make a wide turn that stops all the traffic and starts all the horns blowing. Macy's comes up tall on the left. Its front is grimy. It's been here a long time. You go in the golden revolving doors. Again, the others wait outside and you wonder—this store takes up the whole block, how about if you go out the store on the next avenue over, you'll have lost them, they won't be following you anymore, but no, the street they're on's the street you need to follow, because you lost your keys there—you blink, wipe your eyes. Your

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head spins. It's bright in the store with reds and golds and chromes and deep sharp blacks and you come up to the counter you were at before. The straw-thin clerk speaks sharply.

You again—didn't I tell you to get out before?

Your mind goes blank.

But I lost my keys, you say.

You said that before. There's no keys here. I told you that before. Now leave before I call security.

Her hair is gold and she wears purple. You turn and go back through the store and it's like being inside the basilica—all tall columns green and black things and everything around being so so expensive. Like all the golden holy things in church are all so expensive. But people aren't so rude inside the basilica they wouldn't say leave or I'll call security—you go out the store through the revolving doors and Matthew, John, David and Simon are there and a fifth man is with them, in a long grey coat. The man flexes his hands. His fingernails are severely overgrown.

Well—any luck? says Matthew.

Keys in there? asks John.

Find 'em? asks David.

Let's see—let's see the keys, says Simon.

They weren't there, you say.

Say, says Matthew, placing his hand on the fifth man's shoulder. Here. Meet Peter. Peter, this is the fellow who we were telling you about, who lost his keys.

Hello, says Peter, pushing out his hand. I'm sorry you lost your keys. Any idea where they could be?

No, you say, looking in his grey face. You shake his hand. His nails dig into your fingers. You turn from him and start back down the sidewalk. Your hands are in your pockets and you hear them talking behind and the sound of their shoes and boots scuffing along.

—now God damn that Liberace, says Peter. He could play a damned mean trill and how about those lashes? And those spangles? There was a showman he knew how to be a showman—

—damned right.

The famous miraculous statue comes past on the left behind a black wrought iron fence.

Damned right. He was a helluva showman.

You pass the statue and cross 25th Street. They all follow. The bridge across the river comes up, with the falls of Montmorency to the left, the water plunging between her tall green bluffs. The roar of the falls takes you across the bridge and on the other side, a sixth man comes up, with huge deformed hands and feet. You try not to stare.

James, they say. It's been a while.

Hey, guys, says James—I saw buster the other day too what a coinci-

dence he had bundles of books and he's got a problem hear about his problem?

No what's his problem—

It hurts when he swallows—but you ought to see he's living in a palace what a hep cat—

Hep cat?

Who says hep cat—

Say want to help us find this fellow's keys?

Keys?

Right, keys.

What keys? These keys?

He shakes a bunch of keys in the air. They glitter and jingle and glow in the sun—they're yours! The keys to the new Pontiac in the Garage; the keys to the split level on the acre in the suburbs where the wife and kids and dog are and the beautiful in ground pool—

—they're yours!

Yes! you say brightly.

—the split level with the smooth paved driveway winding under the trees to the stained glass front door—

Those are my keys!

—through which is the warmth of the marble floored foyer with the golden crystal chandelier and the stairway leading up to the kitchen dining room family room and your favorite chair before the TV and your slippers—

Where'd you find them?

—and the family there, waiting with fresh faces bright smiles—all saying they want you—

Over there, he says.

—all saying they love you.

He points to the gutter. Funny the keys should have been there you've never been there you weren't in that gutter—but no matter. Now you can go home. You thank the six men—they nod, and dissipate out in all directions. You're ecstatic, you're happy, you decide to walk back to the 30th Street stop for the bus. It's your favorite stop. It's always been. On the way you go in and out of the usual stores again—Macy's, Gustav's, this time a few others—but you don't buy. You just look. They keep telling you to leave. It normally bothers you when they do that—but you're in a daze. You've got your keys. The keys to your real life. Finally you're back at the bus stop and the bus pulls up splashing the water from the gutter and stops before you in an oily haze. The door opens and you step across and up the well-worn steps. The driver's there on his perch in a white shirt and tie and black pants, and glares down at you as though thinking—how dare you be here. You ignore his stare and your hand goes down in your pocket and there's no change there, but no keys again either—and you panic and

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try the other pocket and it's empty too and you panic more strongly—you just had your keys again but they're gone again, where could they have gone to, you try the pockets again but nothing's there.

You've lost the keys again. Your house key. Your car keys. You just had them again but you've lost them again—

Where's your life gone? you think this time.

Where's your life?

Get off my bus, snaps the bus driver. Get off now.

And the bus driver's eyes push you back down the steps as you're thinking the driver doesn't have to be so rude why was he so rude—you step back onto the curb and the bus door slides shut and the roar rises from the engine deep inside and the bus slides past gone in its stinking black cloud. And instead of starting to look for the keys right away like last time and all the other times before that, you gently sink down to sitting on the curb in front of the old church and put your head in your hands and cry. You sit there crying like you do once in a while, and the people going by pity you there, sitting there like you are, a tall man with thick lips and thick black hair, needing a shave in a green shirt and boots with no laces and holding a wide white hat in your hand, wearing a stained hunting jacket over a long grey coat, with huge deformed hands and feet and unnaturally long fingernails, on the curb, feet in the gutter, cars and buses splashing by laying down layer upon layer of fumes.

STEVE ELDER works at the University of Colorado Law Library. He was the Featured Poet in the Spring 2005 issue of *The New Orphic Review*.

Steve Elder / **Five Poems**

Babysitting the Kid Who Did Nothing Today

“Smother me with pizza. Do it.

“My dad drove his cab right by me today, but he didn’t even wave.

“There was a dead bird near the backstop. It was stiff. A little gray parking-lot hopper.

“Are there otters in Argentina? How many?

“Have you ever been hypnotized by the rain? It’s natural. Most animals have been since rain began.

“I caught my sister hiding behind the couch eating a stick of butter.

“I’m not sure if my mom likes anything, or if she just pretends to.

“The people on TV dance quite well.

“I dreamed I was flying and I wasn’t scared at all. It was around the neighbor’s living room. I think I left a footprint on the ceiling. Can we check? Why not?”

Rohmer in the Afternoon

The matinee was in black and white and French

The high ceiling, hidden in darkness, dripped,
so they sat close under the balcony

After the show, the rain was quiet, falling like memory

The grass, the yellow slickers, the blurred stoplights
were glossier than real

There was a moment, between them, of silent praise
for the fashioner of lips and eyelashes

And a wish, in damp wool, for a smaller umbrella

On Pickiness

Even in the solid dark, no porch-light,
and the wind pressing steady as a wall,
a key is a key and a lock is a lock,
but it was the wrong key or the wrong lock or,
though a door is a door, the wrong door.
Nevertheless, a house is a house, away from the wind,
so I came in, knowing that words are words,
all of them us, whether screamed or cooed.

Silent Apartments

A mind drifts
like a yellow leaf
inside an apartment
with tall bookshelves.

Another mind drifts
like a red leaf
inside an apartment
with prints of old maps.

And in another apartment,
the same again,
but the leaf is orange
and there's a small urn in a niche.

But somewhere there's an apartment
that's a little too green anymore,
where a voice speaks to the phone,
and weeps, but tries not to.

A Clean Zero

Asleep and on fire
in a wooden boat
rocking to the sea.

The many colors
along narrow rivers
are quick to burn.

Best to wake when the shores have spread,
when the line between the sea and sky forms
a clean zero

When JILL MANDRAKE is not performing with her musical group, Sister DJ's Radio Band, she is attempting to put snippets of memoir into a more cohesive whole. Perhaps by chance, pop music allusions figure into most of her recollections. Music may be the spur that puts meaning into an otherwise humdrum event.

Haunts

Jill Mandrake

WHEN I WAS A KID, the Sunday school I attended rented a bus and drove us out to another Sunday school on Cassiar Street. I hadn't been in that area before, and when we were about to re-board the bus, I noticed a long, shadowy building across the street.

It really gave me the creeps, this place, as though its bad vibes reached across Cassiar to where we were queued up. I asked our Pastor, "What is that?"

Just pointing to it had made my index finger feel cold.

Our Pastor said, "Whatever it was, it's vacant now."

Thirty years later, a friend of mine who worked in the prison system happened to mention that building. He said it had been a women's prison before the newer, bigger prison was built. For a long time it sat unused, and now it is townhouses.

When I was a teenager, a friend and I were sitting on the river bank when I spied a cluster of buildings on the opposite bank. They were barely perceptible but the creepy feeling they emitted traveled clear across the river. "Why does that place over there have such bad vibes?" I wondered aloud.

"That's Riverview, you Goof," said my friend.

A few years back, I visited Seattle, Washington, and walked past a school called Lincoln High. I'll be darned if it didn't have unmistakably icy vibes. It looked like it was saying, "School's out, but good."

I thought to myself, "I wonder if that's the school Jimi Hendrix attended? I heard he got expelled for mouthing off to a teacher."

Later I learned that Jimi Hendrix had attended Garfield High, not Lincoln High. But Lincoln High had bad vibes anyway. I couldn't walk past it fast enough.

ANDRE KOCSIS has been writing short stories since 2002. He has had one story previously published in *The Dalhousie Review*. His current creative project is moving from Ontario to British Columbia.

Data

Andre Kocsis

“IN SCIENCE, data is king,” Dr. Stone intoned. “There is an objective reality out there, and we can learn about it only by patient observation, unclouded by preconceived assumptions. How many of you have heard of Penzias and Wilson?”

There were nearly two hundred students in the large lecture hall. Only a few hands went up. Well, what could you expect in an introductory physics class, Stone thought. By the time these students were sophomores, Penzias and Wilson would be old hat to them. Of course, not even half of them would survive the first year.

He continued his lecture. “Penzias and Wilson were working at Bell Labs, and their job was to improve microwave reception in communication towers. They worked for years to reduce the background noise in the electronics, to get rid of a persistent hiss. Interestingly, no matter which direction they turned their receiving dishes, this low frequency signal appeared at a steady level. They kept improving the electronics of the circuits, but it would still not go away. Finally, they concluded that this was real, and not noise at all. Only when they accepted the primacy of their data, observing with eyes unclouded by false assumptions, did they arrive at the truth. They discovered the four degree background radiation, which we now know was conclusive evidence for the most important idea of twentieth century cosmology, the Big Bang.”

He swept his gaze around the auditorium, and noted with satisfaction that the students seemed duly impressed.

Ted Stone himself was not exactly an impressive figure. He was short, squat, with a broad face and thick eyebrows that almost met in the middle. In some ways, he resembled a bullfrog, and this impression was enhanced

by his basso profundo, which resonated in the large hall.

“Reality is what it is.” He paused for emphasis. “You can’t wish it away, or distort it to fit preconceived ideas. Penzias and Wilson could have just interpreted what they saw as electronic noise, and they would have missed out on one of the greatest discoveries of our time.” The bell rang on cue, and the class started to file out.

Ted glanced at his watch, and hurriedly gathered his notes. He had a meeting with the Curriculum Committee, and he was hoping to catch Bob Gottheil there. Ted’s tenure was coming up for review, and, as Chair of the Physics Department, Gottheil was the key to being appointed for one of the two slots as Associate Professor next year. Otherwise, he and Jennifer would be moving again.

How many times had they moved? He had almost lost count. They had married while he was still an undergraduate at North Carolina. Then, graduate school at Michigan. Then a post-doctorate fellowship at Brookhaven, and another at Berkeley. Finally, Assistant Professor at Stanford, but, after three years, not quite making the grade to get tenure, he was fortunate to get another appointment at the University of Washington. But this was “make it or break it” time. Washington was on the fringes of the first rank universities. Being refused tenure here would mark him as being second-rate, and would trigger a downward spiral; most probably it would end in lifelong banishment to some place like Wyoming. Ted just knew that he wouldn’t look good in a ten gallon hat.

Jennifer had been quite reasonable. She did not make friends easily, and each move was wrenching for her. As well, at thirty-three, the biological clock was definitely a factor, but neither of them could envision having children until there was more security in their lives. He had to make it this time.

He was somewhat out of breath when he reached the third floor, but glancing at his watch reassured him that he still had five minutes before the meeting. Unfortunately, when he entered the conference room, he saw that Gottheil had been literally cornered by three other faculty members. George Parsons, one of his competitors for tenure, was in the group.

Ted hesitated. It was impossible to join the group in the corner without being obviously pushy, so he stood close enough so that he could ambush Gottheil once he was free. The Chairman was tall, and Ted noted that he was the type who gave white people a bad reputation. He had absolutely no buttocks. For that matter, he had no hips. He was very slender, making his body a composition in parallel lines, almost two-dimensional. He was only saved from being confined to the plane by his head, which, while it was quite narrow, was oriented orthogonally.

It didn’t appear that the conversation would end before the meeting, and in any case, Ted noticed Murray Wilson edging toward him. He cleverly evaded this trap by moving to the opposite side of the table and

taking a seat. Murray was his contemporary, and had been a colleague at Brookhaven. But he had made full professor the previous year. His last paper, extending quantum electrodynamics into some obscure cosmological domain, had catapulted him into the forefront of his field. There were rumors of offers from Berkeley and Harvard. As if that wasn't sufficient, Murray was a rock climber and mountaineer, and had recently made the first ascent of some godforesaken wall in the Canadian arctic. In short, a thoroughly despicable character, and at this point, Murray was the last person Ted wanted to talk to.

The meeting started a few minutes later, and it droned on for almost two hours, without accomplishing anything that Ted could quite put his finger on. Of course, most of the time his mind had been occupied with how to ambush Gottheil after the meeting, and how to subtly approach the topic of his tenure. He did not want to appear too anxious, so he had concocted another issue which would be the motivation for the importunity.

* * *

Ted was surprisingly successful in his stratagem, because he had chosen a topic which he knew was dear to the heart of the Chairman. Gottheil was well known for taking a strong stance on political issues. He had a deep belief that scientists, as leaders and role models, should be vocal on the issues of the day. Not willing to entertain the possibility that there existed a spectrum of opinions among the faculty, the Chairman attributed the reluctance to the rest of the Physics Department to sign on to his crusades purely to apathy.

Ted was mostly in agreement with Gottheil's politics, and the proposal to send an open letter to Washington on the topic of global warming was in harmony with his own instincts.

Gottheil's office was large, with a high ceiling, and windows which rose all the way to the top. The gloom of the Seattle winter night bumped gently against the glass as small droplets of rain drifted down.

They spent twenty minutes discussing how to achieve unanimity within the department. Ted pointed out that this depended crucially on the wording of the letter to Washington, and he volunteered to create the first draft.

Gottheil was so enthusiastic about all this that Ted did not even have to introduce the topic of tenure.

"I wish more scientists would show such social responsibility, Ted," Gottheil said. In contrast with the rest of his desiccated features, the Chairman's brown eyes were warm, liquid.

Ted feigned embarrassment, and did not reply.

"How are you coming along with that pion experiment?"

"We've established the measurement protocol, and are just starting to accumulate data. It would be faster if we would afford another post-doc."

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“Making the most out of limited resources is the challenge we all face.” Gottheil looked away, as if trying to make out something a long way off. The office was very quiet for some moments. “I made a commitment to the Regents to move this department into the top ten in the country. That means that I have to make every tenure appointment count.” There was now a warm smile on Gottheil’s face as he looked back at him. “I know I won’t be disappointed in you, Ted.”

* * *

As he drove home, Ted reflected back on the conversation. On the one hand, it was quite encouraging. The Chairman liked him, and approved of him. On the other hand, there was a clear warning. Social responsibility was not sufficient; Gottheil could not afford to waste a tenure appointment on a mediocrity. Well, he was not a mediocrity. The pion project would prove that to the world.

In his years at Brookhaven Accelerator Laboratories he had seen that in this age of multimillion dollar physics experiments, luck and politics made all the difference. The discovery of the next particle was simply a matter of cranking up the accelerator energy another notch. If you happened to have put in a proposal at the proper time, you were almost guaranteed to stumble onto something significant.

The pion project had finally provided just such an opportunity, having been scheduled onto the tail end of a French group’s larger experiment. Ted was certain that hidden in the data they had accumulated was some new particle that would make his reputation. All he had to do was to tease the information out from behind the background noise.

His problem was to analyze the data as quickly as possible, preferably coming up with results before the decision on his tenure was made. Tomorrow, he would sit down with the post-doc and the two graduate students who made up his team, and try to accelerate their progress.

Ted felt comforted, as if making the resolution meant that it was already accomplished. While these thoughts swirled in his head, the old Toyota made steady progress north on Interstate 5, leaving behind the outskirts of Seattle. The steady drizzle sparkled in the twin cones of his headlights, and a soporific hiss came from the tires on the asphalt. All of a sudden, he felt tired. He was overcome by a longing for the warmth of his home, a quiet dinner, for the comforting presence of Jennifer.

They had been fortunate to find the tiny house in a quiet neighborhood with towering conifers. Because they were well out of the city, the rent was affordable.

Once off the highway, a maze of short streets brought him home. The long gravel driveway sloped down toward the little house half-hidden by blackberry bushes which grew uncontrolled in the damp climate. The warm

lights spilling from the windows beckoned, a refuge from the chill rain.

Through the side door he went into the mud room, and saw Jennifer's riding boots and yellow rain slicker neatly in their places under the hot air vent. His wife's neatness meshed well with his own compulsion for order.

In the dining room, the two settings of white china were reflected in the luster of the small dark oak table. There was a fire crackling in the fireplace, and in the kitchen, Jennifer was engrossed in putting together a Thai meal, the latest in the long line of her culinary obsessions.

Music, something from Debussy, Ted thought, masked his entrance. Jennifer was on her tiptoes, reaching up to get something in the cupboard. Ted looked at his wife from the doorway, and felt a surge of affection. She was small, with a pixyish face that looked particularly childlike in profile. With one arm reaching up, her back arched, blond hair trailing down her back, she looked like a ballerina.

* * *

The dinner, as always, was exceptional. He told Jennifer about the conversation with Gottheil, and she seemed encouraged about the prospects for ending their nomadic existence.

"And it's not like I'm not in agreement with him," Ted commented on the subject of global warming.

"You're absolutely right, darling," Jennifer stated with uncharacteristic gravity. "The government must do something, and it's the responsibility of scientists to point out the urgency of the situation."

Ted smiled at her. "How was your riding lesson today?"

"Good. You know, I told you the instructor has an accent? It turns out he's Hungarian. His name is not John at all, it's Yanosh."

"Yannos?"

"Yan-oh-sh. He gave me a new horse, Captain. A beautiful animal."

"I hope you're being careful."

"Of course."

She brought in the desert, and then she mentioned a movie they had talked about seeing, but he reminded her that he had to write the letter for Gottheil. She said that it was all right, she wanted to watch a documentary on television anyway.

Ted went to the little office in the back of the house as she was clearing off the dishes. Later he heard the muffled sound of the television, and he was tempted to join Jennifer in the cozy living room, dark except for the dying embers in the fireplace and the glow of the screen. But he was still not satisfied with the letter, and in any case he wanted to prepare a new plan to accelerate the data analysis on the pion experiment.

* * *

When Ted entered the lab next morning, Steve, the post-doc, was already

hard at work. The two graduate students had classes in the morning, and would arrive later.

The lab looked like an ordinary office: a few beat-up metal desks, with computers on each. The heart of the operation was a small bank of electronics arranged along the back wall. This looked like shelving erected from a Meccano set, with exposed circuit boards rising vertically from each shelf, and a multitude of cables running among them like loose spaghetti. Two ceiling-high metal cabinets, a drab military green, contained their data — spools of film containing several hundred thousand pictures of bubble chamber interactions.

Steve was just inserting a roll into a receptacle next to the electronics. As he closed the cover, servo motors began to hum, and the data collection was in progress. Optical sensors digitized the picture on each frame of the film, and stored the information in the main computer.

When the data were analyzed, each new particle would pop out as a bump on a graph. The larger the bump, the more likely that it represented an actual particle. It was a statistical process. They dealt not in certainty but in probabilities.

Even a null result was interesting, since it showed that there were no new particles within a certain energy range. But, human nature being what it is, the discovery of a new particle was what really made news. Even more exciting was when a result either confirmed or toppled one of the many theories in the competitive field of particle physics.

Ted walked up behind Steve as the latter stared at a computer monitor. It displayed the data being accumulated by the equipment. There were various graphs on the display, and counters running like odometers on amphetamines.

Ted pointed to one of the graphs, and said, “That looks a lot better.”
“Yeah,” Steve murmured. “I adjusted the optical constants last night.”

Ted made no comment, but inwardly he felt a twinge of guilt. He knew that recalibration was a long job, and had no doubts that Steve had worked well into the night. Despite that, he had arrived at work before seven.

But, Steve was a post-doc, and they were expected to work hard. Just starting out in their academic careers, unless they proved themselves at each step, they wouldn't get even as far as Ted had. Many would drift from one research post to another, eventually settling for a permanent position in some backwater, or even abandoning their dreams of an academic position.

Ted had to admit that Steve was unusual, even among post-docs. He was aggressive to the point of obsession, and drove himself without mercy. He certainly did not fit the mold of the typical physicist; he looked like a campus jock — tall, muscular, with a strong profile. He had been quarterback on his university football team, and rumor had it that he had been offered a spot in the NFL, despite the fact that he was a little too light. It

seemed that all the drive and energy that he had once put into football, Steve now channeled into his physics career.

Chi-Kwan, the older of the graduate students, arrived at eleven-thirty. He was twenty-five, and from Hong Kong. He spoke rarely, and when he did, it was with a pronounced accent.

Ten minutes later, Geoff Parker arrived. He was a year younger than Chi-Kwan, and was as garrulous as the other was withdrawn. No question that he was bright, but Ted had doubts as to whether he would survive in a profession that demanded intense dedication and encouraged an almost monastic asceticism. Geoff was a joker, very social, and paraded a succession of girlfriends that were the envy of the mostly male physics community.

Ted was the only one that had a private office, the others sharing the main lab. When he heard Geoff make his entrance, Ted emerged from his lair, and addressed his team. As he had done before, he emphasized what a fortunate opportunity had been presented to them with the pion experiment, and that they were all on the brink of greatness, if only they played their cards right. However, this time he emphasized the urgency of the matter.

The annual meeting of the Physical Society was only four months away. To have their results presented there, they must submit an abstract within sixty days, and to do that, they must have most of their data analyzed. At the current rate, they would not be finished until after the conference.

There were several other research groups with similar experiments, though at present they were behind in measuring data. However, by the time of the next opportunity to present results, these groups would also be ready, thus diluting any priority Ted's group would have.

"What can we do?" Geoff asked. "We're already running full time."

"We're averaging fourteen hours a day," Ted corrected.

"What's your point?" Geoff wanted to know.

"The day has twenty-four hours."

The room became silent. Chi-Kwan looked down at his desk, and Geoff stared at Ted incredulously. Steve had a grim look on his face, and his jaw muscles, always prominent, bulged even more.

It was Steve who finally broke the silence. "I'll take Saturday and Sunday nights."

"Wait a minute," Geoff wailed. "I'm carrying a full course load. This is insane."

"Chi-Kwan, where do you stand?" Ted asked.

Chi-Kwan hesitated, and Geoff quickly cut in. "Chi-Kwan, you've got your qualifying exams coming up. You know what will happen if you flunk!"

"He can study during his shift," Steve put in. "You just have to load film, and monitor the equipment. At worst, you have to make a few adjust-

ments. It's not a full-time job."

When Ted volunteered that he would take one night a week, the battle was over. The graduate students would each take two nights.

* * *

It was a Monday morning at nine-thirty, three weeks later, that Ted entered the lab to find that Steve was still there. He had just finished working two nights in a row; usually he went home to grab a few hours of sleep as soon as Chi-Kwan arrived to take over at eight. Despite what must have been an exhausting weekend, Steve had a huge grin on his face as he and Chi-Kwan stared at one of the displays. When Ted went over, it took him a few seconds to decipher the source of excitement. The screen had a string of white dots running along the bottom, interrupted by the occasional bump. The dots at zero signified that there was no particle at that mass; the bumps represented accumulations at a specific energy. These *could* be new particles. However, the inevitable introduction of statistical error into data collection meant that the bumps could also be meaningless background noise. Only if a peak rose above the sea of random error was it likely to represent something real.

Ted finally discerned a bump near the right edge of the screen, in a position where no particle had a right to be. As the servo motors behind him hummed, he saw some more dots being added to the bump, making it stand out even more clearly.

"What's the energy?" he asked Steve, trying to control the excitement he felt.

"It's centered on six forty-seven Gev, give or take."

"It seems rather broad. Have you had a chance to calculate a chi-squared?"

Steve continued to stare at the screen, not even looking at Ted as he answered. "It was over seven an hour ago."

Ted's heart skipped a beat. That meant that there was a better than fifty per cent chance that the little bump represented a particle. Given that it was in a region where current theories predicted there should be nothing, this could create quite a stir in the physics community.

Later that day, at the monthly department meeting, he was tempted to mention the exciting news to Gottheil. However, the meeting ran well past the usual two hours, mostly due to what became a rancorous debate over Ted's proposed letter on global warming. The usual apathy about social issues was this time replaced by an organized opposition led by Murray Wilson.

"I can't believe that you, of all people, wouldn't want to protect the environment, Murray. What will happen to those precious glaciers that you're always scrambling around on?" Ted looked defiantly at Wilson, whose weathered features testified to his avocation.

“Don’t give me that holier than thou bullshit, Ted. You don’t know dick about . . .”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, let’s avoid these ad hominem attacks and stick to the facts,” Gottheil remonstrated.

“The fact is, there is no consensus on global warming,” Wilson shot back. “I find it irresponsible that this department would lend scientific credence to a matter in which it has no expertise.”

The rest of the meeting went downhill from there, resulting in a greatly watered-down version of Ted’s letter. Even after that, less than half were willing to sign.

Ted was disappointed, but he had tried his best. He found it appalling that scientists would hide their heads in the sand, refusing to do anything about a crisis which would soon affect each of them. But then, he mused, even scientists were not immune to wishful thinking. They may accept the supremacy of data in their own work, but still erect a partition in their minds that allowed them to ignore clear evidence in other matters.

The Physics Building was quiet as he trudged down the stairs. It was well past six o’clock, and he had spent little time with Jennifer in the past three weeks. He wished she would find something to fill her time, but in the last few years, since he had insisted that they could get along without the extra salary, she had found little to occupy her beside riding and cooking classes. She was on hold until they could start a family.

Still, he couldn’t leave without checking on the lab first. Steve, Chi-Kwan, and Geoff were all clustered around the monitor.

“Did you just get back?” he asked Steve.

“Nah, I never got away. I was doing a literature search. I think Gobi will be really interested in this.”

“Gobi?”

“Marcel Gobi. Theorist at CERN, working on string theory. Last year he predicted an island of stability near this energy. Everyone said he’s crazy.”

The four of them were silent for what seemed an eternity, mesmerized by the screen. Not that there was an enormous amount of activity. The servos hummed, and here and there, dots on the screen moved up as data accumulated.

Their computer was three years old. Ted had inherited it from another research group that had lost its funding. If only they could get a new computer, they could process data at least twenty percent faster. But that was just not going to happen, and he only had six weeks left before the deadline for the conference.

The low hum of the equipment behind them was soothing in the quiet lab, yet their hearts were pounding. This was what a scientist lived for: that rare opportunity to see something no one else had seen before. It was the holy grail. They stared intently at the screen, knowing that it was en-

tirely possible that history was being made in front of their eyes.

They were all startled when the screen suddenly went blank. After a moment, large red letters appeared, "END OF ROLL." Geoff, whose shift this was, rose from his chair and went to the cabinet to retrieve the next roll of film. Ted glanced at his watch, and was amazed to see that it was nearly eight o'clock. His stomach growled.

He went to his office and called Jennifer, explaining that he had to stay late. She seemed disappointed; no doubt she had prepared another gourmet meal which at that very moment was congealing on the table. He felt a pang of remorse as he returned to his post in front of the screen, but then comforted himself with the knowledge that she would benefit just as much as he, from what was taking place. If they discovered something new, he would get tenure, and then they could stay in Seattle and finally put down roots and raise a family. When he thought about it, in some ways she would benefit even more than he did. After all, it wouldn't be the end of the world for him if he had to endure one more move.

As he sat down, the graph was once more on the screen, and data were being added.

"Aren't you going home?" Ted asked Steve. "You haven't slept in thirty-six hours."

"More like sixty," Steve corrected him. Ted shook his head. Evidently Steve had not left the lab for the whole weekend. Looking at the post-doc's face, he noticed for the first time that he seemed a lot older than the fresh-faced jock he had met only two years before.

Still, if the new particle materialized, Steve's career would also receive a large boost, so it was only appropriate that he should make some sacrifices.

Ted's mind raced. This could be so big, he thought. Reporters. Offers from Harvard or Berkeley. If what Steve said was true, that this was the first evidence for Gobi's theory, he would be in the history books. He had to look up Gobi's paper, he reminded himself.

They ordered some Chinese food, and Ted, being in an expansive mood, paid for everyone. While they continued loading roll after roll of film, they ate in a mood of celebration. Geoff started to refer to their discovery as the Stone particle. Giving it a name removed some uncertainty.

As the night wore on, a general atmosphere of hilarity pervaded the lab. Geoff was truly funny, Ted decided, and he softened his earlier estimation of the young man.

It was past midnight when he left the lab. By that time, only Geoff was left, because it was his turn to do the graveyard shift.

* * *

Jennifer was just getting out of the shower when he got home, and he immediately told her about the Stone particle.

“Darling, that’s wonderful,” she said. “Your mother would have been so proud.”

“I wish she had lived to see it.” Ted felt his throat tighten. “She was so disappointed when I didn’t get tenure at Stanford.”

Jennifer pulled on her nightgown, and then she and Ted folded the brocade bedcover.

“I’m sure that setback reminded her of Father,” he said, thinking of the man he had hardly known, and yet who had been such a large influence on the direction of his life. “Imagine, from Harvard to North Carolina, and then, after all that, the best he could do was a lecturer’s appointment. She always said it was the disappointment that killed him.”

“You’ll do fine, Ted, just fine.” Jennifer looked at him with concern. “But, you know . . .” She hesitated. “Well, what I mean is, it’s not worth destroying your health. Working nights and all.”

“Don’t worry. I want to be around to take care of my princess.”

Jennifer smiled.

He embraced her, looking into her eyes. “If you had it to do over again, would you still marry me?”

“God, we were so young.”

“Are you sorry you gave up university?”

“What could I do? You were moving to Michigan.”

“You could have enrolled there.”

“And live on your TA’s salary?”

“Others managed.”

“Living on food stamps? When I left home, I promised myself I would never take welfare again.”

“You’re my princess. I promised you.”

* * *

Over the next few weeks, the tension in Ted’s lab was cranked up notch by notch. They all arrived early each day, even Geoff. The accumulation of data overnight would inevitably create discernible changes on the screen. Unfortunately, the trend was not always positive.

For the new particle to actually exist, the bump on the graph had to be bigger than the error bars. And the size of the error bars, the level of uncertainty, depended on data from all the other parts of the graph. The peak had to stay above the sea of random fluctuations surrounding it.

It was two weeks before the deadline for submitting the conference abstracts that they started seeing some alarming trends. In two separate spots, a modest accumulation of dots appeared. In Ted’s mind they were like cancer; a small lump which at first seems innocuous could suddenly start to grow until it took over the whole organism.

At first, both lumps seemed dormant, and, in contrast, the Stone particle continued to grow. They discussed the ramifications endlessly.

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“Is it possible there is something there?” Geoff asked.

Steve laughed. “You mean at eight hundred Gev?” Geoff nodded in confirmation.

“Not bloody likely. They’ve run at least three thousand experiments at that energy over the last twenty years, and nobody has ever seen anything,” Steve said.

“What about some glitch in the programmes that tends to dump data just in that spot?” Ted asked.

“I suppose that’s possible,” Steve said. “But how do you test for it? You’d have to look at millions of lines of code. It would take years.”

“Well, if either of those damn things goes over forty, it will swamp our particle,” Ted said in a disheartened voice.

“Unless ours grows faster,” Steve responded.

“It hasn’t done much in the last few weeks,” Chi-Kwan put in. They turned to him, surprised that he broke his habitual silence. Chi-Kwan went to his desk to bring back a printout of an earlier graph.

“This is three weeks ago,” he said, as he spread the paper in front of them. It was clear that the bump had grown very little.

* * *

Ted drove home in a disconsolate mood. Seattle was usually soaked by a steady drizzle all winter, but that night it was raining quite heavily. The darkness seemed to congeal around the little car, and no matter how high he put the heater, he still felt damp and cold. Damn Seattle weather, he thought. Why did he want to get tenure in this miserable place, anyhow?

His thoughts drifted back to the lab. Those new bumps were troubling. In addition, he had heard that at least two other groups which were analyzing data in the same energy range were submitting abstracts for the conference. Ted felt a pain near his solar plexus. He wondered if he was getting an ulcer.

When he arrived, the house was dark. There was a casserole in the refrigerator, so he put this into the oven, and sat down to watch the news. Fifteen minutes later, he heard Jennifer open the door.

Ted went to greet her. She was just reaching to hang up the yellow storm slicker, and Ted could not help but feel a surge of desire when he saw her.

“Sorry,” she said, turning to him. “Captain was restless, and it took a while to get him into his stall.” She felt warm even through her clothes when he embraced her.

“I put the casserole in the oven,” he murmured romantically as he nuzzled her neck, and inhaled the smell of her hair.

“I hope you remembered to turn on the oven,” she said, as she hurried to the kitchen. Ted followed her. His absentmindedness was a standing joke between them.

“I spoke to Gottheil about the particle,” he said to her back, as she inspected the oven.

“Great! What did he say?”

“He was very positive,” he said, displaying a confidence he did not at all feel.

“That’s wonderful, honey. It looks like it will be another twenty minutes before this is done. I think I’ll take a shower.” And with that, she disappeared.

Ted was disappointed that Jennifer did not seem particularly impressed with the good news, but, upon reflection, decided that she had more confidence in him than he felt, and just considered it natural that he would take care of the practicalities of their life. Women had the luxury of always expecting a happy ending.

* * *

A few days later, it was time for Ted’s weekly stint to stay overnight. The deadline for the conference was at the end of the week, and they were almost finished analyzing all their data. The only problem was that one of the cancerous lumps showed every indication of malignancy. Its size was getting dangerously close to the limit where it would swamp the Stone particle.

Since Ted had free time between loading rolls of film, he decided to transfer the accumulated data off line, so he could look at it in more detail. He tried rearranging the bin limits, but this did not change the curve at all. Then he decided to make the bins smaller, to look at a magnified picture of the structure of the curve. The two lumps had very rough shapes; particularly the more malignant one had large spikes and deep troughs. This was very consistent with just an accidental accumulation of poor measurements.

On the other hand, no matter how small he made the bins, the Stone particle described a pretty bell curve, which was typical of a real particle and the measurement error associated with it.

This was quite encouraging. As long as the two lumps did not grow much more in the remaining few days, this analysis would convince most other physicists that what he had was the true article.

As Ted continued to work on the data, he tried to wrestle with the bigger picture. In his heart, he knew that they had genuinely discovered something new. Gobi’s theory made perfect sense, and in fact Ted had discovered some recent experimental results which indicated, though only tangentially, that Gobi’s predictions were correct.

Ted was convinced that if by some fluke his own results were swamped by stray errors, within months someone else would announce finding the Stone particle. Therefore, it was not a case of whether there was really something there, but a question of when it would be found. More impor-

tantly, it was a question of who would be the first to find it. He was reminded of the old saw, about the fact that everyone knew who was the first person to announce the double-helix form of DNA, but no one knew who published the second paper. Few people realized that the key data for this discovery were actually accumulated by an unknown x-ray crystallographer named Rosalind Franklin, who published her work only slightly later than Watson and Crick. She died in obscurity while Watson and Crick went on to collect the Nobel Prize, based partially on her data.

Well, he had no intention of dying in obscurity. This was his chance at the brass ring, probably the only shot he would get. It would be a crime to waste it.

Ted glanced up at the screen to see the red letters marking the end of the roll. He wondered how long the machine had been waiting for him. They should put in an audio alarm to prevent this type of delay.

When he loaded another roll, the graph came back on the screen. The Stone particle had grown a little from the last batch of measurements. However, when he looked at the other two bumps, his stomach contracted, and he again felt pain around his solar plexus. Although one of the lumps seemed dormant, as it had been for a couple of weeks, the other had suddenly grown by almost thirty per cent. It was now well above the limit which would make the Stone particle just a statistical anomaly.

For the next few hours, Ted worked furiously off-line to analyze the new data. Again, he was convinced that the miserable lump was just an accidental accumulation of bad measurements, while his particle had every earmark of a real phenomenon. He stared at the screen for a long time, watching his life being buried under a slow accretion of erroneous data. He just knew it was false, and now, due to some totally random event, some failure in the computer program, his future was going down the drain. The Stone particle would be buried, only to be discovered a few months later by some other physicist. For the rest of his days he would carry in his mouth the bitter taste of failure, of knowing he had almost made it, but could not muster that last bit of effort that separated the heroes from the zeros.

It was four o'clock in the morning, and the lab was dark. His hands were bathed in the phosphorescent glow from the screen, giving his skin an azure tinge. It was dead silent, except for the sound of the servos, and a faint whisper from the computer.

Ted thought of Jennifer. She was probably sleeping peacefully, trusting him to take care of their future. He would not let her down.

He punched in a special code, which brought the programme to a stop, and then accessed the data in the section of the graph which held that poisonous lump which was destroying his life.

For the next two hours, he looked separately at every interaction that made up the bump. He found no common thread, nothing to tie them to-

gether. That in itself was encouraging, since one would expect that a real particle would be produced only under certain circumstances. Still, it was possible that there was something that a more sophisticated analysis would reveal, but that would take months. And he had only hours. He looked at his watch. It was past six. Already, the sky in the east was starting to brighten. For once, Seattle was going to have a clear day. The eastern rim had a definite pink tinge, in contrast with the dead gray that usually persisted all through April.

The others would be in soon. He had to make a decision now, or it would be too late. He thought of Jennifer again, and his stomach tightened. He typed in a password. His hand hovered above the keyboard, and he felt a wave of nausea sweep over him. His jaw muscles were clenched to the point of pain, as he tried to control the spasms around his solar plexus. The burning spread to his chest, and the conviction that this was a heart attack swept over him. He father had been forty-two . . .

He sat rigid, his damp shirt sticking to his back. Finally, the feeling passed, and he pushed the delete button.

In the next thirty minutes, he deleted forty-three interactions. Essentially, he had restored the troublesome bump to the size it was before his shift. This put it below the threshold, though only by a small margin. Any further large accumulations in that area by the end of the week would create the same problem, and his surgery would have been to no avail.

Ted made a commitment to himself that he would accept whatever the rest of the data showed. If he was right, and the sudden growth in the tumor during this one night was simply an accident, he could submit an abstract for the conference. It wasn't like he was fabricating data. He was just removing some noxious weeds that obscured the beautiful flower he had found.

If the weeds grew back, he would accept that there would be no submission, no particle, and, in all likelihood, no tenure.

By the time the others arrived, the machine was accumulating data gain. No one had the courage to inquire why the night's production was below the usual levels.

That afternoon, he felt exhausted from missing a night's sleep, and he debated skipping the Curriculum Committee meeting, but finally decided that he couldn't afford to appear negligent about his departmental responsibilities. He was alert enough to take evasive action, and Wilson ambushed him into a conversation for which, on this of all days, he had neither energy nor patience.

"I brought this just for you, Ted," Wilson was saying, waving a sheaf of papers at him.

"What is it?"

"Read it! This guy is an expert climatologist."

"Climatologist? He climbs mountains like you?"

Wilson just stared at him. The man had absolutely no sense of humor.

“He shows that even with the present level of greenhouse gas emissions, the temperature increase in the next century will be less than two degrees. That’s below the error from natural fluctuations.” There was a note of triumph in Wilson’s voice, as if he had just proved Fermat’s last theorem.

Ted took the papers. “I’ll read it tonight,” he said dispiritedly. For the next ten minutes he endured Wilson’s very detailed account of his ascent of some mountain in Chile. He was relieved when the meeting finally started, forcing an end to his colleague’s torrent of self-adulation.

As he drove home, Ted fought to stay awake, and several times woke with a jolt, realizing that he had dozed off, if only for a few milliseconds. He debated pulling off the road, but convinced himself that he could stay awake for the short time it would take to finish the drive.

* * *

Jennifer was in general not loquacious, and sometimes it seemed to him that they would be doomed to mute existence unless he initiated some discussion. But tonight he was too tired, and it was therefore a relief that for once she was talkative. She was pleased because Captain, the horse she had been riding for the past couple of months, had finally accepted her control.

“Yanosh said that two other people before me had completely given up on Captain.”

“That’s wonderful, dear. I’m very proud of you.”

“You know, Yanosh comes from a family of famous Hungarian hussars. That’s like horse soldiers that . . .”

“I know what hussars are, dear,” Ted interrupted. He sighed. He felt dirty. Dirty, and exhausted.

After dinner, he took a shower and went to bed. It was only eight o’clock. Jennifer said she understood, and said she would go to see a movie with a friend she had met in her cooking class.

* * *

Ted, as well as his crew, were all nervous for the next few days, as the last of the film was analyzed. They were relieved to see that the Stone particle grew a little bit, and the interfering bumps grew less. By the end of the week, one of them became insignificant compared to other background. The other, the one which Ted had surgically altered, was just below the threshold where it would mean trouble.

This freed them to submit an abstract for the conference which was now two months away. In the meantime, they had to do a great deal of data interpretation and write the paper that Ted would present. Of course, that assumed that their abstract would be accepted for presentation. There was

also some uncertainty about whether the competing groups would be presenting papers. It would all become clear in the next few weeks.

Surprisingly, Ted found the wait more nerve-wracking than the mad scramble to analyze the data on time. At least during that period the exhausting schedule absorbed his energy.

He now spent his evenings at home, but even this did not seem satisfying. For some reason, he found Jennifer to be a little moody, though he was not sure whether he was just projecting his own restlessness onto her.

One evening, they were talking about the paper that Wilson had forced on him. He had finally gotten around to reading it, and found it to be a horrible misinterpretation of doubtful experiments. He was just rehearsing on Jennifer the litany of deficiencies which he would present to Wilson the next time their paths crossed.

“At least he can claim that there is a range of values attributable to human greenhouse gas emissions, and he chooses to use the lowest number in that range. It’s not only invalid from a scientific point of view, but socially irresponsible.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Jennifer said, “But Ted, what if he’s right, and the lower number is correct?” Her voice was soft, but there was a surprising firmness in it.

Ted gazed at her for a few seconds. He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice as he said, “You’re becoming quite the little scientist, dear.”

The topic of conversation shifted as Ted asked her about Captain, but he felt resentment from Jennifer for the rest of the evening. He considered apologizing, but then decided against it. After all, what exactly had he done? Should he apologize just because he had reminded her that she was not a scientist?

It was a week later that they were notified that their submission for the conference had been accepted. In fact, the preliminary information had generated sufficient excitement that Marcel Gobi, the theorist from CERN, was being flown in all the way from Switzerland to give a presentation.

As a bonus, when Ted’s group scanned the list of abstracts, they were gratified to see no submissions from the competing research groups. Clearly, their around-the-clock gambit had paid off, and they had succeeded in completing their analysis before the others.

The little group worked furiously for the next weeks, finalizing their interpretation of the results, and generating all the graphs and diagrams which Ted would present to the conference. Although Ted would be the one to actually appear before several thousand other physicists, all four of their names would be on the paper which was to be presented. For the rest of their lives, they would share credit for the discovery of the Stone particle.

* * *

A few days later, Ted was in Gottheil's office, discussing Murray Wilson's efforts to get signatures for a rebuttal of their letter on global warming. After some discussion, they concluded that an official response would be unwise. Ted made a move to leave, but he sensed that the Chairman had something more to say. The early June sunshine slanted in from the tall windows, dust motes dancing in the shafts of light.

"I read your abstract for the Annual Meeting, Ted," Gottheil said, forming a steeple with his long slender fingers. "Quite impressive."

"Yes, the interpretation work we're doing now is giving us some fascinating information on diffractive interactions."

Gottheil looked at him with fatherly affection for some moments, and then said, "Of course, I can't say anything officially, but personally I am looking forward to having you as part of the department."

Ted was stunned into silence and then he jumped up and grabbed Gottheil's hand to shake it, no doubt injuring the slender appendage in the process.

"Thank you, Bob, thank you."

Gottheil withdrew his hand, but he was smiling. "Of course, this is just between you and me for the moment."

"I understand. Thank you."

That night, on the way home, Ted's heart was singing. He had it all planned out. He would take Jennifer out for a fancy dinner, and they would really celebrate. Their lives were set now. He saw in front of him the long happy years of family life, professional honors, perhaps the Nobel Prize one day. And he would grow old with Jennifer, watching their children become adults, hopefully to be respected scientists themselves.

The sun was low in the sky as he drove down the gravel driveway. The ancient cedars towered above the little house, and the grass still retained its emerald hue from the rainy season.

The house seemed strangely empty as he entered. Jennifer's riding boots were not in the mud room, which was consistent with the fact that she was not yet home, but strangely, even the yellow slicker, which hung forlornly on a hook all summer, was absent.

Ted walked into the dining room. The table was empty, its dark sheen broken only by a single white envelope in the center. Ted picked it up. It was not a regular postal envelope, more like the ones used for Christmas cards, made from some sort of expensive vellum. There was nothing written on the outside.

He tore the envelope open. The letter inside began, "Dear Ted, I'm sorry."

ANNE O'HEARN is a graduate of Queen's University and lives in Burnaby, British Columbia. Her writing has appeared in various newspapers as well as poetry contest publications such as *Blue Mountain Arts*, *Tickled by Thunder*, *Bard's Ink*, and was short-listed in *The Writers' Union of Canada Short Prose Competition*.

Anne O'Hearn / **Three Poems**

El Niño

Christmastime: another child born, and they
named him El Niño. Weak at birth,
warm to the touch, like mother's milk, he came

into being on the western coast
of South America. Was he the warmth
of Jesus Christ? Or was he the blanket surround?
So complex, the avenue of exchange,

between atmospheric winds and strong
ocean currents: tugging, pulling, pushing
like the virgin Mary giving birth (in her dreams).
Tepid waters to bathe — for all
to take pleasure, except the fish. Some fish

maybe. Flooded rains in Peru: the anchovy swam
into a horror movie, while the hungry mackerel
glided through — consuming

the baby sockeye, like ruthless scavengers.
The beaches, flooded with sun-worshippers: winter
rains in southern California fell in torrents
as the maddening crowds took cover.
Moist air rose like a baby's blanket

from the ocean: buoyant, twirling, forming
clouds — tropical storms. Jet streams
soared, guiding their winds across the planet.

El Niño had spoken to all.

Nor'Easter

First, take a very large bowl — a wooden mixing spoon (the kind you use for cake batter) and place it all down on the counter. Do not touch.

*

Grab the child and place on high stool, for teaching experience: gender unimportant.

*

Turn on the stove: low to medium heat (wear a flowered apron — wild daisies), then open the fridge to cool the air as you unlatch the oven door for viewing.

Boil a kettle of water, like you're getting ready to make a cup of tea. But don't use teabags. Let the air breathe in the vapour.

*

Turn on the ceiling fan, an upper level disturbance to start the cooking process — clash of the air masses: this method of cooking is best used on the Atlantic coast. Adjustment of recipe will most likely not work elsewhere. The fiddleheads in Nova Scotia have seen all.

*

Depending on the season, this recipe will produce snow, ice and even thunderstorms if there's enough warmth from the oven.

*

Results may vary. Make sure you turn off all appliances when complete.

*

Do not use recipe in summer months.

Virga

Wheat fields: arms thrashing
like childish women running, giggling

carelessly through the rows.
Dry air rustling husks
brushing in euphoric sexual
encounters — touching, reaching
high: thirsty.

Sky, dotted in white puffs
(the lady with her Philadelphia cream cheese
looks down, laughing). She knows
what others do not. Her cloud

heavy with tiny droplets of moisture
— she lets loose.
They gaze upward (the space
between earth and the unknown),
and they watch as puffy white cumulus clouds

— descend —

streaking the sky, but never
touching the outreached hands

of the welcoming wheat below.
The cream cheese lady leans over
and cups the rain, breathing it back
into herself

as it begins to fall.

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*. Set in Switzerland, *To Travel the Distance* is a novella-length work in progress. It deals with the nostalgic longings and nagging dislocation of Ulyssa Segantini, a character who first appear in Schraner's short story, "Dream Dig," published by *The Journey Prize Anthology*, 2001. Her book, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*, was published in November of 2006.

To Travel the Distance

(The Serialized Saga of Ulyssa Segantini)

Chapter 7

Margrith Schraner

CLOSE UP, BENEATH the unforgiving light of the sun, the village fountain of Riom looked unremarkable. Ulyssa said as much to Tomas. Surely he must have noticed the blemishes, the numerous cracks and chips that marred the surface of the stone. What did he think of the dull color of the mortar? In the photo he was proposing to take, whatever beauty the fountain might have had would surely be lost. The stark light would flatten everything, make it look dull and harsh and two-dimensional. She had envisioned something altogether different, she said, something gentler and more diffuse. The fountain should look bathed, as if in a wistful light, which would give it the unearthly appearance she knew from her dreams.

"The fountain is perfect the way it is," Tomas declared. He spoke in a deliberate monotone and his face had a chiselled look. There was an edge to his jaw she hadn't noticed before. She blamed it on the sunlight. He tried to dodge the light, ducking this way and that while looking at her through the camera lens. "Just let me try a few more vantage points," he said, still not satisfied.

At first, Ulyssa had tried to humor him, but she felt less inclined now. The quantities of vermouth and beer she had imbibed with Tomas at the San Lorenzo Bar & Grill had stopped singing in her veins. She gave a sigh. To win him over would require words, in addition to logic and reason. What she wanted him to aim for was a very specific look, she explained, something which in tone, at least, would make allusions to the painting by Giovanni Segantini. Surely he remembered the painting at the Museum

in St. Moritz, the one of the girl by the fountain. The painter had caught it perfectly, she said, that quality of softness, the air suffused with gold, as if laden with pollen — that air of engaging, mellow ripeness that even now would prompt her to turn back at the Museum and have a second look.

Tomas did remember the painting. He said he might give it some thought. He was now squatting with the camera propped up on one knee. He explained to her that he was trying to see things in a new light, from a different angle, as it were. It amazed him to think that Giovanni Segantini could have set up his easel to paint right at this very fountain.

“The fountain looks far too ugly,” Ulyssa protested. “I won’t have it in my picture.”

“The fountain is perfect the way it is,” Tomas countered, straightening up. “What interests me now is to document things as they appear to the naked eye, to shoot a straight arrow at reality, as it were.” He had written far too many stories of late to want to create further illusions, he explained. Artifice was starting to wear him out. He would be opting for realism this time, he said, and that was that.

Ulyssa didn’t care for the kind of realism he was talking about, especially since it seemed to involve some kind of torture, having to stand there, on the hot paving stones, while she posed for him. She’d had enough, she said; the soles of her feet were burning.

Tomas went to stand directly across the fountain from her. “Try gathering up some of those blossoms,” he said, indicating the sprigs of lime that swirled toward her, having been set in motion by the water issuing from the spout.

She scooped up some of the water with her hand. It felt surprisingly cool and refreshing to her touch, so cool, she said, she wanted to jump in — headlong — like the girl had done in the fairy tale.

Tomas lowered his camera to look at her. “What fairy tale was that?”

Ulyssa couldn’t recall the title. But the water was certainly tempting. She would have liked to slide in, to lower herself as if into a bath, she said. Although that wasn’t what the girl in the fairy tale had done.

“She jumped into a fountain?”

“No — not into a fountain,” Ulyssa told him. “The girl jumps into a well.”

He seemed surprised. “By accident or by design?”

Ulyssa hesitated, unsure. “A bit of both, I guess,” she said, feeling an odd sensation pass across her shoulders, as if she were called upon to brace herself. “It’s a long story,” she finally told him. “A girl sits next to a well. She is spinning and pricks her finger. When she goes to wash off the blood, the spindle falls in. She’s afraid she’ll incur the wrath of her stepmother and decides she must go and retrieve the spindle.”

Tomas’s face had disappeared behind the camera again. “I’m not

surprised,” he said. “The wicked stepmother in the story is a dead giveaway. I can tell you right now,” he added confidently, as if he had studied the matter in depth, “the tale was most likely penned by the Brothers Grimm.”

Ulyssa stood staring at the ripples on the water. Tomas was missing the point, she wanted to tell him. The stepmother was a pretext: In truth, what the story revolved around was the well. The ripples on the surface were deceptive. The fountain’s water was deep — uncommonly deep. An odd sensation had now lodged itself at the base of her spine. It felt like a weakness she couldn’t seem to shake off. She was afraid she might keel over, or worse, that she might fall in and sink to the bottom, lifeless, like a stone.

“In fiction, we would refer to the act of jumping as a propitious moment,” Tomas presently said. “It’s generally used to signal the turning-point of a story.”

For some reason, the feeling of vertigo in her stomach had intensified. She leaned one hip up against the fountain in hopes of steadying herself. She wasn’t an authority on the matter, she told him. But as far as she could see, there was nothing propitious about jumping into a body of water, least of all if it was the size of a well.

“It’s a fictional device,” Tomas countered, speaking with the authority of someone who was informed. “But personally, I’m more inclined to think of it as a liberating experience.”

“Liberating?” How could jumping into a well be a liberating experience, she wanted to ask, but Tomas gestured, asking her to stand further away from the camera, to bring her face closer to the water issuing from the spout. “It will certainly be a liberating experience for me, when I finally complete this photo shoot,” he said, passing briskly over whatever objections she might have had. “Who knows, my photo might end up making a splash. I might become the first modern-day photographer who succeeds in carrying Segantini’s famous painting – fountain, girl, and all – into the twenty-first century.” He grinned at her. “Bypassing the twentieth century altogether — call me Mr. Postmodern.”

Earlier in their relationship she would have mistaken his silly half-smile for an enamored look, but now she recognized it for what it was: He had merely been smitten by a new idea. She gave a shrug and wiped at the beads of moisture that had collected on her forehead, rivulets that were running down into her eyes, making them sting. The sun’s rays were nipping at her brow, she complained. Helios was sinking his sharp, little teeth into her flesh. She had had enough of posing for one day, she said. Tomas really was no better than the dentist, who made her suffer while holding her there. “I’m starting to feel like a piece of chewing gum stuck to someone’s shoe on a hot summer’s day,” she added.

“Whoa,” he said soothingly, as though he were trying to rein in an

unruly animal. “Please don’t go blasting off into the ionosphere.” He inquired whether perhaps she had forgotten to take her Evil Heat tablets before leaving the guest house that morning. A resonant twang from the Baroque church bordering the square interrupted him. He spun around and looked up at the bell tower. “What? Two o’clock, already?”

Tomas should have known it was siesta time. She was ready to throw in the towel, she said. The intervening years of living in Canada hadn’t prepared her to face such vindictive summer heat. There was heat and dust everywhere. It was getting on her nerves. She felt hemmed in by the presence of so much stone, she said, by the balusters and stairways outside the municipal office, by the eroded gryphon and urns shaped like artichokes. The heat radiated off the basin of the fountain and the cobbles beneath her feet, the impeccable façade of the church with its layers of brick and plaster and scalloped ledge so enormous it could support an entire row of plaster saints. The heat was so thick it made her want to take a chisel to it to break it up.

Tomas seemed unperturbed. “There. Let’s see you get a little closer to the spout,” he said, planting himself squarely in front of her.

She felt his hand brushing against her shoulder. It annoyed her. She was extraordinarily thirsty, she said. The pleasant haziness induced by the Campari had given way to a dullness that bordered on a headache. She should warn him that his dogged pursuit of some ideal wasn’t going to lead anywhere. She turned to wave his camera aside. “I’ll tell you right now, it won’t be a pretty picture.”

But he persisted. “Try extending your hand — pretend you’re catching the water with your fingertips,” he suggested, inching backward while refocusing the camera. “*Splendido!*” he shouted, before she had even started to hold out her palm. He said he felt encouraged by what he saw through the lens. “As for the background, well, I’ve discovered exactly what I’ve been looking for,” he told her, elated. “An element from the past to help situate the present — the St. Laurentius church is perfect.”

Ulyssa didn’t care one iota about the saints that stood there, on top of the ledge, she said. She would rather have scuttled off and gone to hide somewhere — anywhere — in the chinks of a brick wall, like a scorpion. She could see herself resting in the tenebrous interior of the *Trais Fluors*, the shutters of their guest room closed against the day’s heat, the crickets having fallen silent. She couldn’t wait to let the entire weight of her body sink onto the mattress, she told him. She envisioned lying with her head against a cool pillow, next to Tomas, and allowing herself to dream of sparkling rivers, at last.

“It will only take a minute,” Tomas reassured her. “It’s rather simple — just put yourself in the young girl’s shoes.”

She balked. Tomas was wrong if he expected her to go around impersonating some girl in a nineteenth-century painting. For one thing,

she felt neither supple nor lithe enough. Besides, why would a girl in a Segantini painting be wearing shoes? Ulyssa had never bothered wearing shoes in the summer when she was a child, she told him. Once, she remembered sitting on the edge of a fountain with her feet dangling in the water, when someone had come by to reprimand her. “I was made to feel like I had broken a taboo,” she said.

Tomas was hardly listening. He was preoccupied with the details of the painting, he said. He wanted to allude to them in his photograph, as a kind of trademark, or signature. “Remember, the young girl’s gaze is soft,” he instructed her. “Try to assume an inward look, as if you were deep in thought or deliberating an existential question, perhaps.”

Ulyssa had no desire whatsoever to comply with his wishes. How could he even have conceived of her trying to look as if she had just stepped out of a Segantini painting? The idea was preposterous, she said. He was wrong if he thought it was as easy as stepping out of a bath; she was far from feeling refreshed. If the truth be told, she felt miserable, thrown out of her rhythm. It had been hours since they had gotten off the bus – an eternity, in fact.

“The *Hürlimann* and the Campari are to blame,” Tomas put in, like a doctor with an all-too-ready diagnosis. He told her she was sleep-deprived. “Now, try turning your gaze toward the water gushing from the spout,” he said, busying himself with the light meter. “And don’t forget to breathe.”

“All I see is a glare,” she protested. “It’s going to blind me. In fact, it already has.” She felt as parched as a dragon ready to spit fire, she told him. But it certainly wasn’t the waters of this particular fountain she was thirsting for. She had seen the slime lurking at the bottom of the stone basin, plain as day, thank you very much.

“The slime is nothing to worry about,” he told her, kneeling at her feet, his camera pointed up at her. “Try looking directly into the camera.” There were exceptions, he said. He had read about an incident where cow feces leeching into an old fountain had given rise to a dreadful case of beaver fever. But details such as these were hardly of interest to anyone, except perhaps to novelists like himself. He had made a note of the article and was planning to incorporate the idea in his novel, *Every Mountain Has Its Shadow*, he added.

“Hold out your hand,” he presently said with such urgency she felt she had no choice but to comply with his wishes. “Make your hand look like a cup. You’re about to have your first slurp of water, remember?”

She stood frowning in the sun, motionless, like a statue, and waited for the click of the shutter. What was taking him so long?

“Excellent,” he said. “Now, turn your head a little bit more and — ”

“Stop directing me,” she cut in. “I don’t need your prompts. Who do you think you are – Federico Fellini?” She would have much preferred Tomas to have been a painter rather than a photographer, she thought. He

might have been less obsessed with controlling her every move. “I’m thoroughly familiar with the painting,” she told him, resisting the urge to grab the camera away from him. “I know it better than you do — every detail, inside out.” Even if she were a blind person, she would be able to see the young girl — as clearly as if she had been looking through Giovanni Segantini’s eyes.

It was as if the young girl had been conjured up: Ulyssa saw her standing there, across the fountain, precisely where the painter had positioned her. Every detail was as enchanting as she remembered it.

Ulyssa stood for a long time, mesmerized by the bluish shadow on the white sleeve of the girl’s blouse and by the sunlight, refracted like a halo around her hair. Strangely enough, the babble of the fountain had ceased; it was as quiet as if someone had turned off a tap.

Beneath the surface of the water, past the linden blossoms that floated on top like paper boats, Ulyssa could see Tomas’s naked torso. It looked oddly pendulous, as if it were suspended over a bowl of sky. The sky was methylene blue and made her think of the color of a pool in which she had almost drowned. From the depths, she saw the lens of the camera glinting back at her.

When she glanced up, she noticed Tomas’s figure skirting the edge of the fountain. In the water, she followed his reflection, moving sideways, like a crab. He was complementing her on the look of her smooth and peachy cheeks. His voice grew husky. “Hold your head up high – Contessa – please,” he said, his camera held in readiness. “I’m about to create a completely original style,” he announced, “something utterly *dramatico*.” He tossed around a few ideas. “But for the *pièce de résistance*,” he added, “I’d like to see an enigmatic smile play on your lips.”

Contessa — the name made her feel superior. She was dimly aware that she had gathered a small audience: Two crones were watching her intently from their bench outside the municipal office. She hastily brushed away a few strands from her damp forehead and straightened up, trying to stand as tall as she could. “How do I look?” she asked, sending a coy smile back at the camera.

Tomas paused to consider her question. “Like an innocent, little girl feeding a squirrel,” he said, finally, “afraid that it will bite.” He said he had envisioned a bolder look. And there was of course the question of her hair to consider. Was she aware, for instance, that the grey roots had started to show? How long had it been since she had had her last color treatment? “But not to worry,” he said almost in the same breath, “I’ve got the perfect solution. I’ll try a different angle. How would you like to climb up, on top of the basin?”

“*Magnifico*,” he shouted, as soon as she had managed to balance herself on top. He seemed pleased by what he saw and was now whistling between his teeth. She found herself humming along to a sultry tune that had made

her jump up from her seat and join others on the dance floor during the sixties: *Besa me, besa me mucho* –

Below, in the fountain, she watched a single, white cloud come into view. She felt the crystal brightness of the sky impinge on her retinas. A prickly sensation passed over the skin of her arms.

“Great light, great profile, *great schnozzola*,” Tomas exclaimed, followed by a long silence. He seemed to be having problems with the camera again. “I can’t get a proper reading,” he told her and began to fiddle with the light meter. What was more, he had discovered a shadow; it cut into her nose and destroyed the look of her plump and peachy cheek. “The daylight is an abomination, an assault to the naked eye,” he added with such frustration, Ulyssa feared he might throw the camera into the fountain. Then he caught himself. “Fellini was a clever man,” he added. “He shot his famous fountain scene at night.”

“Ah! The fountain scene in *La Dolce Vita*!” Whether the movie had been shot in the daytime or at night was immaterial, Ulyssa said. What really mattered was the texture of Fellini’s film, the allure of contrast, black satin against alabaster skin, for instance. “The sexy blonde from Sweden is the main attraction, of course. She wades into a fountain the size of a grotto pool. It reminded me of the fountain outside the Boboli gardens, in Florence.”

“I remember the scene quite well; some Gino wades in, waist-deep, after her,” Tomas put in. “They end up frolicking and getting wet together. His name was Bruno, wasn’t it?”

She was certain his name was Marcello. But the name of the starlet was eluding her now.

“Her name was Sylvia,” Tomas said, trying to shade the camera lens with his hand. “Sylvia. Her name is engraved in my memory. Who said that memory can’t make you live twice?”

Ulyssa felt as if her hair was on fire. She wouldn’t be able to keep standing up on the rim, trying to balance for much longer, she told him. But she wanted Tomas to know, it wasn’t Sylvia’s name that was engraved in the memory of the cinema aficionados: What had mesmerized them, all the good men of Switzerland, was the strapless evening gown.

Tomas agreed with her. “Sylvia was unforgettable – that’s exactly how one reviewer put it, in the *Helsingin Sanomat*.” The low-cut evening gown had been a stroke of genius, a stunning *tour de force* on Fellini’s part. He would always remember it: the look of utmost elegance, the dark obsidian sheen of the fabric against the pallor of her décolleté. It had melted many a man’s ice cream cone at the cinema, Tomas added. He lowered his voice. “It was summer; she was young – “

“You’re mumbling, again,” Ulyssa told him. “Take the camera away from your face.”

“Fellini never tired of beautiful women,” Tomas said. His camera now

hung loosely from its strap around his neck; Ulyssa could see herself reflected in his sunglasses. She told him about a film critic in a Swiss newspaper who had completely overstepped the boundaries of propriety when he confessed that watching Sylvia and Marcello together in the fountain had made him crave the endless pleasures of the night. "I'm almost certain he said *endless*," she added. "Maybe he said *mindless*; I don't know, anymore."

"It only stands to reason," Tomas began, but he stopped himself. Something in the water's murky depths had attracted his attention. "At any rate, it is my supreme pleasure now to be melding my mind with Fellini's," he announced, a prime-time smile on his face. "My photograph of you will serve as the proverbial proof of the pudding."

Ulyssa was curious to find out what had attracted his attention and tiptoed along the basin. Peering down into the water, she saw something glinting there, half-concealed by mossy green slime. "Not three copper coins!" she exclaimed, laughing. Such things never actually occurred in real life, did they? Surely they were the stuff of fairy tales.

"On the contrary," he told her. "Three coins, three wishes." He seemed quite certain. "It's an omen," he added. "It's my destiny to come back to this fountain, time after time –"

"I can't quite see it," Ulyssa told him.

"See what?"

"Your fate – I mean, your destiny — your Eternal Return." She didn't remember who had first coined the words. Was it Nietzsche? Or a French poet, perhaps? But there was a legend, she said. It was connected to the Trevi Fountain in Rome and promised a safe return to anyone who was willing to drink of its water.

Tomas wiped at his sunglasses with a cloth handkerchief. "I'd rather stay away from the Eternal city," he said. "As for drinking the water from a fountain – any fountain — I wouldn't take the chance, if I were you." He put the sunglasses back on his nose. "Let's get on with the show," he said. He took in a noisy breath. He didn't need three coins to tell him what to do, he said, bustling about with the camera. His job was to bring Fellini's diva back to the silver screen, to make her come to life, figuratively speaking, of course. And he wasn't going to forget her — no, siree — Ulyssa was perfect for the part. He wanted her to shine. Already, he could see the camera lights; they were all turned on and ready to go. In fact, they were so bright, they would light up the entire night sky.

Tomas was on the verge of a breakthrough, Ulyssa thought. Otherwise, how could he have visualized his finished masterpiece or have described his outstanding composition in detail, with Ulyssa's tall and slender figure at the center, appearing as a silhouette against the play of multiple water jets?

She thought better than to contradict him. Standing atop the rim of the

fountain, she enjoyed the feeling of a fine mist from the water jets landing on her bare arms. There seemed to be voices mingled with the sound of water issuing from the pipe; they reminded her of fragments of conversation heard through an open door. She heard the fountain singing. It was the song that all fountains sang, the song that sang babies to sleep and made mothers dream.

A distinct voice stood out from the babble of the fountain; it was Tomas's voice, complementing her on the captivating look of her evening gown. Even if he had three magic coins in his pocket, it wasn't the Trevi fountain in Rome he was setting his sights on for his Eternal Return, he said.

He was now facing her directly. If indeed there was such a thing as an Eternal Return, he would want it to take place in St. Moritz, he said. "How about that pastry shop?" He winked at Ulyssa. "I'd prefer my Eternal Return to take place there."

She remembered the visit to the *Sweet Nothings* shop, in particular the offhand comment Tomas had made regarding the sensuous appeal of the pastries. He had stood at the counter for an interminable length of time, peering at the pastries on the glass shelves in the display case, the whir of an old-fashioned fan overhead, unable to decide what to buy. The strawberry tarts lying on their divans of frilly paper lace were irresistible, he said as he stood there, eyeing the girl standing behind the counter. He was especially taken by the traditional Graubünden walnut torte, and even more so by the tender *mille-feuilles* with their generous layers of custard, topped with a pale, pink glaze.

The girl behind the counter giggled. There was something Rubenesque about the girl, Ulyssa thought, especially about the style of her attire, a low-cut, blue peasant dress with an opulent underlay of a frilly cotton blouse that brought out the sun-kissed color of her skin. She was leaning forward while listening to Tomas, one elbow propped on the counter.

"Those muffins, up front," Tomas said, turning aside briefly to speak to Ulyssa, who was standing next to him, "the ones that are nestled on their divans of paper lace – I wonder if they're filled with marzipan."

Tomas, she was certain, had been alluding to the contents safeguarded by the clerk's bodice. His remark may have seemed innocuous, had it not been for the look of enchantment Ulyssa had witnessed passing between the two of them. It had alerted her to pay close attention. There had been something unchecked about his choice of words, which continued to vex her even now. The matter might have blown over as quickly as a rain shower on a hot summer's day, had Tomas not been standing at the counter for such an inordinate length of time, jingling the coins in his pocket.

Later that evening, at the guest house, Ulyssa was surprised to discover that the girl at the pastry shop was still on Tomas's mind. He had even devised a nickname for her; he now referred to her as 'The Renoir of Graubünden'. "She's an exact replica of the bar maid in the famous Renoir

painting,” he explained.

“Renoir?” Ulyssa had challenged him. Surely he meant to say Rubens, the Flemish painter. Wasn’t it Rubens who did all those busty women in *The Garden of Love*? Their exchange had devolved into a lengthy argument. Tomas repeated that the girl at the pastry shop was the spitting image of the bar maid in the Renoir painting.

But Ulyssa insisted: She wasn’t blind; she had seen it all with her own two eyes, how mesmerized he had been at the shop, how he had been inspecting the contours of the girl’s décolleté as if he had been looking at one of the pastries. “The look of the girl in Renoir’s painting is demure,” Ulyssa had concluded in a final attempt to prove that she was right. “That of the girl at the pastry shop was far more — enticing.”

Tomas, in his inimitable attempt to make light of the matter, had resorted to quoting Fellini: *There is no end, there is no beginning. There is only the infinite passion of life.* What irked Ulyssa most of all was that he should have only one wish, namely to return to the *Sweet Nothings* pastry shop. Even now, while standing there, posing for Tomas atop the fountain’s basin, she half expected to hear him jingle the coins in his pocket.

“Camera, lights — action!” she heard him shout, an impresario in charge of his own fantasy show. “The propitious moment has arrived,” he announced with theatrical aplomb. “Pretend you’re about to wade into the water.”

Ulyssa obeyed without giving it much thought; her eyes were closed against the imaginary brightness of countless camera lights. She wasn’t at all surprised when she seemed to feel the water touch her feet. “Perfect,” he called, his voice oddly amplified. Her body felt weightless. It was as if she were held aloft by the sheer brightness of the camera lights. For the briefest of moments, she was convinced that she was walking on water.

When she opened her eyes again, the water in the fountain lay before her like a mirror. Visible beyond the linden blossoms that floated on the surface were two white clouds, seemingly adrift in a sea of methylene blue. Something moved, like a phantom curtain blowing in a breeze. As she watched, the curtain gathered itself into the shape of a black coat and she discerned a face staring back at her.

She recognized the man in the black coat, although it had been years since she had last glimpsed him, as a fleeting apparition at the castle of Riom, when she had been seven years old. It came as a shock to see Giovanni Segantini appearing in broad daylight for a second time. Then, as now, she felt an inexplicable urge to walk toward him, and would have done so with the assuredness of a sleepwalker, had not his gesture stopped her in her tracks. She remembered the gesture, the intent look he had given her before adjusting the black coat slung over his shoulders and turning to leave.

When she looked up, expecting to catch sight of Segantini walking

away from the fountain, he had vanished, every bit as elusive as a ghost. She heard Tomas yelling, "Hold on!" and then she lost her footing. She knew she had slipped and tried to clumsily right herself, but the world turned topsy-turvy and she felt herself reel. Her arms flailed and she groped for something to hold onto, but her efforts were in vain. She seemed to have no choice but to let herself go, to allow herself to be precipitated, toward the solitary white cloud she saw hanging there, like an apple from the sky.

Her feet sinking into mud had stirred up the mossy-green slime, layered centuries deep. She heard Tomas frantically calling out instructions, but his words were muffled and then they were drowned out altogether as water gushed into her ears. She gasped and spluttered and tried clumsily to right herself, but the water was like a broiling mass of bubbles swirling round and round, and she was swirled along with them as if in a great big cauldron.

When she finally managed to get her nose out of the water, she caught sight of Tomas raising a crooked elbow as if to ward off some calamity. A wave set in motion by her plunge was heaving itself over the rim, drenching him from head to toe. It barley missed his camera.

"My poor Squirrel Cheeks," he snorted, barely able to conceal his amusement. "You almost drowned in the Fountain of Youth."

Ulyssa was not amused. "You threw me into the fountain!" she protested. She heard shouts across the square. Looking up, she saw the owner of the San Lorenzo Bar & Grill, standing on the terrace of his establishment, gesticulating wildly, waving a cloth napkin as if he were seeing someone off at a train station.

The two crones who had been sitting on the bench outside the municipal office came running toward the fountain, calling out with a great deal of urgency in their voices. They grabbed her wrists and pulled her up with their strong arms, water dripping from her clothes. They tugged at her as if she were a small child in danger of drowning and then pulled her along, away from the fountain.

"Where are you taking me?" She glanced back over her shoulder. "Tomas, help me! I'm being absconded with."

He raised the camera to his eye. "Don't worry. I'll get it all down on film, my dear — every moment of it."

The crones clucked their tongues and chattered amongst themselves, and looking across the square, shouted something back to the owner of the Bar & Grill, in a dialect that sounded as unintelligible to Ulyssa's ears as the gibberish of crows.

BETH L. VIRTANEN (see page 32). The following poems come from her collection, *Guarding Passage* (Penfield Books, 2005).

Beth L. Virtanen / **Four Poems**

Origins and Identity

There are questions I see
in these brown Yup'ik eyes
before me, questions concerning
my own level of humanity, my
goodness, the depth to which
my humility might reach, and how
firmly rooted my need to narrate
over their stories of existence and
subsume incorrectly all of their
experience with an autocratic voice
which they've heard once too often.

In my communication, I seek
confirmation of that which matches
and doesn't match my face, great
Finnish heritage, the *Kalevala*,
those *runo* singers buried in my
family plot, and I strive to share
the other side that they don't even
suspect, and from whom my image
appears not to have come, and I own
a small connection to *Gitchee Gumee*,
the Ojibwa, but I don't insist, for there's
been enough trading on the slim facts
of identity and not enough reliance
on common human decency.

Swamp Roses

Irises, those wild, swamp
roses, hardy as thistle,
take root and grow
anywhere, so much more
versatile than the slender
orchid, the pink lady slipper
who hides in the just moist
evergreen wood where it's
over moist for the fern and
too shady for the tiger lily,
but irises to the scorched
hillside cling, onto the ditch
alongside the road, or perched
on the outcropping, purple
or yellow, white and laughing,
hardy peasant women chuckling
together in knots here and there,
blocky and unselfconscious.

I Happened to Lose

I happened to lose a friend recently.
I did not notice the tendrils of connection
slipping, nor the thread of conversation
unraveling until I tried to speak but
no words came and silence eroded
the last of the warp and weave,
leaving a void that was once traversed
by the intricate work.

Somewhere our tapestries were
hung on different walls, severed
from each other, but each
did not lack for what was not,
only the juxtaposition and collaboration
of the two ceased to play, but played
instead off other works, and I happened
to notice the play was irrevocably different.

Three Words Cost Ten

Traversing my ground to yours
drives me beyond my own
thinking space to find yours
distant from my own.

I walk a simple mile
tugging along a walking stick
to point the way from me
to you, from mine to yours.

You drag sledges of bricks,
a load filled by imperialism
and its expansionist protocol
to say three words cost ten.

I read your lips as they
skip around the frivolity
and get to the essence that
you feign shit but speak pearls.

You own no shoes like mine
sturdy and black leather
with cushioned insoles and
reinforced arches.

You walk in boots,
great hardened slabs
so all who wish to know
can hear you coming.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. *Saint Julian of Southwest Wyoming* is a novel-in-progress.

Saint Julian of Southwest Wyoming

Chapter 1

Ernest Hekkanen

I'M SURE EVERYONE who is about to read this account will recall how Julian Cape – the eminent critic, silk-screen artist and popular culture guru – gave up his whirlwind lifestyle in New York City and moved to the countryside to lead an ascetic life, because the transition was conducted with a great deal of fanfare and spectacle. First, he delivered a cranky epistle denouncing his life of avarice in the pages of *Organt*, a magazine he had helped to found in 1968. That was followed by a well-publicized auction at Sotheby's, where, with much trumpeting and playing to the audience, he divested himself of his Upper East Side townhouse; his twin Rolls Royces, *Gilbert* and *Sullivan*; all the knickknacks, furniture and *objets d'art* he had amassed over four decades; and, of course, every stitch of clothing mothballed in his wardrobe – which, we mustn't forget, occupied one entire floor of a warehouse. Doubtless you will recall the tragicomic figure he struck in the midst of his divestiture, when he tipped one last gleaming glass of champagne to his lips, his flaxen hair falling stiffly to one side, his black-framed spectacles, inset with rhinestones, sparkling in the camera flashes of the paparazzi.

He stood on the auction block, proffering first one hand and then the other, displaying the gem-laden rings which were like companions to him. "No, Madame, my hands are not for sale," he said at one point during the auction. "But should I ever tire of using them, I shall send them directly to you at your gallery, you can rest assured of that."

With the haughty, confident panache we had come to expect of him, he divested himself of each article of clothing he had worn to the auction,

performing what one journalist would describe as “the most opulent, gaudy striptease in history.” When his last vestige of clothing had been sold to the highest bidder, he stood naked before us, exposed as though to the ridicule of the world; and at that juncture, many of us were struck, quite painfully, by something we had declined to acknowledge until then, and that had to do with the physical state of our impresario. The perpetually youthful man whom we had known for over forty years, the one with the corn-silk hair that always managed to look a fright, had aged. He had become flabby and stooped or, if you will, *unglamorous*; he resembled, more than anything else, an iris bruised by the stinging blows of time. This revelation silenced us. Our precious clown had become *old*; we had failed to notice his Dorian Gray change in demeanor, until then.

When we were all suitably hushed – so thoroughly one could have heard a pin drop – Julian mustered his madcap, irreverent charm, and signaled for me to unfold his robe. “My new attire,” he said. “From now on, this will be the only thing I wear – this plain, brown garment you see right here. It won’t win any awards for style, but then, it wasn’t designed to.” He slipped his arms into the rough brown robe that I helped to unfurl over his nakedness. He blew kisses to those who had, in his words, “brought him to this moment,” and then he strolled, in all of his magnificence, down the aisle and out through the doors to the street, where he and I climbed into a limousine idling at the curb and were whisked away to a helicopter that would, again in his own words, “lift us out of the tawdry waste of New York City.”

“I have never felt so exhausted,” he confided to me, as the lights of the city passed like a glinting carpet below us. “And yet, I have never felt more exhilarated, either. Why is that, Gerald?”

* * *

Few people are aware of how methodically and meticulously Julian had planned his retreat from fame and notoriety. Four years earlier, he had hired an architect to design a house for him, one that was eventually erected in the desolate environs of Southwest Wyoming. The house – St. Francis would have railed against such asceticism – bore the stamp of Julian’s regal personality. A great deal of attention was paid to the lines and curves of the building, which were intended to promote a sense of calm, of quiet. Although the house ran to nearly fifteen-thousand square feet, it nonetheless managed to appear quite austere. Built with its back to a sandstone ridge, it looked less like a house and more like a series of terraces carved out of the terrain. Approaching the house from the parking lot, along the winding path that led through the sagebrush, the shade of the courtyard seemed to invite one as though into the mouth of a cave. The interior was designed to produce an air of simplicity. The smoothly

textured, taupe-colored walls and vaguely pink marble floors recalled those of a cathedral Julian had seen in Italy. The hallways opened into rooms and the rooms narrowed back into passageways, with the result that a sense of constant flowing energy was generated throughout the house.

Julian referred to his abode as the *Labyrinth*, sometimes in a tone of affection, sometimes not. Each day he ventured forth into the surrounding plains where he would spend several hours studying a feature of the natural world, be it an anthill, fossil or flower. At some point during his contemplations, he would convulse as if from an electrical shock and declare, "My Labyrinth. I must return to my Labyrinth," and off he would scurry across the landscape, in a manner that suggested great urgency.

For the first few weeks of his retreat, Julian seemed to me to be forlorn and dejected. He brought to mind a Byronesque hero who is forced to walk through a city he has come to cherish, but which has been reduced to rubble. Memories would seize him. Sighing deeply so his body quaked, he would shake his head as if to rid himself of unwanted thoughts that had superimposed themselves on the present. Only a few close friends were privy to how harrowing the transition from clutter to divestiture was for him. He went through a slow, excruciating withdrawal, accompanied by actual physical symptoms. He would twist phantom rings on his fingers, where pale reminders of adornment continued to linger for several months. He had to dispense with gestures he had formerly used to call attention to certain *objets d'art*. He had to refrain from using familiar phrases such as "have Gilbert (or Sullivan) brought around to the door" and "where is Freud (his dachshund) when I need him." He had to curtail the sly, admiring glances he had once given himself upon entering different rooms, for there were no longer any mirrors to reflect his presence. The habits he had relied on to ease himself into his former madcap existence were no longer there to assist him in the morning. Gone was the pinch of snuff from the carved silver box, the cappuccino brought to his bedside on the gilt platter, the concatenation of pills and, of course, Freud, whom he had been in the habit of stroking his naked feet against prior to putting on his ermine slippers. And gone, too, were the ermine slippers – to be replaced by simple sandals.

Frequently, he would exclaim: "My God, Gerald, what have I done? Everything is gone. Gone!" To help him survive his paroxysms of grief, I would encourage him to stroll the wrap-around terraces and to breathe deeply of the sagebrush-fragrant air. There, I would try to interest him in features of his new surroundings. "Oh, look, Julian! Look at the way the sunshine has frozen that shrub. And look over there – at that magpie gliding above the sagebrush. See how it carries a shadow beneath its wings. Isn't that just too beautiful for words?" I would remain at his side until his panic attacks had subsided, and he was able, once more, to take

delight in his adopted environment.

Patting my hand, he would thank me for helping him overcome his sense of loss and alarm. For several hours or days he would remain calm of heart, until seized by yet another paroxysm of withdrawal; then I would go through the same ritual of calming him. Sometimes he would miss an *objet d'art* so terribly, he would grieve its absence like a close friend who has died. On one occasion I heard his voice rent the stillness of the house, a cry so horrible I thought he had suffered an accident. When I went to investigate I found him writhing on the marble floor, his arms wrapped around his chest, as though fiercely hugging a lover.

"My little Punch," he wailed. "I know something dreadful has happened to my little Punch. Hooligans have broken into the house that is now his home, and are turning him into firewood, as we speak!"

"Julian, we are thousands of miles away from Punch's new home." I knelt beside him on the floor, dragged his feverish head onto my lap and tried to soothe him by stroking his hair. "How can you be so certain he's been violated in the manner you just described to me?"

"Because I saw it in a vision, Gerald. I saw Punch being struck down. He's gone. He's simply a pile of splinters, now."

Although Julian frequently succumbed to melodramatic attacks of this nature, which reminded me of an actor performing on stage before an audience, he was able, more often than not, to live up to the rigors of his newly acquired ascetic life. Each morning he would rise in the dark and ascend by glassed-in elevator to the top of the ridge behind the house, where he would sit in meditation, waiting for the sun to rise in the east. He swore that this particular practice had the effect of replenishing the sorely depleted solar batteries of his soul. After meditating for an hour or two, he would go for a brisk walk around the arid countryside, trying to remain "awake" to everything that presented itself to his eye. He would return to the Labyrinth a revitalized man, doff his brown robe with the cowl and immerse himself in the cold waters of the spring, which had been diverted so they now flowed into a marble-lined pool. He would plunge into the water with a frightful yelp and remain there until he had become quite chilled, sometimes to the point of hypothermia, and only then would he allow me to drag him from his bath. He referred to this practice as his Morning Mortality Ritual, for it was designed to acquaint him with the impermanence of life – how easily life could be taken from him, and without warning!

After taking the waters of the spring, he would sit in the Sun Room where he would shiver like an individual stricken by palsy, while attempting to indulge in a light breakfast of fruit and cheese. When he was sufficiently warm, he would sit crossed-legged for several hours in what he called the Inner Chamber, a vertical shaft with a transparent bubble of glass at the very top.

“Here I want to experience how deeply I am mired in the human condition,” he had explained to the architect. “I want to know how infrequently, if ever, the eye of God peers down on me. I want the Inner Chamber to be constructed so the sun will shine on the bottom but once a year, and then only very briefly – say, for a minute or two – so that if I fail to be observant I will miss it.”

His habit was to sit at the bottom of the shaft, waiting for the sun to seek him out. When the sun had reached its zenith and had failed to alight on him at the bottom of the shaft, he would emerge from the Inner Chamber and inform me that the eye of God hadn’t glanced on him. In his fanciful, if not farfetched way of viewing the world, he understood this to be a sign, one that indicated he had to tighten the grip of his asceticism.

“I must subject myself to His will, and subject myself to It very strenuously, otherwise I might sit in the Inner Chamber forever and a day without seeing the light.”

Julian spent the rest of the day observing nature. He traipsed across the countryside to his vantage point on top of Toadstool Rock and there he sat for several hours, making his senses available to ordinary events taking place in the landscape. His objective was to blend in so thoroughly with his environment that it would resume its normal course. Rabbits were a common sight that summer and fall. On one occasion Julian was forced to witness a rabbit being pounced on and made dinner of by a red-tailed hawk. He returned to the Labyrinth a shaken man, wondering if Darwin had not in fact seen life a lot more clearly than the mystics. He railed for nearly two hours, and at the end of his tirade, he slumped to the floor in utter despair.

“This might mean, Gerald, that I’m on a fruitless quest here in Wyoming. Furthermore, it might mean that I’m wrong, dead wrong!”

“Wrong about what?” I was dicing onions at the kitchen counter and was weeping copiously.

“About everything. Perhaps life *is* red in tooth and claw. Perhaps that’s the simple truth of the matter. Perhaps there isn’t a deeper meaning – to anything!”

I wiped tears on the sleeve of my shirt. “I thought you came to Wyoming to learn what was real and what was not,” I reminded him. “I thought you wanted to be stripped of all your preconceived ideas.”

“Of course, I do, Gerald. Of course, I do. But I don’t need to have my preconceived ideas stripped with quite so much vigor. God could teach me such lessons, using a lot more decorum, don’t you think?”

After his daily afternoon interlude in the natural world, Julian would engage in the practice of trying to meticulously recall everything that had happened to him since waking in the morning. The purpose of this practice was to strengthen his memory, and to make his life seem less accidental. He referred to it as his Sacred Balancing and Recollection Exercise. Upon

completing it, he would retire to his study where he would madly scribble in his journal (soon to be published in several volumes under the title, *Epitaph*). In his journal he struggled to put his life into perspective. He poured out every reflection that crossed his mind, as though driven by the need to empty himself. *Epitaph* is confessional in tone, and oftentimes quite revelatory, as well. In it he wasn't writing for publication; rather he was writing in hopes of discovering a deeper meaning to life. Below is a typical passage, chosen at random:

I have come to the conclusion that we have to actualize the dream that lies buried deep within us. We do an excellent job of actualizing concepts; we exteriorize them on a daily basis, bringing them into three-dimensional existence. For instance, Federal Period furniture, the *Mona Lisa*, the automobile or even entire cities. So why not ourselves? Why can't we actualize what is deepest and most profound in ourselves?

When I turn my inner gaze upon that which I wish to actualize, it eludes me in the labyrinth of my soul.... Oftentimes I get the feeling that I am being endlessly divided by the need to become.

In late July, when the world lay prostrate at the end of a very long, hot day, Julian jettisoned from his study in the throes of frenzied thought. "I've made a discovery, Gerald. A very important discovery! Each gesture, each small batting of an eyelid or gross flailing of a limb, is part of an overwhelmingly complicated drama that is being acted out as a mime. How we comport ourselves is extremely important, and so far, I have comported myself quite badly. But that is going to change. That is going to change, beginning right now!"

Now and then, the writing in *Epitaph* is lucid and succinct, but more often than not, it is overburdened with verbiage. My feeling is that Julian was trying to divine something with his pen, something that would give him a reason to go on with his life, but that, of course, is simply conjecture on my part, and my part was to type his journal entries into the household computer (which he had nicknamed Carl Jung).

Julian's daily fling with the written word was usually completed at twilight, just in time for him to ascend by elevator to the top of the sandstone ridge behind the house, where he would sit in meditation beneath the starry sky. The purpose of his evening meditation was to observe the moon in flight across the dark heavens. On nights when the moon wasn't available for viewing, he would look inward in an attempt to chart its progress across his soul, a practice he referred to as Raising the Moon

Within.

“I swear, tonight, I saw the moon swing like a pendulum across the dark expanse of my collective unconscious,” he told me at eleven o’clock one night. “I swear that is why it disappears from the sky once a month. It’s so we can look inward – into our souls, Gerald! into our very souls! But more important is the reason why the moon has chosen to offer us this unique opportunity. It makes itself scarce up there –” he pointed toward the ceiling “– so that we might glimpse its shining presence in the dark expanse that resides within each and every one of us – even inside of you, Gerald. Yes, even inside of you! All one has to do is open oneself to the experience, simply open oneself!”

“I’m sure you’re quite right about that.” I had been hanging clothes in the laundry room, when he had come bursting in through the door to inform me of his discovery.

“Of course, I’m right. Have I ever been wrong?” He flipped his unruly, flaxen hair in his customary fashion, and let go a piercing treble laugh.

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"[*The Reluctant Author*] is both a work of investigation and of love wherein the author exposes the hard shell and the soft underbelly of the writer, poet, artist Ernest Hekkanen... With sensitivity and discernment, Schraner captures his conflicts and his accomplishments, and present them without sentimentality." Beth L. Virtanen, Associate Professor of English, University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

"Ernest Hekkanen is Canadian literature's true iconoclast and most resolute maverick. He deserves to be the subject of a book." Bill Gaston, author of *Sointula*, Mount Appetite, Professor of Writing, University of Victoria

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The Charlatans of Paradise by Arthur Joyce ISBN 1-894842-07-3, \$16.00

"Joyce sees elements of both despair and salvation in contemporary society in this beautifully produced volume... His ability to recapture nature in minute detail is his forte. Moving, original metaphors make for lines that arouse and vivify." - R.W. Meyer, *The New Orphic Review*

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"Wright manages to spin a narrative line taut enough to keep us turning the pages." David Cozy, *Kyoto Journal*

Hillel Wright's 'A Borges Trilogy' is a sophisticated homage to the Argentine genius." Tom Sandborn, *X-Tra West*

Kafka: The Master of Yesno, A Critical Study of the Writer and His Work by Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 1-894842-09-X, \$25.00

Hekkanen's portrait isn't as charitable as those provided by Ernst Pawl, Ronald Hayman, Max Brod, and a number of other enthusiasts; and the criticism he levels at Kafka's oeuvre runs contrary to the praise heaped on it by scholars who have turned Kafka into an industry at universities... This iconoclastic study concludes that Kafka took the easy way out through tuberculosis and death rather than fulfill his promise as a truly great writer... Hekkanen unflinchingly dissects Kafka's character. His treatise is guaranteed to anger those who have based their careers on overlooking the defects inherent in Kafka's fiction.

Heretic! by Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 1-894842-08-1, \$18.00

"[*Heretic!*] isn't going to make you happy, but it will jolt you out of your isms and the lethargy induced by the grand received narratives we have inherited. Either that, or it will make you really angry. For sure, it is not a book to be taken lightly."

Beth L. Virtanen, PhD, *New World Finn*

The Life of Bartholomew G. by Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 1-894842-06-5, \$23.00

"The central character in *The Life of Bartholomew G.* is a lowly ESL teacher who has legally changed his name from Bartholomew Gustafson to echo the Kafkaesque character known as K. A chronic disappointment to his medical doctor father, he often feels more like a fictitious character than a human being... Bartholomew G. jumps back and forth between self-loathing and self-aggrandizement like a literary hybrid of Woody Allen and Ingmar Bergman... Like a traffic accident, we can't help but look." Alan Twigg, *BC BookWorld*

"Reading Hekkanen's *The Life of Bartholomew G.* is like volunteering for an afternoon of laughter and tears with a manic depressive who is both elated by and ashamed of himself." Beth L. Virtanen, PhD, *New World Finn*

Melancholy and Mystery of a Street by Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 1-894842-05-7, \$23.00

"With wry shades of Franz Kafka and an opening quote from Thomas Mann – 'Quiet! We want to look into a soul.' - some of the stories in Ernest Hekkanen's 34th title *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* unfold in Italy, Switzerland, Finland and Afghanistan; others are set in his hometown of Nelson. A Finn traveling through Afghanistan on a bicycle finds himself in a folktale. A cynic attends a student art show. 'On the night in question,' says the narrator, 'I donned my *I Hate Art* T-shirt and headed downhill to the gallery.' Famous Italian authors plot to win a Lifetime Achievement Award. Fantasy and reality are comfortable bedfellows throughout." Jeremy Twigg, *BC BookWorld*

The Misadventures of Bumbleberry Finn by Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 0-9687317-5-9, \$18.00

"*The Misadventures of Bumbleberry Finn* delivers plenty of laughs along with outrageous characters and plot lines....Hekkanen pokes gentle fun at the Finnish community in this warmhearted tall tale where Bumbleberry Finn eventually succeeds in spite of himself." W.P. Kinsella, *Books in Canada*

"*Bumbleberry Finn*'s plot is clever and the characters are colorful...two hips and a hooray for Hekkanen! Let's hope we hear more of the foibles of funny Finn-hood from this masterful storyteller." Karen Berg Douglas, *The Finnish American Reporter*

The Flat Earth Excavation Company: A Surreal Fiction Anthology, edited by Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 1-894842-00-6, \$23.00

For anyone who thought surrealism and its practitioners were all safely dead and buried, *The Flat Earth Excavation Company* should prove that the opposite is true. Edited and introduced by Ernest Hekkanen, this anthology spans the length and breadth of surreal fiction – from automatic writing, or thought’s dictation, to stories that are fabulistic, mythical, alchemical and even postmodern.

The Last Thing My Father Gave Me by Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 0-9682800-1-3, \$20.00

“*[The Last Thing My Father Gave Me]* defies categorization – it lies somewhere in the hodgepodge of secondhand bookstore shelves where Erica Jong paperbacks, *romans à clefs*, and really good novels meet... Without giving away the page-turning plot, it’s fair to say that after a number of rather unusual coincidences and bizarre experiences Pamela finds herself, good sex, and true love through (mostly Canadian) literature... That Hekkanen gets so accurately inside a woman’s head and her physical being is commendable. Added bonuses are the authentic West Coast setting and the quirky Freudian ending.”

Katja Pantzar, *Quill & Quire*

Those Who Eat at My Table by Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 0-9682800-0-5, \$18.00

“*Those Who Eat at My Table* explores food as a motif for revealing human behavior... Illustrated by Hekkanen’s ghoulishly medieval woodcuts throughout the text, *Those Who Eat at My Table* is cohesively and cumulatively alarming, like an exhibit by Edvard Munch.”

Jeremy Twigg, *BC BookWorld*

Black Snow: an imaginative memoir by Margrith Schraner and Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 0-9699162-1-3, \$23.95

In this wildly experimental novel, the authors seek to recount a shared experience as accurately as possible, only to discover how differently and inventively they remember the past. This novel of memory relies largely on voice. The voices are contrapuntal in nature; they are separate, and yet woven together into a single harmonic whole.

“*Black Snow* pushes the boundaries of creative non-fiction.”

Zoë Landale, *U.B.C. Alumni Chronicle*

Good Ol’ Boy by Ed Roy and Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 0-968288-5-6, \$29.95

“If you’re interested in finding out how life in Lake County [Florida] was not too long ago, you must read this new historical novel by Ed Roy and Ernest Hekkanen. This is an eye-opener for anyone new to the county and very accurate according to lifelong Lake residents... Whether you agree with the authors or not, this is a *must* read.” Roger Ballas, *The Mount Dora Topic*

Beyond the Call, a play by Ernest Hekkanen ISBN 0-9699162-7-2, \$12.00

“Befuddled by how the war could have affected someone so much, Trevor draws Alex’s story out as if he were gathering material for a book but is soon sucked into the emotionally and physically damaged vet’s life.” Roberta Penn, *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

The Big Dave (and Little Wife) Convention by Ernest Hekkanen

ISBN 1-894842-04-9 \$23.00

“Ernest Hekkanen’s skill at creating the texture of ordinary life is remarkable... It is a measure of [his] abilities that he is able to draw the reader into his weird world, where madness is not a clinical condition affecting only a few, but the dark force at the centre of life.”
Joan Thomas, *Winnipeg Free Press*

“Sexual politics aside, [*The Big Dave (and Little Wife) Convention*] is a clever mixture of meticulous realism and haunting fantasy guaranteed to make you come to grips with your own fleeting mortality.” James Dunn, *The Vancouver Sun*

“The themes of descent and loss of identity sound familiar notes, and, while Hekkanen is working within a well-developed Gothic convention, he tunes it well to his own particular, delicate song.” Tanya Gardiner-Scott, *Canadian Literature*

“These stories are grim, but they are also oddly comic... They demand thoughtful attention from the reader, but generously repay it.”
Roderick McGillis, *Canadian Book Review Annual*

Medieval Hour in the Author’s Mind by Ernest Hekkanen

ISBN 1-894842-02-2 \$20.00

“The unity of opposites, the helpless repetition of doomed behavior, all couched in intellectual puzzles, bring to mind the landscapes of certain formidable masters — Nabokov, Kafka, Kundera, Coetzee, Borges...” Clark Blaise, *Quill and Quire*

“[Hekkanen] writes with the careful, dark charm we find in the stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer, and he does so with a chiseled and ironical prose that also reminds one of Samuel Beckett...a fascinating writer.” R. H. Solomon, *Choice*

“Ernest Hekkanen’s new collection of eight interrelated stories is a stunning achievement, an absolutely brilliant debut. It’s extremely difficult not to drop into endless superlatives to describe the power of this eerie, weird, and grimly comic writer... What makes this collection so rewarding, then, is that each of the stories seductively lures the reader into a literary space that is genuinely dazzling and imaginatively rejuvenating. Hekkanen writes an angular, deceptively simple prose which, in the best tradition of deadpan delivery, fractures most of our assumptions about art, freedom, society, and ‘all that.’”
Gary Boire, *Canadian Literature*

“*Medieval Hour in the Author’s Mind* gives the reader dissonance, the unknowable, stretches his imagination and taxes his sense of himself. It challenges. It tests ‘the currents farther out.’ It is a book to be read.” John Norris, *Freelance*

Chasing After Carnivals by Ernest Hekkanen

ISBN 0-9699162-5-6, \$20.00

Set in the late 1960s, this novel examines the lives of two brothers, Link and Tom Anderson, who come of age in small-town America during the era of the Vietnam War. Feeling constricted by the limited horizons of Prospect, Washington, they try various means of escape, some of which result in comedy and some of which lead to tragedy.

“*Chasing After Carnivals*...introduces a new author with promise.”

Louise Longo, *Quill & Quire*