

# The New Orphic Review

*Editor-in-Chief*  
Ernest Hekkanen

*Copy & Associate Editor*  
Margrith Schraner

*Managing Editor*  
Michael Connor



Nelson

Canada

---

Contents Copyright © *THE NEW ORPHIC REVIEW* for the authors  
First North American Serial Rights Reserved

ISSN 1480-5243

*The New Orphic Review*, a journal devoted to publishing fiction, poetry, reviews and essays, is published two times per year by New Orphic Publishers. The review accepts no financial assistance from government sources, but will accept advertising.

**EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICE:**

*The New Orphic Review*, 706 Mill Street, Nelson, British Columbia, Canada, V1L 4S5. Fax: (250) 352 - 0743. Please make sure all inquires and manuscripts are accompanied by an SASE and that the return postage is Canadian. Manuscripts with insufficient return postage will be held for one month and then discarded.

Payment to contributors is one copy of the review in which the author's work appears. *The New Orphic Review* purchases First North American Serial Rights only.

Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of *The New Orphic Review*.

**SUBSCRIPTIONS PER YEAR (2 ISSUES)**

Individuals Canada	\$30 (CAD)	Institutions Canada	\$35 (CAD)
USA	\$30 (USD)	USA	\$35 (USD)

**Note:** all subscriptions outside Canada are in U.S. funds.

Individual issues \$17.50 CAD or USD as applicable.

**ADVERTISEMENTS (BLACK & WHITE CAMERA-READY ONLY):**

Inside covers:	Other pages:	Half pages:
\$200 CAD, \$175 USD	\$150 CAD, \$125 USD	\$75 CAD, \$60 USD

Subscriptions and advertisements should be sent to the above address. Cheques should be payable to *The New Orphic Review*.

706 Mill Street    Nelson, British Columbia    V1L 4S5    Canada

# Contents

Volume 10      Number 2      Fall 2007

- Ernest Hekkanen 4 *Literature as an Oppositional Disorder*
- Sheheryar Badar Sheikh 7 *An Arrow from the Great Hill*
- Sean Arthur Joyce 27 *Three Poems*
- J. R. Hanson 33 *Off-base*
- Ernest Hekkanen 47 *Reviewing Clarise Samuels*
- Thomas D. Drescher 50 *The Neighbour's Boy*

## **Featured Poet / 51 / Catherine Faurot** ***A Deft Poetic Invitation***

- Nathan Andrew Wilson 60 *A Melody*
- Sandra Hartline 65 *Gourmet Di Bella*
- Louis E. Bourgeois 71 *Five Prose Poems*
- A. S. Penne 74 *Paths of Ascent*
- Margrith Schraner 87 *To Travel the Distance*
- Ernest Hekkanen 95 *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*

Visit Our Website

[www3.telus.net/neworphicpublishers-hekkanen](http://www3.telus.net/neworphicpublishers-hekkanen)

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.

## Literature As An Oppositional Disorder

Ernest Hekkanen

IN THE SPRING of this year, Alan Twigg of *BC BookWorld* asked me to write a thousand-word essay for *Reckoning 07*, a literary conference scheduled to take place in Vancouver in the fall. The request came a week prior to my leaving for Europe. Needless to say, I was a little pressed for time. Now that I'm back in Nelson, I'm in the position of having to play catch-up and so, in this issue of the *NOR*, I am going to reprint, in full, the essay I wrote for Alan Twigg. It has since undergone a few minor changes to fit the needs of this magazine.

\* \* \*

For those of you who know me, it will come as no surprise that I suffer from oppositional disorder. However, without that disorder, I would never have managed to become a writer, a small-time publisher and editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review*. And I did it without government assistance.

Back in the mid-1960s, I got involved in two activities that came to define my life: I started to write and I became an anti-Vietnam War activist. However, those activities were symptomatic of a deeper oppositional disorder. During my ninth-grade year at Lynnwood Junior High, President Kennedy placed a blockade around Cuba. His address to the nation was broadcast over the school's public address system. Afterward, my biology teacher said, "I'm sure everyone in this classroom will agree with what President Kennedy has done, except maybe Mike." I went by my middle name back then. The girl sitting at the desk immediately in back of me said to her deskmate, "Why did Mr. McLeod say that?" to which her deskmate replied, "Because Mike's last name is Russian."

When I shared that anecdote with my father, he got irate on my behalf. He told me about the Finns having been subjugated by the Russians for a hundred years, and later, in the Winter War, having fought them to a

draw. That's when I learned what it was to be someone of Finnish descent. I learned that Finlanders are a people who stand up for themselves, no matter the odds against them.

As you can see, my oppositional disorder has historic dimensions.

What does this have to do with literature in British Columbia? When I arrived in Vancouver, Canada as a draft dodger and published author in 1969, nationalism was raising its head and literature was struggling to find its Canadian legs. After eight months or so I came to realize I was someone who straddled a border. As long as I hid my American attitude and spelling faux pas, I was able to get published in Canadian literary magazines. But because I now had a Canadian address, I found it difficult to get published in American magazines. Later on, when I took an MFA at the University of British Columbia, my thesis advisor gave me the following advice: "If you expect to get *Chasing After Carnivals* published up here, you'll have to change the location to a town in Canada." Which I did. My novel was accepted by Stoddart Publishing in 1983. It got all the way to the bound galley proof stage, and was even reviewed in *Quill & Quire*, and then it was dropped from Stoddart's list.

No, the review wasn't a bad one. It maintained that I was a writer with promise.

Had I not had a strong oppositional disorder, I might have given up at that point. To date, I've had over 35 jobs in Canada, most of them working-class jobs. My second book, *Journeys That Bring Us Here*, employed many of my working-class experiences. I submitted it to over a dozen Canadian publishers. A B.C. publisher replied, "Unfortunately, your collection didn't appeal to our readers. It's full of losers, deadbeats, outcasts and drifters." It sounds as though my characters might have suffered from oppositional disorder, doesn't it? "Furthermore," she went on, "there are very few women in your stories, and all of them are subjected to the whims of men." The editor was obviously an educated woman who led a solid middle-class life, someone who had gone through university and now fancied herself an adjudicator of good taste. Another editor remarked: "Real people don't act or speak the way your characters do. They're all so illiterate, so determined to be stupid."

I suspect such editors haven't been forced to experience anything outside their comfort zones. That's typical of people in the book industry in Canada—whether we're speaking in terms of writers, editors or publishers. After all, literature is a business. Who buys the bulk of fiction in Canada? Middle-class readers do, many of them women. To survive as a publisher one must appeal to the middle class, otherwise one is likely to go under financially, even with the support of the Canada Council and the B.C. Arts Council.

I'm happy that I have a well-developed oppositional disorder. Without it, I might have given up the frivolous occupation of writing—and let's

## *The New Orphic Review*

not fool ourselves, writing *is* a frivolous occupation, especially here in Canada where Canadians buy far more books by writers from other countries.

To date, I have published 38 Hekkanen titles and 20 issues of *The New Orphic Review*, which is now in its tenth year of publication. That is how I make my inconsiderable living. I decided to go it alone in the mid-1990s, and now there are five writers in my New Orphic stable. All of them have distinct voices not likely to be recognized by B.C. publishers.

I chose my particular path because it allowed me to flourish as a writer who employs many voices—in books that are unique in style and approach. My way of doing things has licensed me to be as creative as I can possibly be, in any genre I wish to tackle, without second-guessing whether I will find a publisher, because I invariably do. Writing has not only permitted me to make sense of this turbulent world, it has been my life preserver. I cling to it tenaciously, in opposition to the brutal times we live in and because I value something in myself that the larger society has little use for. As Albert Camus said in his treatise on revolt, I am “a man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation.”

Currently, I’m working on my 40th book, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, about the small town of Nelson and the proposed Anti-War Monument that has created such furor. It doesn’t look as though my oppositional disorder will disappear any time soon.

\* \* \*

In this issue of *The New Orphic Review*, a number of stories and poems deal with the conflict in the Middle East, from ancient times to the present. I’m reminded of what Sgt. Walsh said in James Jones’ novel, *The Thin Red Line*, “Real estate. It’s all about real estate.” Extend that notion to our minds, and then contemplate for a moment who is selling what to whom, and it should be easy to discern that we continue to live in the Dark Ages—with Enlightenment far off down the road somewhere.

SHEHERYAR BADAR SHEIKH's work has appeared in *The Bend, Re:View, Paisley Parsley's Parcel Post* and *The Potomac*. He is also staff critic for *NewPages.com* and Pakistan's features haven, *The Friday Times*, for which he has worked the past three years.

## **An Arrow from the Great Wall**

**Sheheryar Badar Sheikh**

MYLORD STOOD on the great wall's east side with his bow. Both kinds of arrows lay in a quiver near his feet. With a hand shading his eyes, he squinted against the white clouds to spot again the red flag being waved on the hill. I watched my lord pick an arrow, and I knew not at first which one it was.

You know which one it was, Manshoor. Come on, tell us, was it the new one? It was the new one, wasn't it?

As I said, at first I didn't know which of the two arrows my lord had picked. He was a strong man, and iron and wood both weighed the same in his hands. Even at fifteen yards apart I could see my lord easily hold the arrow horizontal between two fingers. It wasn't until the arrow flew that I knew it was the new one.

All right then, as long as you knew for sure.

Yes, I became certain that it was the new arrow that was flying towards my Khurram on the hill because a wooden one would never fly so fast.

Was there anyone else watching this?

There were no other witnesses. Khurram was on the hill with his flag and I was at the base of the great wall, near the turret, ready with my lord's horse and my own. My lord shot the arrow, which disappeared over our heads with a swiftness no wooden arrow could match. This was the new iron one my son had fangled up in his laboratory. By iron I mean it seemed to be made of the same material as my lord's broadsword, and it had carvings chucked into the shaft. I still have the shaft of one such arrow that I'll show to any one of you that doubts me.

Innkeeper! A drink of the finest for Manshoor! Hear! And one on me!

All right. All right. Here it is, the shaft from the arrow my lord shot that day from the great wall. You've all seen the distance from that to the hill.

And see this. Here, touch it. See the engravings I'm talking about, hollowed out of the shaft. And see how it's a mite thicker in the middle than near where the point or the fletching would be. Well, cheers to you all. The material, the carvings and the tapering on either side combined, Khurram said, would make the arrow travel further and faster than a wooden one. And there it was, shot in the air by my lord from the great wall, across the sky of a white-clouded day, at the hill on which my son stood. You would doubt that the hill could be reached with an arrow, for how far would they be—a straight shot of two miles my son said, from the great wall to the hill's top. Can an arrow cover two miles with a bow? Certainly a foot-bow can land one close to a mile and a half. But two miles by hand was a claim to immortal glory. My lord had to test Khurram's assertion. We were the only three official witnesses, because unfortunately, my lord was not held in much favor those days, for he had courted beyond courtesy a lady-in-waiting. Alas, he spent too much time with her, and her virtue came into question among her peers. It was sordid to say the least.

Would that be my lady Nagina's youngest daughter, Yasmeen, Manshoor?

I'm afraid I'm not permitted by etiquette to malign the good character of ladies. So I cannot answer yes or no.

And your lord—are you permitted by etiquette to malign his character?

My lord is dearer to me than my soul, God bless him. My woes lie on a different road.

We know your woes, Manshoor. Go on with the story, old man. What happened to the arrow?

My lord was fond of Khurram like he would be of his own son, possibly because his wife had passed on in her youth, and he had no son of his own, only pitiful nephews who gambled and wasted all hours of their day on drink and the king's poetry. My lord ensured that as a boy, my son was educated at the university with his nephews. Khurram was permitted to banter with my lord in a familiar manner I didn't completely approve of. Sometimes as a toddler he would jump into my lord's arms like a monkey. Throughout his early years, my lord would instruct that Khurram sit with him as he dined, even if there was company present. They would talk for hours about the trivial things that children do and politics at court—such similarities there. When the time came for him to see the world, my lord brought the world to him. His education at the university came to conclusion, and Khurram asked permission from my lord to set up a laboratory in a dungeon at the castle that hadn't been used for over a decade. My lord, for he was in charge of those parts of the castle, not only granted the request, he also received the king's approval to import all manner of instruments, manuscripts and rough goods. The city's alchemists, among them Faqwat al-Zimri and Nowais the royal biologist, were red with rage,



green with envy, and all shades of purple with a mixture of emotions when they saw implements coming in by the cartloads. My lord made use of all the contacts he had made on his extensive travels as a younger man. For six months, the trade routes became a passage of calibrating instruments, precision timers, cold metal sheets and tough stone blocks. Herbs were brought in from the great healers of Athens, and the dangerous blue sand from West Africa. Amalgams of copper and glass were discovered and brought in from the hidden deserts of Eastern Angles. Animals and plants were brought in live and recently killed, until there was a zoo in the deodar forest beside the castle, and a cold-storage morgue in the unused cells next to Khurram's laboratory. Tubes of rare medicines from islands far off were smuggled in ships bringing immigrants to the Holy House of Mecca. Jerusalem's best architects sent scrolls on all aspects of design, as did the nine sages of Baghdad, on the properties of various materials. Khurram was more fretful than ecstatic with gratitude, and he begged my lord to stop the imports before they dried his and the kingdom's treasury. But my lord kept adding new discoveries, as they were made. And a steady but less frequent supply began coming in, to replenish and buttress.

But what about the arrow, old one? When did that come into being?

Patience, my friend. We should let the women head home to put their children to rest. And if they have no children, then to let my child's rest stay undisturbed.

You heard him, they should go home now. Let them stay, they're tougher than we think they are. Those who have young ones at home should leave. All right. They can hear you, Manshoor. Be mindful of that if you want but it doesn't matter much to them what you'll say. The things they suffered in the great battle would toughen the thinnest hide on the daintiest maiden.

You toughen your women more if you want. That's your prerogative. I prefer mine soft, like my wife was before she left the world. Stay then and listen. My Khurram lived in that hole under the castle. He took his bed and pots down there, not seeing the sun for weeks until his laboratory was done. When it was finished the way he wanted it, my lord visited him underground, and came up to say I should go see for myself. I was shocked to see what he'd done to a filthy set of rooms. My nose was prepared for the space that had once the reek of vomit and vile sewage, and spittle frozen on the black sooty walls. But the rooms were giving off a light jasmine fragrance. All traces of rubbish had been cleared. The floor was layered in sandstone tiles. Bars and chains that had kept prisoners were employed in holding cauldrons up in some places, and in others replaced by stone walls, which were covered in stark white parchments with charcoal sketches of figures and a series of equations on them. By white I mean the kind you see when the sun blinds you. There were shining metal tubes everywhere. And glass vessels of every imaginable size and shape.

One beaker stood as tall as myself, containing a pale blue bubbling liquid. Two large tables appeared to be a catalogue of colors: with yellow, red, black and green crystals, filings and powders made into piles on pieces of leather inside glass jars. There was so much to see, and I was standing there in awe of his myriad chemical endeavors when Khurram—if you remember him, this was unlike his scholarly detachment—came out of the thick of these beakers and tubes and said, *Father! Look at what my lord has done!* He was laughing like a kid, though he was near his twentieth year. You remember how he was. Tall and thin, nearly weak, always a serious boy with a humor only tickled at the hidden tricks in equations. Well, such a laboratory isn't often held in private, and certainly not by a cook's son. I managed to keep my composure and looked at him as I'd always looked at him—not seeing the wild engine churning thoughts behind his eyes, only the thick lenses of the monocles in front of them. *My lord is kind to you, Khurram*, I said to him and patted him on the head. He was about to explain the workings of one set of the apparatus to me, but I waved him off and said, *There is time yet.*

Was it the arrow? It was, wasn't it?

No, the arrow didn't come into the picture for several months. At first it was herbs and medicines that Khurram worked on. Cures of ailments such as consumption and skin diseases. The kingdom's poorest were his customers and he took from them little as payment. It was science in effect: he tried on them his potions, curing nothing as big as blindness, but things like the flu, or broken bones, or better salves for burns. That was his early work. Not until the Sassanids and Byzantines both began sending envoys seeking alliance with the king was the arrow conceived. My lord was in those months after creating the laboratory turned into a pariah. The lady-in-waiting whom he was rumored to have robbed of virtue was shut out of the public eye, in the castle's recesses, not allowed to clear her name or be further defamed. Had this unfortunate turn of events not happened, my lord—who was once the king's friend and favored advisor—would have been asked his thoughts on the matter, and he would have voiced a need to side openly with the Byzantines.

The Byzantines, Manshoor?

Yes, Isaiah. However, the king had his ear tuned to advisors who favored a neutral stance. It was our miserable lot that the kingdom lay between the warring empires, but that fact didn't mean we could avoid choosing our path from the crossroad that lay in our kingdom's path. When I say kingdom, you know the horizon-to-horizon span is what we had back then. None of the green meadows beyond the deodar forest or the mountains to the north were ours to roam freely before the great battle. The southern coastline and port were our kingdom's only asset, besides the castle and the great wall around the town. At nightfall, the villagers would come back inside the wall from the lands they had tended to, and all of us would

be locked up in our houses, with the king and some nobles in the castle. It may be my old bones talking, but there was a shared lull of wealth in those days, as if the storm to come was already being put into effect. When Khurram began working on the arrow, it was because he wanted to appease my lord, who would come from the king's court to the kitchen where he would grab a flask of wine from the stock and then head straight for the dungeon laboratory. Having watched the noblemen and the king fritter away the hours on poetry and petty politics, his passion for our kingdom's predicament swayed him into physical frenzy, and he would pace Khurram's laboratory, his cape flying behind him, knocking things down. *Khurram, they plan to take no sides*, he would say, or *Damn blinkered fools*. Curiously, my lord's voice didn't betray his frustration. It was calm and deep as always, though it hid a storm and hardly matched his lumbering back and forth, like thunder that stays between clouds, spilling light out but only hinting at sound.

What about the arrow, old man, the one he let go from the great wall? Aye, Manshoor, what about that one? Another pint, on me!

If you must hear it, then I'll get to it quick. My bladder is as old as me, so please mind to not buy me any more rounds. To appease my lord's wild fits among his delicate vessels, but more to win him favor at the court in return for his kindness in setting up the magnificent laboratory, Khurram proposed to build for my lord a range of weapons that would defeat the ordinary materials and designs. These my lord could show to the king, and once he'd impressed the king with the power of these weapons, he could win favor both for himself and for his proposal to side with the Byzantines. For in those days, the trade of weapons was a fashionable one. The king wouldn't care for the practical use of such weapons as my son proposed, but if they were beautiful, he would claim them as his kingdom's pride. They would be displayed as the handicraft of our little kingdom at the annual fair in Jerusalem. To defeat the world in the arts, that was our king's objective. Meanwhile the Byzantines were advancing all the time. Our western border was almost breached. Not many small kingdoms lay between them and ourselves. The Barakids and the Cogolomites, they'd been scattered like twigs. On the east, the Sassanids were scavenging for gold to finance their western campaigns. They must have followed the trail of material to my lord's gold. From the amount of imports our little kingdom had been acquiring, it's a wonder we hadn't been discovered sooner. Any day, we expected terrible news from either frontier. Messengers began arriving in the night, asking for allegiance to one party, and soon as they left the other side's ambassadors would come. Our land hadn't witnessed war for two hundred years. The peace and trade had allowed us prosperity, and peace itself was nothing to be shunned. But my lord believed we had not earned it, that our test of fire was waiting on one of two horizons. So he agreed to let my son create the weaponry he

proposed. Khurram had an even temper, which surely aided him in objectively dealing with the results of his experiments. Not often since he learnt to read and write did I see him sulk or jump for joy, not even in those days when he set to work on the armory. His steady nerves, by which also he took after my lord, prompted me to look into his laboratory again. On the pretext of bringing him a savory meal, of which he had dire need in those days, I opened the door to the once-dungeons and climbed down, only to remain affixed at the foot of the stairs. In front of me was the dazzling orange and silver glow of iron and fire. All the tubes and beakers had been dismantled and stored in a recessed cell. The floor was littered with moulds of stone in which iron arrows lay cooling. And by iron you know that I mean it looked like the material of my lord's broadsword. Perhaps it was a mixture of metals. From one of the two anterooms I could hear the hiss of steam. I looked in to see molten iron pouring off from a tipped cauldron into a mould, and the mould sliding forward of its own accord on a platform of rolling cylinders. Its mechanism wasn't obvious to me, and I walked in confusion to the other anteroom, where Khurram sat on a stool near a bench, with one of the arrows in his hands. I looked up at the ceiling, because it struck me as peculiar the way light was coming in through there. I saw that a skylight had been cut into the ceiling. From the little gap, which opened to the outside, and which was coated with a layer of mirror-bright metal, a large circular beam of light was coming straight down to the bench, where it passed through two glass prisms, and a large lens held by metal prongs extending from a wall. The end effect of all this was a needle-thin sliver of light coming from the lens to the arrow as it was held in Khurram's hand, causing the iron arrow to sizzle with heat. I had not seen light thinned down so, nor had I seen it searing any metal like this. I noticed that Khurram wasn't touching the metal directly. There were thick rags in his hands. This made me realize how hot the metal must be, and that I should wait before calling out to him. So I watched him carve these shapes out of the arrow's shaft, domelike structures. The thin light would need only a few moments to etch each of them. And when he pulled the metal away, to change its position, the light dove into another prism on the bench, from which it entered another lens, thickening as it exited, and falling through a hole in the table to a glass bowl on the floor, filled with water and marbles. O, the light in that room—it was like I'd entered a jewel! Khurram saw me finally, when he looked up after working on the arrow. The processes he pointed out to me escaped my understanding, but not my belief. There they were, for anyone to see them taking the light and doing so many things with it. I was so proud I fed him with my own hands. *It's like watching a sunrise after years of waiting*, I told him. But it didn't make sense for these iron arrows he was making to be better than wooden ones. And by iron I mean—

—by iron you mean whatever your lord's broadsword was made of. So

that was the arrow.

Those were indeed the arrows. And there were swords stacked at one end of the room within the month, and spears were lain near the stairway so that I nearly tripped on my way down. These swords and spears were a little lighter, but much stronger than ordinary swords and spears, and they would outlast ordinary swords by centuries and thousands of wars. But the real diamond was the arrow. It was fortunate that my lord's ordered supplies never stopped, even while he was held in the court's contempt. Ores of various metals kept coming in minute quantities. Some of the kitchen's surplus knives and metal trays began disappearing, and I'm sure metal structures throughout the dungeon were altered. Who was I to complain to my lord about my son pinching from my lord's kitchen? It meant more regular cleaning of the utensils that hadn't disappeared yet, and sending stewards to other kitchens in the kingdom with the job of stealing trays. And that's how things went until the siege. Our handful of soldiers were rested, yet unpracticed. We had no real advantage in terrain, there being a hill to our East, sea to the South. Among other kingdoms of our size there was no doubt we would have prevailed, but the Byzantines and Sassanids were like elephants to us. The king was decided on his neutrality. Nothing would sway him, especially not my lord's plea. They would not let my lord talk at court, and he was forced to watch the king recite his couplets to slaving noblemen. Before the armies of Heraclius and Esfandiyar arrived on our borders, for by then both were as inevitable as the next breath, my lord wanted to convince our king to pick the right side. The king had silenced his best man, all because of a woman. My lord perhaps knew the consequences of the king's choice. He was the most traveled man in our kingdom, he had seen things you'll only hear of these days. Like all of us, he had not been in battle himself, but had studied the strategy of war through manuscripts brought in from all over. Even after the first strike he was eager for the king to side with the Byzantines.

What kind of a con was your lord, wanting to side with the Byzantines? Let the man speak. Go on, Manshoor. Don't mind Isaiah's foolishness. He's only speaking his mind.

Isaiah, you will learn when you are older that it's not wisdom that age accumulates, but patience, which seems to give the appearance of wisdom. I thank my creator every day that he did not make me an invalid old man. I don't piss or shit where I eat, for which I'm grateful at this age. There's been enough time since the fight for me to reflect on my lord's choices. He was right to wish for the king to side with the Byzantines. They had the upper hand in wealth and manpower, and they were honorable.

You call my sister and mother's rape honorable, Manshoor? Isaiah! How dare you, Isaiah! You scoundrel! Let go of me.

Isaiah, you misunderstood me. I don't have any strength to overpower

you, nor would I want to. Just hear me out, son. Be patient with an old man. Leave him, he is a good man. Circumstances have been terrible for him and I wouldn't wish what he's gone through on anyone, even the Byzantines. Listen, I have no desire to change your mind about our enemies because now even though they rule us they are truly our enemies, whereas at the time I'm talking about they had the potential of being our allies. The same men who defiled our women would have defended us to their death. I've spent two decades since the battle thinking of little else and that thinking more than the years I've lived has aged me. Here you are, like a grandson hearing my story and insulted by it before you've heard its last words. Come, have a mug of ale and be patient with me. Hear my life out that it may yet hold a truth that's more bearable to you.

If there's more truth in your mouth than piss in your bladder I'll take you up for that drink, old man. Enough! Isaiah, how dare you insult Manshoor? You bastard! Throw him out.

Let him be. In his own interest, let him hold a drink and sit down with us. Come, young man, sit close to me. Tell me if I'm lying when I say the Byzantines and Sassanids were gathered on either horizon, fighting their war in our land. Do you know that they both tried to win us over? It wasn't just Esfandyar who courted our king. Perhaps it will soothe your rustled anger to hear some of the things the Sassanids did, but I think not. You are here with the objective of gaining anger from what I say, and you will gain it whichever story I tell.

Manshoor, if you weren't an old fool I'd cut your throat. You have no idea about my anger, or what I'd do to any Byzantine man for what my family's had to endure. Look at me and tell me my hatred is wrong, that I have no cause to avenge my family's dishonor at the hands of the *honorable* Byzantines.

Very well, Isaiah. If it's truth you really want, then know that your reasons and your anger are worth dribble, entirely fed by your heated young soul. Your mother was a kind woman who forgave her enemies even after they besmirched her, and your sister has the sweeter heart of the two of you, and a devoted husband and daughters. If you cannot learn to forgive what they did, you'll be consumed by your anger. It stems not from a need to avenge them but from your own impotence. My son, you were five years old then, barely able to think. You had no valid reason to be strong. But now that you are a man, you have no cause to be angry at the past you have been given. If you call me a fool, then you are the greater fool for taking to heart what I have said.

I trusted you before today, Manshoor. No more. You can sway these men, but I won't be swayed by you. Out of my way. Be careful with whom you disrespect, boy.

Let him go. His hatred is blinding him. Anger does that to many people, it kills the balance. Let him be. This is his test, nobody else's. Those among

you who have suffered more than Isaiah, yet kept quiet in the face of his outburst, I salute your fortitude. Though I must tell you this. If Isaiah goes to the edge of what's left of our forest tonight, for that is where he must go to think over his life, then he will come to a crossroad within. For what will seem like a long time he will tremble with anger, and then there will appear the fork between the choices he must make. At first it'll be out of reach, like a ghost of possibilities. When the fork comes close enough though, it will be up to him to decide which path to take. In that moment he will be most vulnerable and truly alone for the first time. We have meant a community of fathers, brothers, mothers and sisters to him. But now he is on his own, and this test will be of his courage and worth. Not any one of the choices is easy, for if he chooses to keep his anger he has to pursue it, and if he chooses to release it he has to harness his rage. As we sit here drinking by the fire, one of us is shivering in the cold outside with our collective fury. We are shepherds of our peace and he is the wolf we have thwarted for the night. I look at you right now and I see that you younger ones are as tortured as Isaiah. You, Moses. You haven't said a word all night but I can hear everything you want to say. Your family suffered the same fate as Isaiah's. You must have been two or three years older than him. What makes you so certain that keeping quiet is the right thing to do? Have you faced your anger, son? Have you tested yourself by giving in to your rage? If you haven't, you do not know yourself. If you pretend patience, the pretense is hollow. If you are truly patient, time will test you. So be ready. Perhaps the tolerance you exhibit here is deference or confusion, for I'm an old man and these old men and women are my friends and even we know little about right and wrong. You young boys are, some of you, like sons to me. And yet, there is Isaiah outside, planning now whether to kill me and keep his hatred fed, or to ask my pardon and accept his past.

Nobody's planning on killing you, Manshoor. He's just a lad who's suffered a little too much.

Death is certain. Not the how of it, but the what. I will not regret it if Isaiah has to kill me, but I will not die in vain if that happens. If he does come for me—and he may not, for I know little about what path he will choose—but if he does, I don't want any of you to harm him. If the law finds him guilty, let it. But don't touch him on my account. You hear?

Yes, Manshoor. Aye. All right, old man. Go on with your tale.

It's not mine alone. You're all part of it. Though it seems that I am doing the telling, even my speaking is part of the tale. No matter where we turn there is the tale of our lives being told. Remember now with me the beginning of the fight, recall our peaceful days of not knowing the heathen word God. Never feeling the need for a God. My lord and my son were both there the day the Sassanids came to us with that word. It was that day, when my lord shot that arrow to the hill. Overhead, against the

white of the clouds, the arrow left our sight. Khurram's flag stopped waving after that, appearing no bigger than a blade of grass against the white clouds behind him, and him no taller than a gnat. From the turret's base where I was standing, my lord grabbed from me his horse's reins and off we galloped. At first our eyes strayed from the flag to the clouds above us, and our necks were spun around. My lord's horse was faster than mine at full gallop, and he rode ahead. Like the members of our king's court, I expected Khurram to fail. Yes, he was my son and I'd defend him if it were needed, but his claim of shooting an arrow so far, it's as good as sending it to the heavens. Earlier that day, when my lord suggested that the entire aristocracy, king and queen and all the noblemen come out to witness the spectacle—can you imagine a thousand donkeys? That's how they laughed, like braying donkeys. The noise! Not one of them joined my lord, occupied probably by their routine of music, poetry or dance or some such consuming habit. And there we were, riding for a red flag after my lord shot the arrow. And I was afraid, almost certain, that an iron arrow couldn't fall more than three hundred yards from its point of shooting. No matter its speed, it was iron after all. And by iron—

—by iron you mean the same material as of your lord's broadsword.

Yes, that, and by iron I mean it was heavy. My eyes were on the ground so I ignored the rumbling sound. White clouds sometimes thunder at each other, which is what I thought the sound was. There was the wide span of fields from the town to the hill. Those of you who remember will recall the daisies between the millet and wheat fields that reached up to our horses' knees. Millet was ripe then, and the wheat on its way. Expecting the arrow to fall within one of these fields or between them in the daisies, I kept looking on either side, knowing my horse was following the straight route from shot to target. My lord's trust in Khurram's calculations was strong though, and he was shouting ahead as though worried he'd actually hit the boy. So even he had probably discounted the sound that was growing louder than the noise of passing clouds. God must make lightning with the sound of horses' hooves in mind. Disappointed at not finding the arrow on my first go, I thought it would probably turn up on our ride back. I watched my lord ride up the hill at an angle, and then looked at Khurram, who was holding the flag steady but looking away from us, to the other side of the hill. Had the arrow landed behind him? I could not believe it, but in my excitement I spurred my horse to go faster, eventually catching up with my lord. *They're here*, he said as I came closer. It didn't make sense at once, not the sound of thunder, or my lord's mysterious words, or the arrow's landing place. If I'd been less confused, maybe I would have screamed when we reached the top and saw what Khurram was looking at. The first thing I saw was the torches, blazing with fire. One torch held by each of more than a thousand men marching closer to the hill. A handful of yards below us, hundreds of cavalymen were forming lines, while



men with red and white flags were guiding them into lines. The neigh of horses joined the clatter of hooves and boots. It was the Sassanid force come to our kingdom's edge, bringing their sacred torches with them. The field had the likeness of an inferno. Dressed in silver metal armor and broken into lines of archers, the lesser cavalry and their fearsome *clibanarii*, whose entire bodies and horses' bodies, from hoof to mane, were covered in thick armor plates. The only holes in all that metal were slits for their eyes and nostrils. They carried no shield since they were shields themselves. In one hand a sword and in the other a pike. Some of the bigger horses seemed like monsters of metal. It shook me from confusion to despair to awe. You can't forget the first time you see a horseman and his animal cleaved together with metal, carrying a pike whose point is blazing with fire. That image steps into your nightmares.

And what about the arrow, Manshoor?

It was there. In their commander's hands. Khurram pointed out the one holding it to my lord and me when we rode up. Dressed in only half as much metal as the other *clibanarii*, with the Sassanid red flag painted on a chest-plate, the commander seemed so differentiated it was almost an invitation to death on the battlefield. Holding the arrow and the horse's reins in one hand, with the other the commander pointed us out on the hill's top to two subordinates. *My lord, it went over my head*, Khurram said. *That's remarkable*, said my lord. *They don't think we fired at them, do they?* I asked. *I don't know*, Khurram said. *No*, said my lord, *otherwise they would have killed us by now*. While we spoke our eyes were riveted on the subordinates trotting up the hillside on their horses. They invited us with the words: *Shahbanu Esfandyar, Malika of Persia, would like the pleasure of your company*. My lord relented, Khurram climbed behind me, and we let their horses lead ours.

So nobody died from that arrow? Does it matter? Yes, it matters because I thought someone was going to die.

There were enough deaths afterwards, once the war began. If you crave stories of those days you're in the wrong place, son. Show me someone who can hit an arrow to a target two miles away and I'll give him the rest of my days in service. It did not kill anyone. It fell between Khurram and the Sassanids, and was in their commander's hand. We watched while the flag-bearers conducted the soldiers into formations under the commander's supervision. In little time the columns were formed and stretched across the span of our eyes, left to right and all the way to the horizon, ready with their torches like demons in a devil's guild. There were women and supply carts too, by the hundreds. We stood out of the way while a circular tent was set up and the commander went in, followed by some aides. The messengers told us to stay where we were. *Looks like war*, Khurram, my lord said. *Yes, my lord, they're ready for it*, said Khurram. *But the Byzantines aren't here yet, my lord*, I said. *They will be, Manshoor*. He

was right. The Sassanids were resigned to a long fight, and it was going to happen in our land, where there hadn't been a battle for two hundred years. We were in the thick of it without having taken any side yet. While we waited, the aides came out from the tent and ordered the soldiers to make their own tents. The formations broke and people moved in turn to the supply carts. Then we were beckoned. My lord signaled us to wait outside, but after ten minutes the messengers came out again and asked us to come, too. We stepped into the large tent, adjusting slowly to darkness. It was lit by candles placed on a large table on the side. There was a plush red carpet on the ground, and arranged in a square in its center were eight pillows. Lying on one side, across from a woman reclining on a pillow, was my lord. Khurram and I stood to one side, watching a servant fanning both my lord and the woman, with a large fan made of peacock feathers. *Manshoor and Khurram*, said my lord, *meet Shahbanu Esfandyar, the Malika of Persia. My lady, these are Manshoor my cook and Khurram his son, both of whom comprise my family.* The woman was so obviously a princess, despite her military attire and plates of metal on her shoulders and bosom. Without her helmet, she was every inch a woman and a princess. A veil hid her lips, but her large eyes were like knives.

A woman?

The most beautiful woman I have ever seen, my friends. The most beautiful, and the most dangerous. Her veil was green, like her eyes, her skin fair, her grip on the arrow in her hand was sure and strong. She pointed it at Khurram. *You made this?* she asked him. Khurram looked at my lord for help, but there was none offered. My lord was sipping from a goblet in his hands. He seemed lost in thought, eyeing the goblet and Malika Shahbanu alternatively. It was an unsettling moment, watching my lord apparently succumb to the charms of this woman. However, she had other designs. Though I looked up only from time to time, I could sense the sharpness in her green misty eyes. I promised myself not to look again, but I did. It was a losing battle with my wits flung all over the tent. Nothing had ever captivated me like her sweet voice. Before I could stop myself, I remember noticing that my thoughts were racing off with a will of their own. I was enchanted, making vile plots of running away with the Malika, imagining her naked, then progressively turning into a slave of my desire. At the same time, the danger was apparent to me, I realized that I was an absolute fool. No offence to the ladies present, but oh, that woman. I would have given a limb to have seen her face. As it was, though, she paid my lord and me no attention. Her fixation was with the arrow and its inventor. *Malika Shahbanu*, said Khurram, *this weapon and others like it were gifts for my lord that I made recently.* If you cannot believe that a son would be a threat to his father, consider that in that moment I was plotting how to attract only a flicker of a glimpse from her. I coughed and twitched, agitated at her steady stare at the young man, whom I suffered as though

he were an enemy. For all the minutes my agitation lasted, it seemed I must have exercised every muscle in my body in order to gain her attention. She must have asked him more questions, and he must have replied, because there were sounds of conversation in the air. When they were done conversing, the Malika retired to her thoughts and clapped her hands to signal her aides. She hadn't looked once at me or my lord since Khurram entered the tent. All of five minutes must have passed. Outside, the blinding light brought me to my senses, but not completely. *My lord*, I asked when we were quite some distance on the other side of the hill, *what does the Malika of Persia want from Khurram?* My lord was pensive and he didn't reply. Instead, he rode off saying, *Manshoor, Khurram, come with me. We're going to see the king.*

What was she doing leading the Sassanid army? Was she Esfandyar's daughter?

The revelation will come soon. Patience, friends. For those of you who have seen only the official portrait of our monarch, I'm sure you'll be surprised to know that in real life he was twice the weight and half the king he appears to be in that painting. This is not meant as disrespect, only as truth. In those days he used to enjoy lying down on the throne. It was after the throne had to be altered to adjust to his increasing weight. At all times you would find a lamb chop and wineglass at his side, in case he ever felt hungry. At this particular moment, when my lord entered the court, the king was working on a nobleman's couplet, mouthing it again and again to the strains of an attendant playing a harp. Gathered around him in the room were the nobles, the queen and her ladies and a jester awaiting command for his act. The nobleman had spoken the couplet a while back, and it was his pleasure at the recitation that the king was deciding by repeating it ponderously. My lord bade us wait at the door, and entered himself. From behind the red curtains, through the gaps of which we could see part of the gathering, Khurram and I witnessed my lord's bow and the king's frown. Having seen my lord enter, the king became increasingly agitated with the couplet—it went something like: *my head is full of my heart, yet this cavity in my chest is making throbbing sounds*—and expressed his displeasure with my lord and the couplet by sniffing loudly and turning his eyes away. The poet noblemen were in turn aggravated by the king's displeasure, and showed it in their glares at my lord. *Your highness*, my lord began, *I beg audience with you.* The king turned quickly, surprised that my lord had addressed him at all instead of taking his accustomed place with shame. His reply was as though a blow to my lord: *You have the audacity to speak, do you?* My lord wouldn't back down. *There she is*, Khurram whispered at that point, and I turned to him to see what had caught his attention. And there she was, the lady-in-waiting, this shy petal of a girl, who'd been ruined because of my lord's forwardness with her. She stood behind all the seated ladies, as though

being punished. *Your highness, the Sassanids are at the edge of our Eastern border. My lord's authoritative tone shook some of the indifference to his opinion in the room, though not any of the disgust at his person. He told them: They are camping behind the hill as I speak. Our scouts are in their custody and being treated well, but they are intent on staying, at least until the Byzantine army reaches the area. The Sassanid king, Esfandiyar, is delayed by a few days as he fell ill on the way. His wife, Malika Shahbanu, is leading the army. She is a threat to us, your highness. You must refuse her offers.* So it was Esfandiyar's wife, that green-eyed beauty. A pair of Persian emeralds for eyes and a Persian king to imprison them. I was in a rage. I was hot from head to foot. My body itched to murder this Esfandiyar. It was the rapture of a demon in a man's body. I felt the appetite of a thousand men for this one woman. It may sound so foolish to you, coming from an old man.

No, Manshoor, a woman's power isn't a trifle. It can drive you to madness. How can a man lust after a woman so much? You wait, son, you'll see.

A life without passing through such rapture is not worth living. It's not enough to love. To be obsessed, to be consumed—that's what I mean. All faculties indisposed, to live with a wrung heart. To desire and know that desire is futility, and yet desire more. To burn for a long and searing time. It was like that for me when I saw Malika Shahbanu. Oh, such childish agony is torment for a man in his middle years. And there I was, cook to a nobleman in the kingdom, forgetting my place in the large scheme of things, not content that my son had escaped my kitchen drudgery, that generations wouldn't be lost this way to our family's destiny of tedious work. I could have knocked him down with my own hands for having gathered the Malika's attentions, but even with my stirred emotions I couldn't ignore the look in my son's eyes as I watched him look without blinking through the curtain with an agony of his own. A son's wet eyes can bring a lunatic father to his senses. They nearly brought me back, since it was in his eyes that my desire found its name. Following his stare again, I saw the girl standing, with her eyes lowered in shame. The girl my lord had shamed had won Khurram's heart, and by won his heart I mean it was divine providence. For his sake, I was terrified. A lady of the court and a cook's son had no means to be together. They would have to run away, if anything. For my own fortune, at seeing my son already enamored, I was overjoyed. It seemed as though the world had cleared its hurdles between myself and Malika Shahbanu. It was rapturous, it was divine, it was utterly ridiculous.

You snapped out of it, didn't you?

Not at once, not for a while. First it lingered in me like a poison. I began to feel like a foolish young man. My body shivered with delight at everything my senses brought in. Colors seemed richer and the fragrances

of court more concentrated. My head felt light. My feet were as though floating on air. I thought if this was how it would feel, then it would be best for the Malika to conquer us all. Foolish thoughts, uncomplicated by reality. The only agony I felt was that, being a cook, I wouldn't please her royal sensibilities.

Manshoor. Manshoor! Is Manshoor here? Here.

I am, son. What is it?

Manshoor, it's Isaiah. He's looking for you. He looks possessed by the devil and he says he wants to speak to you. I had to come warn you. Is everything all right?

It's all right, son, no need to hurry. I know why he wants to meet me. Tell him to come by my house in an hour. And tell him I'll be alone.

Yes, Manshoor. Wait, son. Manshoor—

Let him go. He will let Isaiah know. Now, it's up to God and Isaiah what he does next. If he does harm me in any way, I don't want you all to spoil my life's work and step in the middle. His need for vengeance ends tonight. I have an hour. A final round for my friends, innkeeper, and put it on my tab. If it comes to that, you may pay for it with the nugget of gold that Nowais's stableman Elahi owes me. If this is how it has to happen, let me tell you I have nothing to regret, not the war or my wife's early death, nor my son's or my lord's. Not even my own death. If I have a regret it is that I wasn't able to help my lord more.

But Manshoor, you don't seriously plan to go meet Isaiah alone. I mean, not that I suspect he's going to harm you. He probably wants to apologize and is too shy to come here and do it in front of all of us, but if what you believe he's going to do is true, you don't seriously plan to accept his killing you without a fight, do you?

Well, Moses, I certainly don't plan to die without finishing the story I've started, that's for sure. Come on now, drink up and listen. There is no time to divulge the particulars of my bliss anymore. We were at the court. Myself, Khurram and my lord. While he was presenting a case for siding with the Byzantines again, one of the nobles asked my lord, *Did that arrow of your servant's perform as expected, sir?* My lord then said something that hadn't occurred to me. *It did work out, and it will be our greatest downfall*, he said. And then he went on to say that Malika Shahbanu, who had witnessed the arrow's fall, was hoping to acquire an army's supply of these arrows, or at least the inventor's services in exchange for silks of insurmountable beauty, spices from the banks of Indus, woolen pashmina shawls, along with the visitation of our court by two famous poets of the east, Ibn-e-Khaled and Jalfaraizi. The Malika had done her research well. She knew our king would never refuse to host such eminent poets. *Your majesty, I know what choice you will make. It is as apparent to me as is my lady's unblemished honor.* Saying this, my lord pointed at the girl whose honor he was supposed to have robbed—secret meetings and all. *I*

*know you will choose no side, for fear of our peace breaking down. With the respect that is due from my station to yours, your highness, I beg you to reconsider. For if the Sassanids use us as they are planning to, our kingdom won't last this war. The Byzantine army is a mere fifteen miles away. If we send them word now, they will know what we fight for. They might even demand that the Sassanids keep the fight far from our land.* At this point I confess I lost hope, as I'm sure my lord had. His appeal was rebutted by the nobles first, then rejected by the king. My lord was dismissed and he came out a defeated and resigned man. He and Khurram went to the dungeons to gather the weapons, with the intention of destroying as many of them as possible before the king could claim them as gifts for Malika Shahbanu. There wasn't time enough for that. They buried the swords under a tile in the floor and then some of the arrows and spears behind a stone in the wall, both places later discovered by the Byzantines in their search after the battle.

Where did you go, Manshoor? Were you there?

I must have been with them because I know what they did and where they hid the arms. There weren't many places to hide them, and my lord wanted to convince the king that only a few weapons had been made. But I was dazzled. There was only so much help I could give them in that state. By the time we were done the emissaries from Malika Shahbanu were in the king's court, and my lord and Khurram were summoned to court again. This time I didn't go, but what transpired was as my lord had predicted it. Khurram was ordered to go with the emissaries, taking the few arrows and spears he hadn't hidden, and he was to serve the queen. He was to make sure the Sassanids were equipped with more arms than they would need. You see, the king had already heard an offer of gifts and exchange from the Byzantines before my lord brought him Malika Shahbanu's offer. The Byzantines had offered him land and money, but no poets. They had asked for nothing in return, but offered protection if our king gave them his allegiance. The king, of course, had refused and while remaining within the bounds of neutrality he gave to the Sassanids his greatest weapon, my son.

And then the slaughter began.

Not yet. Not for eleven days. In those eleven days we were as though besieged, on either side by armies that could devour us. They didn't, only because the Byzantines had their honor and the Sassanids had Khurram. My lord and I waited for the heavens to burst, which they did, eleven days after Malika Shahbanu and Heraclius met in the king's court. Of course, they wouldn't come to an agreement—it was mere formality. They agreed to fight after both armies were reinforced. Then the day-by-day escalated walls of silence from either side. In that silence, Ibn-e-Khaled and Jalfaraizi wrote epic poems for our king, and were regaled by the nobles for their turn of phrase and capture of the bleakness of life. They mentioned Him

so many times in their couplets that the entire kingdom began to believe in God. Circumstances were dire. The laborers and even the nobles hadn't seen such armies. God's arrival with the Sassanids was as natural as His absence in times of our prosperity.

And what about before God? Did we not worship?

Aye. We worshipped all right. We worshipped labor by hand and peace between brothers. May sound like prattle from an old buzzard to you, but that's what we did. We worshipped the honest thoughts in our head, which helped to pass the day without fear. Before God came to us, we hadn't known war in two centuries. Think about that when you say your prayers tonight. But that's another woe. Tonight I have to share with you something besides the war or its aftermath or the killings. So let's belittle the glory of the battle by passing it quickly. It was the Sassanids who struck first, in the middle of the eleventh night. From far away, they volleyed fire-lit arrows from the top of the hill to the Byzantine encampment on the great wall's other side. There was no warning. The Byzantines were probably asleep. When they woke up to fire landing on their tents, you can guess how peeved they must have been. To say they had no idea about the Sassanid treachery would be to blame them of ignorance, though. They knew Esfandyar and Malika Shahbanu wouldn't keep to the treaty and wait for both parties' reinforcements. The Sassanid relief squadron had reached our shores that day, headed by Esfandyar, and the carnage was begun at night. The arrows flying over our heads had their tips lighted with the Sassanids' sacred fire. It blazed in the Byzantine camp. In order to beat that arc of fire in the sky, the Byzantines had to get in range for their own archers to reach their targets. Many men were killed without taking out their weapons. But it all backfired. Once the Byzantines had their shields up, only the odd arrow that pierced the metal completely actually killed anyone. Mostly the tips of the arrows got embedded in the Byzantine army's shields, and when they moved, the fire on their shields made them seem like an army of spirits. It took them two days to keep the Sassanid advantage in check. Then the Byzantine relief arrived, and the fight didn't last much longer, despite the *clibanarii*, who were cooked alive inside their metal coverings with the Sassanids' own fire.

Is it true that the king still took no sides?

Yes, he wasn't keen on sticking his neck out until the victor was completely decided. The Byzantines, of course, dealt leniently with our king and us. Our fields were already destroyed. Seepage of blood and the scorch of fire took much of the millet, and nearly all the wheat. There was word circulating that we wouldn't survive, that the Byzantines would set fire to everyone within the wall. They didn't—instead they took what our king had forfeited anyway: our honor. All common women in the kingdom, including maidens, were to be sullied by Byzantine soldiers. That is the price of honor we had to pay, because news was out that Khurram had

helped the Sassanids. Our king didn't protect Khurram the day they dragged him in, bound and bloody from a beating. I wasn't there, for I had to help the king's chef prepare the meal for Heraclius's visit. I didn't even know Khurram was back inside the wall. This is what I heard: Khurram was taken to the courtyard outside the castle, and they chained him by his feet to a large boulder rolled in especially for this purpose. His arms were held across a slab of stone, and it was asked of him to name his accomplices, if he had any. He didn't. Our king was there with Heraclius, Esfandyar and Shahbanu. My lord was there, watching the three of them deny any ties to Khurram. And then the Byzantine soldiers were told to go ahead and execute Khurram—the command came from our king. *We don't execute traitors*, said Heraclius, and gave a different order. Before the iron sword came down—by iron I mean made by my son—before that, my lord stepped up and said, *Your majesty, why don't you speak?* And he went up to the swordsman, sat down opposite Khurram and put his arms on top of Khurram's on the stone. Heraclius told the swordsman to carry on. The swordsman brought the iron down, cutting off my lord and Khurram's arms in two clean chops. They left them chained like that to the stone, and some say they bled for an hour before dying. My lord stayed with Khurram, and held him during the chaos that followed, when the women screamed and the men stood by in shame. Had there been proof of our king's involvement, all our men would have been killed, and spared this misery of seeing their women defiled. But they had to listen, and some had to watch the pillage, because the king wouldn't say anything. The royals feasted through the noise. It took hours, but the sounds finally died down. The Byzantine wounds were soothed, and the buffet was over. They went home.

When did you hear of Khurram's death?

After the banquet, when someone found me in the dungeons, where I'd gone to escape the women's screams. Someone led me to the spot, where it was dark except the light that came from the moon and the distant fires. And she was there.

Malika Shahbanu.

Yes, her, and that other lady from the court, the one my lord was supposed to have desecrated. But he hadn't, never did. Those meetings they were supposed to have had in secret never took place because all along it was Khurram who had loved her, and it was Khurram she had met in secret. It was Khurram she was holding in her arms, sitting by the stone to which he was chained. My lord had protected his secret and suffered the king's displeasure and even kept me in the dark. She had her lips pressed to Khurram's cheek and was saying affectionate words to his limp body. The old man who led me there went and sat by her. I stood beside them, crying, looking at the blood on the stone, the dried streams of it. I held my lord's body and sat there until I noticed Malika Shahbanu, who watched



us from her own spot in the shadows. I wondered how long she had stood there before I saw her. The why I know—she came to pay respect, and to give me this, the shaft from the arrow. When I came closer to her my feelings wavered between what I had felt and what I knew I should feel. When I looked up at her then, her unveiled face, my desire for her was as dead as my lord and Khurram. Her beautiful green eyes could have begged, but I would not have looked at her again after that night. I thanked her for coming, for taking the risk in getting my son's arrow and a letter from him to me. The letter was written in his hand, and in it was wrapped the shaft, the one my lord shot not long before from the great wall to the hill. And now gentlemen, I must leave to meet Isaiah and the God that the Sassanids introduced to us.

What about the king? And what did your son say in the letter? O, you'll be back tomorrow night, Manshoor. There's no need for such dramatic departures. Get rest, old man.

I have an idea on what prompted the king to leave us as vassals of the Byzantines and go to Rome as Heraclius's advisor. But it would be treacherous to say it aloud when the king is in his last hours and unable to defend himself against my charges. As for my son, what he said in the letter I'll read to you before wishing you a good night. *Dear father, he wrote, if my lord was right, then I have very little time left. For the past ten days I have not been sleeping more than a wink at night. The Sassanid soldiers posted to keep guard at my tent say they pity me. This despite the fact that I am honored in the legions like an emperor. They bow to me like I'm god. It's science, I tell them, but they don't listen. The arrows I made for them have made the mark, but they do not see anything special about the swords and spears. Everything is being melted to make more arrows, even swords and shields. I don't think king Esfandiyar understands the need for hand-to-hand combat. It's this cowardly way of launching arrows from a distance that will bring the Sassanids to their fall. Even the Malika has refused to listen to my pleas. Last night, when I gave her my word that she would lose the war, all she did was kiss my hand and force me to make more arrows. It's as though they want to lose on purpose. It vexes me, father. They treat me like a king, but they make me work like a dog. I only hope that I can die in battle, and not bring shame to our king or to my lord. Father, I have learnt what poison is. It is a person who makes you feel all alone in the world. And an elixir is someone who makes you feel that you are the only one in the world who matters. I have had both. I'm leaving you the only thing that Malika Shahbanu will allow me to leave you. I know that the Byzantines will never use weapons used to kill their people. That is their honor. My work will die with me. I know that when I am killed, my lord will not live long, so it is useless to leave him anything. I am well now, but will not be for long. I hope to see you before dying, but know not why I dare not hope. Know that I have lived a full life, with love*

## *The New Orphic Review*

*and passion. I will die without my lady, but at least I will have her heart.*  
There it ends.

One more thing, Manshoor—why tell us all this tonight? Why not before?

Tonight, as you all know, I might die. It will be fitting, since twenty years ago to the day is when Khurram and my lord died. Our king is dying too, as we know. The gout has him and he won't last the month. There is no better year or hour for me to leave the world. Good night. God keep you all.

Good night, Manshoor. Good night, old man.

SEAN ARTHUR JOYCE has been published in numerous literary journals, among them *Canadian Author*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Whetstone* and *Horse-fly*. He was the Featured Poet in Vol. 7, No. 1 of *The New Orphic Review*. His latest collection is *The Charlatans of Paradise* (New Orphic Publishers, 2005). The following poems are taken from a forthcoming collection, *Star Seeds*.

## Sean Arthur Joyce / **Three Poems**

### **The Jinn in the Nightmare's Eye**

—with apologies to A.S. Byatt

When we stepped into morning light  
after 24 hours under a sky blazing with bullets  
and rocket fire, it was hard to know  
whether to scream or weep for joy.

Shrapnel had eaten a bleeding hole  
in Captain Barclay's side, and we spent  
a delirious night with him yelling into the com  
for reinforcements that never came.

The pain and morphine made him hallucinate  
and he kept singing, *Red-poppy fields forever*,  
'til I thought my teeth would explode.  
The terrorist cell in the village

we'd been sent to eliminate  
turned out to be a starving camp  
of women and children clawing our sleeves  
for food, and stark-eyed with fear.

They looked at us like we're the Devil  
incarnate, a gun in one hand  
and sweet water in the other. Most of the women  
were old enough to be our mothers.

The real insurgents came at us  
like wind-demons in an Afghan dust storm,  
the jinn in the nightmare's eye, somehow  
everywhere at once and nowhere.

When help finally came churning  
through the dunes in a yellow cloud  
the adrenalin began to drain from our blood,  
and some of the men couldn't stop shaking.

Corporal Jones, who had been stalwart  
and wordless under fire the whole time,  
couldn't stop screaming. He had to be  
held down and shot with tranquilizer.

The clefts and gullies of these mountains  
have been carved by the chisels  
of hard centuries, the dark eyes of her people  
burning with love for this fierce land.

What was it, exactly, we came here to do?  
The shock troops of empire, the blue-eyed  
sultans of oil, rosy-faced youth gone pale  
and haggard in the belly of the beast.

Now to be sent home to our sofas and  
satellite TV, politicians who never set foot  
in a desert seething with mines, and family  
who have no clue how to support us.

But you who sent us away to pass through  
hellfire and napalm, much as we love you,  
cannot expect us to fully return. The jinn  
have snared our souls in the nightmare's eye.

**because i am empty  
(the Bush doctrine)**

“I am become death, destroyer of worlds.”

**i. ache**

because i am empty,  
i am an insistent  
ache, so sharp—

it will eat guts, sinew,  
bone and flesh.  
so you can understand why

i throw pain from my body  
like a knife—a mind that can kill  
with a single thought.

food in the belly, clothes on my back,  
a roof over my head,  
all these things are fine

for the brain-dead in our factories  
the riff-raff fucking in alleys  
who lack my genius for chess,

my long reach around the globe  
to put down the monkeys  
who carry our sugar, our coffee, our dvds.

the hours are long, the food greasy  
like cheap sex. and my stomach  
is in a permanent state

of acid reflux. but the pay is fantastic,  
women drip like diamonds  
from my tuxedo,

and the constant thrill

of having my finger on the button  
that controls a world

is better than sex.

## **ii. god complex**

because i am empty, i know—  
what is a soul, but neurons  
and chemical transmitters?

because i do not question,  
or hesitate at the decisive moment  
that will change history forever

in the name of God, i balance  
six billion worlds on my fingertips  
because i AM a god

i sign this future into possibility.  
i embrace the endgame with open arms.  
i take no responsibility

for the consequences—the crushed songs  
of every bird on the planet.  
evergreen spice in a mountain valley,

salty kelp of sea air, seagull  
screaming in cloud drift—no more.  
the first raspberry burst

on the tongue, first word, first song  
that grabbed way down deep,  
first cake, first kiss, first delicious

shock of air—all of it—gone.  
nothing personal, you understand.  
because even a black hole

is alive with star birth  
and i am sterile as stone.

*The New Orphic Review*

nothing i can do about it.

i just happen to be exceptionally good  
at death.

## **because i am blessed**

—early spring, 2007: for all souls who fly

### **i. observer**

because i am blessed  
i am graced by souls in feather—  
waxwing, hummingbird, and robin

gossiping in the apple tree  
outside my window—  
a backyard choir of forest sprites

all shouting to be declared  
the beloved of God.  
they are curious and wonder

what it is that draws them to me.

### **ii. flyer**

because i am blessed  
i can chase you delirious  
through the air all afternoon

and feel Mother waking beneath me  
all green and sleepy.  
because i am blessed

i have a voice of many colours  
and all the songs i know are light  
shone from an ancient prism.

though the words are long since lost  
the sky depends upon me  
to keep from falling

so i dip, dive and tag  
and my needle threaded with wind  
sews together misting earth

and star-seeded pool.



J.R. HANSON grew up in North Idaho. Following advanced degrees at Cornell, Heidelberg University, and the Sorbonne, he taught English in Europe and the Middle East. He now writes full-time from a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This is his second appearance in the *NOR*.

## Off-base

J.R. Hanson

“MY TEACHER,” an accented voice whispered. Mike felt a nudge. Then: “Please, Teacher Swan.” Blinking, Mike Swan saw an air force cadet in uniform beside his desk. Behind the blue figure, the classroom came into focus.

The cadet bent and whispered. “Colonel is coming, my teacher. You must wake.” With a warning glance at the door, he pivoted neatly and returned to his seat in the front row. A half-dozen cadets in blue, service caps threaded beneath epaulettes, sat watching, dark-eyed, worried.

Mike came to and realized, with a twinge of regret, that he’d fallen asleep in front of his class, losing the battle he’d been waging in his months there. The cadet, he understood, was warning of the approach of Colonel Mirza Haqqani of the Pakistani Air Force, seconded to the Arabian Gulf, serving as adjutant to the commandant of the Matrood Air Base. Fortunately for Mike, Colonel Haqqani had apparently decided to berate one of the other expat Language Officers first that morning.

From the wall clock Mike figured his cadets had let him doze for around ten minutes. It wasn’t that he didn’t get enough sleep—on the contrary, there was so little to do on the base, lost in the baked volcanic wasteland of northern Arabia, not only did he take a midday nap per local custom, he went to bed early and slept more than he had in years. There was simply nothing in his daily routine that ever really woke him up.

His students—Missile Cadets, on a missile base protecting the country’s northern frontier—arrived in class ready to nod off themselves. Cadets were up with the dawn prayer call for two hours of PT, driven without mercy (as they told it) by their drill instructors, retired American noncoms topping up their pensions. There was little to keep cadets awake in the curriculum, devised thirty years earlier by the Pentagon-affiliated Military Language Institute, preparing learners to affront, in English, jungle

warfare and the tanks of the Warsaw Pact. In the bleak landscape outside there was no jungle in sight and no signs of the Russians coming either.

But few cadets had much hope of passing the Military English exam sent out from Washington, tricky multiple-choice questions that often baffled the Language Officers too. The way to escape the English requirement and become a Missile Officer was to endure, keep failing the exam, and hope—relying upon family connections or the commandant’s whim—to be certified “Exempt by Military Necessity.”

In the hallway, sharp steps—a fist knocking out a beat—approached. Mike visualized the tall, mustached Colonel removing the clipboard there, sternly examining the lesson plan Language Officers had to post each morning. Mike eyed the copy on his desk: quick, which pointless exercise were they supposed to be doing at 10:45?

“Cadet Al-Qahtani!” he called out.

“My teacher!”

“Page 57, Cadet, at the top.”

A flurry of page-turning. “The com-munist ter-rorist,” the cadet read haltingly, “pre-fers—”

The door opened and the cadets leapt to their feet, saluting, as the tall, frowning Colonel entered. They remained at attention beside their desks as he conducted his inspection.

Mike too stood, not at attention exactly but with his hand raised in a kind of salute. Language Officers were employees of Logisticon, a military training contractor (headquartered in a D.C. suburb, not that anyone had actually visited); outside the chain of command, they weren’t required to salute, but did wear a sort of uniform, khaki pants and shirts with a dark green tie and military-style name tags (“L.O. Swan”) plus little bars on their collars assimilating them to the rank of lieutenant. No salutes were exchanged between the expats and the commandant, General Sultani (a jovial backslapper with an impressive paunch) or other local officers.

But Colonel Haqqani liked a nice crisp salute. With furrowed brow he made clear he expected expats to salute, pointedly awaited compliance and returned it snappily. If the Colonel’s authority was tenuous with Arab officers—the commandant’s adjutant, he remained a foreigner—he reigned unchallenged over the Academy, cadets and staff. At larger bases, Logisticon had ‘Managing Officers,’ expat administrators who evaluated their colleagues, but with only four instructors at Matrood, the Colonel wrote the evaluations—and got his salutes.

“As you wuh!” he barked, inspection completed.

“Cadet! Continue!”

“—pre-fers a jun-gle en-vi-ron-ment,” Cadet Qahtani began, but coming to “for infiltration,” visibly nervous before the Colonel, abruptly derailed: “fooreenfeeltreeshoon—”

“Cadet!” Mike halted him. “Repeat: In-fill—!”

“In-fill—, my teacher!”

“In-fill-tray—!”

“In-fill-tray—, my teacher!”

“In-fill-tray-shun!”

Colonel Haqqani, mustache twitching, lost interest. “Carry on!” he barked, and strode out. The lesson-plan clipboard banged into its slot outside, sharp steps dwindled down the corridor. Sighs of relief went out from everyone in the room.

\* \* \*

An hour later, cadets hurrying past to the mess before the noon prayer call, Mike walked out of the Academy and waved to retired Master Sergeant Terry Hand, approaching across the parade ground between the base’s main office buildings. The sergeant, in his mid-fifties, still radiating nervous, muscular energy, ran the cadets’ PT program for a salary he considered a particularly good joke. After discovering they’d both grown up in Montana the two usually spoke briefly, although from the way Hand eyed Mike it was clear he thought the Language Officer could use some whipping into shape.

They stood in the shade of the two-story Academy—in late Fall it was still warm out, if nothing like the scorching summer temperatures when Mike had arrived and no one stood around outside.

“Got a ten-day leave coming—” Hand started, but suddenly the base siren started up, whooping away. Mike thought it was the mosque’s loud-speaker calling the prayer, but then a deep bass horn, two low notes repeating—*wah-aw! wah-aw!*—joined the siren in ominous counterpoint. Airmen and cadets around them, hearing the horn, sprinted for cover.

“I’ll be damned,” Hand said, scanning the sky. “That is peculiar—”

Loud rapping inside the glass doors of the Academy. Colonel Haqqani, a wild look on his face, frantically motioned them inside to the building’s basement shelter. Hand, who reported directly to General Sultani, gave a dismissive wave and kept looking up. With a final glare at Mike, the Colonel disappeared.

Mike imagined a scathing evaluation, possibly a loss of bonus. “Sarge, actually, I think I’ll—”

“Hold onto your skirt, Language Officer, here comes Janner!”

Phil Janner, a retired E-5 and career radar tech, ran across the parade ground while craning his neck looking to the north. Janner had emerged from a low building that housed, in a deep subbasement, the base’s radar center (where Mike’s cadets, if they ever actually became Missile Officers, would train).

Janner and Hand, poker buddies, clapped each other on the shoulders.

“That what I’m thinkin’?” Hand asked. Mike leaned close to hear over the racket. The three huddled near a life-size replica, mounted on a marble pedestal, of one of the base’s Hawkeye SAMs.

"I'd say so. Major Saleh just switched the radars off."

"Hot damn!"

"Guys, shouldn't we—"

"Gonna see somethin' special, Language Officer," said Hand, firmly gripping Mike's arm.

A distant roar became audible above the alarms, then shot off the scale, a deafening shriek—even the two veterans covered their ears. Three fighter jets in formation, impossibly close together, flashed by overhead, barely above the palm trees ringing the parade ground. Mike tore himself from the sergeant's grip, diving to his knees—stupidly, he realized, for the jets were already past. The others grinned, but Mike didn't notice, stunned by the planes' insignia: astonishing, unmistakable, blue stars of David.

"Those hot dogs!"

"Ain't they somethin'?"

Still crouching, Mike stared at the grinning veterans. "But won't the locals fire—"

"And lose their pretty little base?" Hand asked.

"That's why the radar's off," said Janner. "Don't want to paint those birds, not for one second."

"But what are they doing—"

"Lettin' our hosts know they care," Hand said.

"They fly over couple times a year," Janner said. "Hey, Sarge, twenty says they hit somethin' on the way out—"

"No way! You're on!"

The sirens cut out. In the sudden ringing silence all three men leaned back. Janner and Hand shook on their bet and, chuckling, headed towards the mess. "My advice," Hand called back. "Keep your eyes peeled yet." He just smiled at Mike's puzzled look.

Cadets and airmen emerged, eyeing the sky. Mike stood, slapping the dust from his pantlegs, when an angry voice erupted behind him.

"Language Officer Swan!"

Mike turned, saw the Colonel in the doorway of the Academy, snapped a salute.

"In my office, Mr. Swan!" Behind the lanky Colonel Mike made out the slighter form of Henry Hebel, the longest-serving Logisticon employee, often found shadowing his boss. Mike imagined Hebel smirking and cursed him mentally before starting back.

With a sudden whoop the sirens returned as the fighters materialized over a butte to the south, roaring overhead in a heartbeat. A shiny, cylindrical projectile dropped from the lead jet, then from each of the wingmen. Cadets and airmen leapt for cover, the Colonel and Hebel dove towards the stairwell inside. Mike could only hit the dirt at his feet.

Two cylinders crashed into the base's chain-link perimeter fence, pulling out fenceposts, punching deep bulges in the mesh. The third sailed

over onto the roof of a warehouse, cartwheeled off onto the officers' club, careening into a big air-conditioning unit. It perched there momentarily before rolling off and landing on the north side of the square.

The jets gone, the sirens stopped. The cylinder lay silent. Hugging the ground, Mike started crawling away, fast. He had to get the Academy building between him and.... From the mess hall Hand and Janner came sauntering over, Hand shaking his head in disbelief.

"Guys're good all right!"

Hand walked up to the cylinder, which bore lettering in Hebrew, drew back a booted foot and kicked it. A hollow *bong!* echoed across the deserted parade ground. The men walked back toward Mike.

"Hell you doin' down there, Language Officer? Join the infantry?"

"That thing, won't it...explode or—"

"Sure hope not," said Hand. "Never heard of empty long-range fuel tanks explodin'." He punched Janner lightly on the shoulder. "Damn, they never hit anything before."

"Hard things to aim," said Janner. He stuck his hand out, waiting. The sergeant got out his wallet and handed over a twenty.

\* \* \*

Mike headed for the Rez, as the former officers' quarters housing Logisticon employees was known. He was so dirt-covered after his parade-ground crawl he'd need to change before seeing the Colonel; he wasn't hungry anymore anyway.

Two of the other Language Officers wouldn't be at the Rez: brown-noser Hebel stayed in the office with a sack lunch producing paperwork and memos for the Colonel; Peter Krasniak spent lunchtime working out in the officers' club gym, the same thing he did most evenings and weekends, exercising himself into oblivious muscled tautness.

Only Fred Tierney, the one colleague Mike spent time with outside work, would be around. In the dark hallway, chilly with air-conditioning, Mike leaned closed to Fred's door and heard what he expected: a woman's orgasmic squeals—*Yes! Yes!*—and some guy grunting. Fred had become a good friend in Mike's short time on the base. He had bestowed the phrase, *addicted to pornography*, with new understanding.

Fred and Mike usually ate lunch together, but that morning Fred had rushed back to the Rez straight from teaching, which told Mike something else: one of the General's shipments had arrived. Every few weeks, on the U.S. Air Force C-130 that flew in components for the Missile Training and Support Mission, sealed crates arrived, stamped "Gen. Sultani, Matrood AFB." Shortly thereafter, a local master sergeant—by coincidence from the same small town as the General—had new porn videos and whiskey for sale.

In his room, once Mike had taken off his grimy clothing, a good mid-day nap suddenly seemed irresistible; the Colonel could wait until after-

noon office hours. The cries from Fred's room continued through the wall and Mike put on some jazz just loud enough to cover them before lying down for his nap.

\* \* \*

If you had woken Mike and asked, point-blank, he would have said he was, oh, twenty-six, just out of grad school, raring to get his life started. After a moment it would have occurred to him that he had turned forty-four six months earlier and behind him, like a trail of car wrecks, lay two divorces and an academic career spiraling downward to end as a community-college adjunct. During that long decline first one marriage and then the other had turned into tragicomedies of incomprehension and ill will. At forty-four he was nearly penniless and pretty much careerless.

A former colleague, another one-time adjunct, had spent a few years at Logisticon and put aside an amazing sum. The pay was absurdly high—mysteriously, since expat English teachers were a dime a dozen, working for far lower salaries throughout the area. Language Officers constantly debated how long the Logisticon gold mine could continue, but the preposterous sums kept being deposited in stateside bank accounts. Recruitment was by word-of-mouth referral, preferably candidates with a military background—which Mike lacked—however, his former colleague had given a strong reference and perhaps that had swung it; or else Mike had shown just the right combination of competence and desperation.

From high school through grad school, Mike had specialized in the come-from-behind rally, goofing off until the last moment when an all-out effort could turn things around. “Another of those famous Swan come-backs,” one high school teacher had said when Mike went from a midterm C- to a final A-. Now, at Logisticon, saving, saluting and enduring, it was Mike Swan's last chance for the come-from-behind rally of his life.

\* \* \*

Each afternoon, Language Officers had office hours from two to five, in principle available to cadets (who, in Mike's experience, never came near the office), in practice occupied with paperwork required to justify what the locals were paying Logisticon: each cadet's Daily Evaluation, all five of those in turn appended to the Weekly Individual Report, building up to the lengthier Monthly Cadet Assessment, and of course the lesson plans posted each morning for the Colonel. His office was just down the corridor and he liked to appear with no warning beyond the sound of his approaching steps.

When General Sultani was on base, he often called the Colonel over to Command, but recently the General had been away dealing with his business and real estate investments, leaving the Language Officers, ears peeled, on constant high alert. Colonel Haqqani made clear that office hours were not for outside reading or personal correspondence, nor for music or short-wave news (inappropriate in a professional military setting). The door

should be kept open at all times.

Mike found Krasniak and Hebel at their desks, but no Fred. He immediately regretted not knocking on Fred's door on the way out, since his friend often lost track of time. Mike had been worrying about the Colonel—"In my office!" kept ringing in his ears—steeling himself for the inevitable tirade. But when he had stopped by the Colonel's office, a glimmer of hope had appeared: the Colonel's Egyptian secretary said he'd been called over to Command, unclear when he'd return. Perhaps by tomorrow, when Mike saw him, the incident would be forgotten.

Krasniak looked fit and pumped-up after his workout, his khaki Logistical shirt tight on his upper body. Pale, chubby Hebel peered at Mike over piles of paperwork, struggling to suppress a smirk. Mike wondered what the little sycophant knew. Hebel was in his sixth year at Matrood and continually lobbied, so far in vain, for promotion to Managing Officer. He'd had business cards printed up styling himself 'Coordinator'—a position that didn't exist—and had accumulated a roster of (to Mike's mind) secretarial functions, like scurrying around at the end of classes each morning collecting lesson plans from classroom doors, filing them in—Hebel's very own creation—the Master Archive of lesson plans.

"Nice of you to drop by, Swan," said Hebel, struggling to keep a straight face. "The Colonel was looking for you earlier."

"I'm not late," said Mike, checking his watch.

"Did I say you were? It's just that the Colonel stopped in on his way to Command and asked me to convey a directive. Following the incident this morning—the term he used was *misconduct*—you're confined to base until further notice. He asked me—"

"Jesus!" said Krasniak. "That's a first!"

"—to inform you in case he doesn't return before end of shift."

"Damn, Swan, what'd you do?"

"Nothing. I happened to be outside when the Isra—"

"Shhh!" Hebel whispered, finger to his lips. "Don't say that!"

"What? Isra—"

"*Nooo!*" Hebel cried, on his feet, stretching across his desk, trying to get his hand over Mike's mouth. "You'll get us all fired!"

Mike ducked his head back. "Fighters buzz the base, everyone sees them, we can't say—"

"I only know you mustn't use that word," said Hebel, sitting back down, relieved he'd managed to avoid a crisis.

"Sergeant Hand was there, Janner, too," Mike said. "They confined to base?"

"I wouldn't know about that."

Mike looked at the others at their desks. "Can he do that? Sure, he writes our evaluations, does that mean he can keep us on base?"

"Interesting point," said Hebel, craning his head to check the hallway.

“It’s a gray area. You’re right, contractually he’s exceeding his authority. He should ask Logisticon to confine you to base. But let’s say he orders the sentries not to let you out. *They* certainly have to obey the General’s adjutant, and there you are, confined to base.” He smiled smugly, as though he’d just made a telling courtroom point.

“Unless you go out over the perimeter fence,” said Krasniak.

“Hey, no problem. I’ll go over where it got flattened by the fuel tanks dropped by the Is—”

“*Stop* it, Swan,” said Hebel testily. “Just stop—” He broke off as steps approached in the hallway. All three quickly tried to look busy at their desks.

It was Fred, hurrying in, slightly red-faced.

“So nice of you to drop by, Tierney,” said Hebel, beaming. “I was beginning to wonder if I’d have to write you up for the Colonel.”

\* \* \*

Mike sat waiting in the front seat of Fred’s Land Rover parked behind the Rez. It was late afternoon—the second afternoon prayer call had just sounded—and they planned to drive into Matrood City to eat at a Turkish restaurant, a change from the mess, and shop in the souk.

“Here’s the situation,” said Fred, getting in. “The Colonel’s definitely got you on the NP—No Permission—list, so the sentries can’t sign you out.”

“That bastard! Let’s just forget it,” Mike said, starting to get out.

“Hold on, man.” Fred put a hand on his shoulder. “I talked to Sgt. Osman, the one I, um, do business with”—despite his purchases being well known, Fred remained reticent on the subject—“he’s got the gate tonight. If you duck down in back, they won’t look inside, he’ll let us through. He’s on ’til midnight, so as long as we’re back before then, we’ll be fine.”

From the floor in the back, the creaks and rumblings emanating from Fred’s clunker were louder than ever—he’d bought it from a pool mechanic who’d patched it together from wrecks on the desert highway (which locals, after the frequent collisions there, simply abandoned). Then Mike heard Fred talk to the sentry at the gate and scratch his signature on the sign-out sheet. At a light rapping sound, Mike peered up and glimpsed a goateed face beneath a beret, grinning as Fred pulled away.

“You’re okay now,” Fred said a couple of minutes later on the highway. Mike sat up and leaned against the rear seat. The evening sun was an orange ball in the west, casting flaming colors on the landscape along the wide new asphalt road. Dull black cinder cones, heaps of lava and boulders strewn at random all glowed in the sunset.

A small pickup packed with Bedouin zoomed past the other way—with the sun in their eyes, it seemed to appear out of nowhere. Then they were alone on the smooth highway. Fred drove with one hand, making



points with the other, occasionally turning to speak to Mike. To the south, in the distance, what looked like a water truck was bouncing down a side road toward the highway from a cluster of buildings below reddish cliffs. Dust clouds tinted by the sunset billowed in the distance.

“I worry about Maggie, alone with the kids,” Fred said, turning a concerned face to Mike. “It’s a lot to handle.”

Mike watched the water truck approach the main road. Given the tender, almost reverent tone with which Fred invariably talked about his wife, Mike found his porno fixation puzzling. He’d talk about Maggie, his angel, then ten minutes later Mike would hear, from Fred’s room, a voice cry “*Nail that bitch!*” Maybe, once back home, with his wife and kids again, he’d give the porn up. Distractedly, Mike saw the truck reach the paved surface and bounce onto it with a wild hop. Far from slowing, it kept coming. Surely, on that wide road, with no other vehicles in sight, they couldn’t...

“If Maggie can tough it out two more years,” Fred said, turning with a look begging for sympathy, “I’ll have enough saved—”

The truck loomed, coming straight at them. “*Truuuck!*” Mike gasped, jabbing a finger past Fred. Above, the truck driver’s face, eyes wide, mouth an ‘o’. Fred fought the wheel, then, with a crunch, the world shifted. Mike was thrown across the back seat, banging his head on the door.

The odor of gasoline, pungent, sickening. Sitting up, shaky, Mike got the rear door open for air. His hurting head made him squint. The Rover was off the road in deep sand, still nuzzled on Fred’s side by the water truck, itself angled into the desert with rear wheels on the road. The big truck’s engine idled with deep bass throbs.

Fred’s door bulged inward around one corner of the truck. Fred looked uninjured above, but his legs disappeared in a tangle of metal below the steering wheel. His breathing was audible, regular, head to one side as though dozing.

Mike climbed out, unsteady, the world cottony. *Get Fred out*, he kept thinking, but wondered about pulling him over the console and gearshift between the seats. Then, through the windshield, movement: the truck driver standing, arms hanging limp, staring at the wreck. Mike scrambled around toward him.

“Help,” he started, but the man had turned away. Tall, long-limbed—a Somali perhaps—wearing a dark tracksuit, he silently jogged into the desert, unhurried, someone beginning a long run. Confounded, Mike watched the loping form dwindle in the darkening landscape. When the driver had disappeared in the twilight, Mike stood rubbing his throbbing head with his palms.

The only sound was the big truck engine idling on. Mike’s mind flitted from one thing to another. He couldn’t go for help—town and the base were miles away. He had no cellphone. The steady idling reminded him:

*turn the engine off!* He walked toward the truck with its door left ajar.

Down the road, from the direction of the base, headlights. A moment later, a pickup packed with Bedu, maybe the same vehicle he had seen earlier, coming fast. Jumping from the big truck's running board, he ran over, waving his arms. Horn tooting in rhythm, the pickup sailed by, boys in the back waving their arms in imitation, flashing grins.

Mike watched the taillights disappear. In the renewed silence, a rasping sound. Animals? At the base, scorpions were a concern—a special obsession of Hebel's—but this rasping wasn't scorpions. He had heard of desert vipers, did they rasp? Then he understood: Fred, he was trying to speak through the Rover's window.

When Mike leaned inside, Fred beckoned him closer.

"If...I...die..." Fred breathed through clenched teeth.

"Fred, you are not going—"

Fred slapped at him with surprising force, just missing.

"Listen...to...me!"

"I'm listening, buddy."

"My room...my porno...you get it—"

"Fred, that's kind of you, I'm not really interested—"

"NO!" Fred looked ready to burst with frustration. "Listen!"

"I'm listening."

"Another guy...last year...meningitis...evacuated. Personnel shipped his stuff... his wife, kids, found porno..." Fred strained to speak. "Don't want... Maggie, kids...find my porno...throw away! Understand?"

"Understood, I'll do it."

"Promise?"

"Promise, buddy."

Fred slumped back, exhausted.

"Fred, I'm going to try to back the truck away. The engine's running, it hardly looks damaged. That's the only way I can get you out, okay, buddy?"

Fred grunted, indifferent. "Throw away porno...disgusting stuff—"

\* \* \*

Mike looked around the cab of the truck. Keys in the ignition, engine idling. The tall gearshift had a dark grimy knob without the usual gear diagram. He'd never driven a truck like this. When he depressed the pedal, the engine revved without moving the truck—neutral. For reverse, he'd have to guess. It looked as if the brakes had failed the driver. If the truck went forward he'd have to shift back as quickly as—

Arabic spoken, below, at the truck's door. Jolted from his concentration, Mike stuck his head out. Pistol in hand, a policeman stood, speaking angrily. Nearby, a police Volvo, top lights flashing.

"I don't speak Arabic," Mike said, "but am I glad you're here!"

The policeman continued, in Arabic, angrier with every sentence. Then he pointed his pistol straight at Mike and gestured: down from there! As-

tonished, Mike climbed down carefully. The policeman kept the gun on him, now gesturing: hands up!

Smiling nicely, Mike complied. Then he spotted another officer over at the window of the Rover, trying to speak to Fred.

"It's his legs," Mike called out, turning to go over to the Rover. The policeman beside him grabbed his arm, touched it with something cold. Looking closer, Mike saw a pair of handcuffs around his wrist. The policeman reached around for his other hand.

"Hey!" Mike cried, pulling his hand away. The officer kicked at his leg, knocking him to his knees. An elbow came up, banging his chin; his head swam. Both hands were cuffed. The policeman leaned close, delivered a burst of angry Arabic, then drew back and backhanded him. The other policeman, approaching from the Rover, joined in the cursing. Mike curled up on the ground, pulling his knees to his face. But the officers had turned away.

Sirens approaching, more lights. Another police car screeched to a stop, followed by a Red Crescent ambulance. The paramedics ran over and peered in at Fred; one, a Filipino, hopped up into the water truck and backed it away. The other yanked futilely on Fred's door, then, joined by the Filipino with a crowbar, forced it open. A moment later, Fred was on a stretcher, loaded into the ambulance, speeding toward Matrood City.

The four policemen stood talking and laughing a few feet from Mike. After a few minutes, two of them pulled him up by his arms and hustled him into their car's backseat. On the way into town, the officer sitting shotgun turned and spoke in slow, deliberate Arabic, apparently following the theory *If I speak slowly enough, something will penetrate*. One thing did penetrate, the burning anger these officers felt towards Mike.

When they booked him, they took his shoes and issued him thongs. He had to empty his pockets, hand over his belt, his watch, his wallet. Seeing the wallet on the counter, Mike remembered what Krasniak always said was their best perk at the base: a "get-out-of-jail-free" card in Arabic, requesting arresting officers to contact General Sultani. Under the dubious gaze of the big sergeant, Mike shakily flipped through the wallet, finally producing the card. "Yes, yes," the sergeant said, tossing it onto the pile of Mike's things.

The holding cell was the size of a classroom, with bars from floor to ceiling on the corridor side, a sliding door in the middle, the other walls cinderblocks painted green, windowless; above, one large ceiling vent and fluorescent lights behind mesh. On three sides wooden benches were bolted to the walls, in one corner a stall behind a vinyl curtain displaying a snow-capped alpine scene. The smell hit Mike right away, its source the hole in the floor behind the curtain, with foot-treads and a hose for ablutions.

Two little Yemenis huddled together on one bench whispering and laugh-

ing as though in a park somewhere; down from them sat a dozing Somali who looked a lot like the truck driver, in a robe instead of a tracksuit; opposite, a frowning bearded man—a local or some other Gulf national—wearing what Mike took for a turban but then saw was bandaging.

His arrival was met with sleepy indifference. The Yemenis momentarily stopped whispering, then resumed. No one else said a word.

\* \* \*

Perhaps three hours later, the sergeant slid the door open.

“Yes, yes,” he said, beckoning.

He put Mike at a table in a conference room. A moment later, a young police lieutenant came in wearing an immaculate uniform. He carried a file and a plastic box containing Mike’s effects.

“Give me a minute,” he said, “while I get up to speed.” His English was nearly unaccented. He paged through the file, then opened the box and removed Mike’s wallet, examining his IDs: residence permit, Logisticon ID, driver’s license.

“Right,” he said, “I’m Lieutenant Abdullah. My American friends call me Abby, so call me Lieutenant Abby.”

“Your English is impressive.”

“I lived in the States as a kid while my dad was in grad school. A few years ago I did an internship with the Utah State Police.” He grinned beneath his neat mustache. “Anyway, I’ve read the report and seen your documents. It’s clear you work for Logisticon at the airbase. One thing still confuses me: why on earth would you steal a water truck?”

They went over everything several times. The Bedu who’d called in the accident had seen Mike climbing down from the truck; the police had found him trying to drive away. The truck was stolen, its driver—hit over the head, badly hurt—a relative of the policemen. Water trucks, apparently, were favorites of smugglers.

They sat talking like pals. The Lieutenant held up Mike’s card from the General. “I’ll get right on this,” he said. “But you should understand, the law is that we can’t simply release you once you’re in custody. Your employer—your *kafil*, your sponsor—has to take custody of you. This late at night, I’m not sure—”

“You’re saying, Lieutenant Abby, it won’t happen tonight. I’ll have to spend the night.”

“I’m afraid so. And I have to put you back in the holding cell.”

“I’ll survive.” They shook hands cordially and suddenly the big sergeant, summoned somehow, was leading Mike back to the cell.

\* \* \*

That was Monday night. Early Thursday morning, Mike waited impatiently for the Thai employee in orange coveralls to serve the breakfast of gummy Pita-style bread with dark beans cooked in something that did bad things to Mike’s stomach. He knew because he’d eaten the same thing the

two previous mornings. Yet he tore into it—there were two meals a day, breakfast at around six-thirty, the second meal around four-thirty in the afternoon. To his growling stomach, the previous afternoon's gummy bread and spicy yellowish gruel already seemed a distant memory.

No one from the base. No sign of his pal Lieutenant Abby. Demands? Complaints? There was no one who spoke English to complain to—"Yes, yes," the sergeant dismissively answered Mike's appeals, going past without slowing down; "America bad! *Bad!*" said one of two new Yemenis (there were four huddled together in the cell now) every few hours, to the great amusement of the others.

The cell was cold, his head hurt from the accident; he felt exhausted but at night couldn't stay asleep longer than an hour at a stretch on these damn benches, the lights always on, not to mention the smell that, whenever he thought he was used to it, reasserted itself in his nostrils. Nothing to read, no TV, no radio, the others perpetually muttering in Arabic. It wasn't torture, but time stretched out, dull, empty.

The sergeant came that afternoon and led him to Lieutenant Abby. All business this time, the officer started right in. "I've been talking to a Colonel at the base, a foreigner I think—"

"Colonel Haqqani. He's Pakistani."

"That's the guy. Whenever I call out there about you, I end up with him."

"He runs the Academy, where I work."

"Right. Well, this Colonel says you're an impostor claiming to be Michael Swan."

Mike sighed. "You have my residence permit, my ID. They look fake to you?"

"They look quite genuine. But the Colonel says the real Michael Swan was confined to base and there's no record of him leaving. He says he's conducting an investigation, but until he officially determines you're missing he can't send anyone to take custody of you."

"So how long can he leave me here?"

"Someone I know who works out there guesses they'll send for you before General Sultani returns from the Paris Air Show. That should be in about a week."

Mike swore under his breath. The Lieutenant drummed the table. "Look, Mr. Swan, if you demanded your right to a phone call I'd say you're in the wrong country. But we've really no reason to hold you, so I'm going to lend you my phone. I have a hunch if you call this Colonel and apologize, ask very nicely, you'll be out of here today." He held out the cellphone.

Mike looked at the phone for a long moment, then took it. "Could I possibly have a little privacy for the call?"

The Lieutenant regarded him skeptically.

"Lieutenant, surely you don't think I'm going to try to pull something

stupid. It's just, if I have to grovel to the Colonel, I'd rather do it without witnesses."

"Okay," the Lieutenant said with a warning look. He took the phone, punched in the base's number, handed it back. "The Colonel's at extension three-fifteen." He went out as the phone started ringing.

"Extension three-twelve," Mike said when the base switchboard answered. "Yes, three-twelve."

The phone rang and rang. *Come on*, Mike urged, *answer!* Then: "Logisticon Language Unit, Coordinator speaking."

"Henry, it's Mike Swan."

"Swan? You're out? How—"

"Not yet, I'm not, but never mind me—"

"You realize you're in deep—"

"Henry, what about Fred?"

"He's gone, Swan. They loaded him into a C-130 on a stretcher yesterday. Logisticon's sending a replacement up from—"

"What about his things?"

"Things?"

"His belongings, man, they still in his apartment?"

"I imagine." Hebel chuckled. "Didn't look like he was worried about the stuff, the way he was sedated into oblivion with that mangled leg. I suppose someone will crate and ship it eventually."

"Do me a favor, Henry. I promised Fred I'd destroy his pornography so it won't get shipped to his family. Could you get inside his room and do that?"

A silence, then: "Look, Swan, I couldn't possibly—"

"Okay, then how about this: tell Krasniak. Tell him what I asked, he'll get inside easy, there's passkeys for all those apartments floating around. Will you tell Krasniak? I'll owe you bigtime, Henry, I'll get down on my knees and call you Managing Officer."

Another silence, then: "I'll tell him, Swan."

"Thanks, Henry." Mike hung up.

In the hallway, he handed the phone to the Lieutenant, who eyed him expectantly.

"I'm afraid I didn't talk to the Colonel."

"What, was he—"

"I just decided not to talk to him, Lieutenant. Sorry. Thanks, but no thanks."

Blinking, the Lieutenant looked Mike over, then stiffened. "In that case, we're done," he said angrily. "We'll let you know when someone comes for you." A moment later, the big sergeant led Mike back to the cell.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review*. His reviews occasionally appear in *Books in Canada*.

## Reviewing Clarise Samuels

Ernest Hekkanen

*Fairy Tales for the Bourgeoisie*

by Clarise Samuels

Pudding House Chapbook Series

ISBN 1-58998-481-1     \$10.00

*FAIRY TALES FOR THE BOURGEOISIE* by Clarise Samuels is a collection of poems that seduces with its eloquence and imagery while at the same time delivering a wake-up slap to the side of the face.

Samuels establishes her *raison d'être* in the first few poems. The poet, for her, is a goddess and seductress whose intention is to leave us stripped, quite naked, before our improbity, falseness and hypocrisy, something she manages to do with great deftness and charm.

In “The Absurdity of the Universe,” the first poem, she lets us know “that five minutes ago/ I fell madly in love with you/ and now desire to sweep you into my arms.” Two poems later, in “Did You Happen to Notice That I’m a Goddess,” she is walking side by side with Polyhymnia and Thalia, when a beautiful male stranger comes down the road and hands her a bunch of pomegranate seeds, and her alter ego reacts by:

...remain[ing] serene in the face  
of his conflicting loyalties  
may I have some wine? I would really like some wine  
he has muscles and long flowing hair  
and I am eying him over with lustful interest—  
if he is going to keep me in Hades  
even part of the year  
it better be worth my while.

By this point in the collection, the reader is aware that *Fairy Tales for the*

*Bourgeoisie* is, in part, a commentary on those of us who keep others and those of us who are kept by others. And yet, in “Periphery of the Truth,” Samuels lets us know that her collection is also about the “Thing That Endures,” which:

...remains—stoic and unrelenting  
with the inexorable power to crush and destroy  
immutable like a categorical imperative  
some disgusting muck leaking the Truth.

Here, she could be speaking of her own poems.

*Fairy Tales* is the work of a mature writer. Originally from Rahway, New Jersey, the author, Clarise Samuels, now resides in Montreal West, with her husband and two children. She has a Ph.D. in German Literature and has worked as a journalist and corporate writer. Her background has doubtless hastened her development as a poet, for she writes with a great deal of authority. With dazzling adroitness, she pokes fun at the myths, fables and fairy tales which shape our lives and which, moreover, can be so destructive. “Armenian Nights” and “Red Thailand” remind us that applied myths can exact a terrible price, one resulting in “the sorrow of massacres” and “a red drum/ beating faintly/ in a boudoir/ in Bangkok.”

In “Vishnu’s Wife,” Samuels’ alter ego speaks of her plight, and by virtue of that, our plight, in bourgeois society:

I feel like J. Alfred Prufrock  
walking through the streets  
that are licked with yellow fog  
he only wanted to know if he should propose marriage  
and become an official bourgeois  
he saw his life spread out before him  
a confusing panoply of coffee spoons  
and polite chat at dull parties  
he only wanted to be normal  
but the dark sensuous evening  
egged him on.

*Fairy Tales* is a relentless examination of the middle-class. But it is also a relentless examination of the poet’s role as a member of that class. In “Operating Room Blues,” Samuels’ alter ego probes the tender areas of her own soul, in the guise of a patient about to be operated on by a doctor “who should not be eying me over/ like tender red meat/ upon which he will feast/ after he digs in with his knife.” The narrator-poet also views the spectacle from the doctor’s point of view: “...I felt his agony/ and for a moment I was moved.”

If we haven’t quite got the point, and the point is that our bourgeois lives have turned us into vapid actors, Samuels makes her intentions clear in “Dinner at the Asylum for the Bourgeoisie,” which is:

[a] commencement for young doctors in a crowded room



## *The New Orphic Review*

with round tables and long-stemmed glasses  
the dull speakers make inside jokes  
and the attendees neigh like horses.

Further along in the poem, she describes a woman with a perfect nose  
and eloquent gestures who speaks:

in fluent gibberish  
and meaningful nonsense  
as she hangs on her husband's words  
for he is illustrious and desirable  
and there are many fine mares  
who would long to take her place  
without showing so many teeth.

Toward the end of the collection, in a poem entitled "Leaping Angels  
and the Garbage Truck," Samuels eulogizes some graceful garbagemen  
plying their trade on her street, and suddenly we realize that Samuels is,  
in part, speaking on behalf of the poet as garbageman.

I would like to pin a purple medal onto the shirt of every  
garbageman that I see  
they are heavenly seraphs  
they face the trash that we throw away . . .  
[that] we want to magically disappear.

This passage reminds me of Slavoj Žižek's commentary on film, in  
particular the part about the David Lynch movie in which evidence of  
wrongdoing resurfaces in a toilet and our reaction is one of disgust. Clarise  
Samuels does something very similar in *Fairy Tales for the Bourgeoisie*.  
She provides us with modern-day myths we are disinclined to examine  
all that closely, and then she gets us to examine them by seducing us with  
her eloquence and her imagery.

Given some time, Clarise Samuels could become a major poet.

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. He contributed poems to Vol. 10, No. 1 of *The New Orphic Review*.

## **The Neighbour's Boy**

Thomas D. Drescher

The neighbour's boy  
gone off to fight  
in foreign wars;  
no longer here  
to help rake leaves,  
chop wood,  
shovel snow.

The prongs of the rake  
catch on a root  
beneath summer's  
empty hammock.

It's early spring:  
the bears  
will come;  
the dogs  
will bark  
in the night.

*Featured Poet*

**Catherine Faurot**



**A Deft Poetic Invitation**



CATHERINE FAUROT holds a master's degree in creative writing from Dartmouth College and an undergraduate degree from Berkeley in religious studies. Her work has been published in *The Christian Century*, as well as in *Spectator*, *Zephyr* and *Sierra Nevada Review*. She is the recipient of the Dole Prize for Poetry.

## **The Labyrinth of Engagement**

Catherine Faurot

THE LURE OF VIVISECTION is to see how the hidden internal miracle of life works, but this very act of invasion destroys the life it seeks to find. Is this an accurate metaphor to apply to analyzing poetry? By applying the scalpel to words, do we destroy the living poem? What makes living poetry is the connection between poem and reader, the lightning bolt between the soul of the words and the soul of the one who breathes them in. And of course this connection is ephemeral and transitory and impossible to pin, still beating, onto a dissection plate.

I propose instead the metaphor of walking a labyrinth of engagement as a means to search for the beating heart of poetry. I am just emerging from a three year journey of translating Catullus' love poems and writing original responses in his lover's voice, a collection called *White Seeds: Lesbia Responds*. In looking back, I find myself transformed in my understanding of what forms a body of poetic work, and, more deeply, how the heart of that work makes the poetry live. And as a labyrinth repeatedly swings close to the center of the mysteries and then veers away, in the same way I faced both my own poems and Catullus' work from different perspectives about poetic power, truth and beauty.

Catullus' gateway poem, his invitation of the reader into his work, invokes the Muse, but this is a lighthearted invocation, and it matches the tone of his opening poems. The love poems are playful, and the non-love poems are inventively crude and hilarious put-downs of fellow Romans. Even the tragic love poems in this first section maintain an ironic and sophisticated tone: the poet is always aware of himself and his poetry. But the arc of Catullus' work moves out of this territory, so familiar to the modern reader, and swings toward the heart, the dissected heart with its passions and vices, fears and desires, naked to the eyes.

Smack in the middle of Catullus' book are two poems that serve as the hinge of his poetic vision, the central helix in a galaxy of poems that

spirals out from this gravitational center. The light of these poems suffuses and informs all the other poems in Catullus' work. In the first of the duo, *The Attis*, Catullus takes on the persona of a young Greek man who falls from the pinnacle of classical manhood when he castrates himself in an ecstatic burst of devotion to the goddess Cybele. The Muse he toys with in the opening poem is now a terrifying, omnipotent power who has stripped away his ego and protective layers of identity, laying bare his deconstructed self. There is no ironic or mocking tone, and the metrical form Catullus invented for this poem—galliambics—takes its headlong beat from the parade chant of the *galliae* or eunuch priests of Cybele. In the make-believe world of the poem, Catullus is telling his truth: he is unmanned before his muse, his lover, his goddess.

In *Peleus and Thetis*, Catullus presents another face of the goddess, and another approach to the heart of poetry. In this poem, Peleus is a mortal man who falls in love with the sea goddess Thetis. Their marriage is the union of human and divine, an eternal moment that for Catullus falls into time and human failing with heartbreaking speed. The imprint of this fleeting union—and Catullus' longing for its return—colors the final poems in the book. This vision is the heart of Catullus' work, and just as stripping away the self creates a larger vessel for the transmission of poetry, connection to a great force or vision infuses poetry with life. For Catullus this force was the embrace of an implacable and generative goddess; for other poets the center will contain a different power source. But following his fearless swing into the center presents an inspiring—and humbling—impression of the transgressive jolt of power a great vision supplies.

As I responded to Catullus' work, following step by step into the spiral of his poems and out again, I moved into another quadrant of the labyrinth. From this opposing side, Lesbia's yin to Catullus' yang, the poetic task is not annihilation of the self but its resurrection. We know there was a woman behind Catullus' pseudonym—she was identified as a noblewoman named Clodia Metelli in the second century—but Lesbia lives within the poems, invoked and animated by words. But they are all a man's words: Catullus colors and paints her with his language; he tattoos his lines across her imagined body. Lesbia herself is mute. I wanted to give the voiceless muse a voice; I wanted to hear her voice, had wanted to hear it from the first moment I heard Catullus' words lift Lesbia off the page. Perhaps, in this imagined world, I gave myself a voice.

As Catullus did, I turned to myth to tell the truth. The Romans loved Ovid's rendering of the tale of Procne and Philomela, two sisters who are turned into songbirds. In the myth, Procne is married to Tereus, who secretly abducts her sister Philomela, rapes her, and cuts out her tongue so she cannot tell what has happened. The voiceless sister weaves her story into cloth, and together the sisters exact a terrible revenge, killing

Procne and Tereus' son and serving the child to his father to eat. In counterpoint to *The Attis*, violence and violation cut away the superficial self, and writing this poem carved away at my deepest layers of identity. Sometimes the cost of writing the truth is severance of the selves who exist in relation to others. In Ovid's tale, Procne is transformed into a nightingale, bird whose golden voice flames through the dark, but classic poets fell in love with the idea of Philomela, the tongueless woman, inheriting that song, and I have followed their suit.

In *Penelope's Loom*, my companion poem to Catullus' *Peleus and Thetis*, I revisit the *heiros gamos*, the sacred marriage between goddess and god, through the myth of Herakles' fatal union with Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons. Unsurprisingly, the encounter was fatal for Hippolyte, not Herakles. From this side of the marriage bed, the fall from eternal bliss follows the trajectory of the Greek gods from the golden age—when the Titans and Titanides shared heaven and earth between them—to the male dominated bronze age of heroes. Along with Catullus, whose work shows a particularly jaundiced view of the heroic treatment of women, I use the hero myth as a lens to magnify the next stage of the fall into time, the age of men, and the unfurling of love in an imbalanced world. The defeat of the Amazons is a recurring motif in Greek literature and art, and it was essential to me that the mirror version, the female side be told. And as the vision of the resurrected self appears through the device of weaving, the story of the Amazons appears coded into Penelope's trickster loom.

On a final note, the process of immersing myself as a translator in Catullus' work, the intimacy of brushing my lips across the body of his work and holding his words in my mouth one poem at a time, raised questions for me about the esthetics of form. Catullus wrote in strict metrical forms, although the rhythm and structure of Latin give his verse a sensuous flexibility, and I worked out an English metrical variant I considered a syllabic exoskeleton, molding the English words into a poetic form. The complementary journey of writing original responses within those verse forms, holding my own words in the suspended dreamtime of poetic creation until meaning and form fused into a whole, changed my relationship to the post-modern esthetic of formless poetry.

On a very basic level, the use of a metrical form demands the rejection of the easy line, the facile word, and these demands forge a better poem. On a larger scale, the unifying aspects of form move a book of poetry from a collection of pop songs to a symphony; within the overall movement, variations and change in form add nuance and expression. I am not advocating the resuscitation of styles that have rightly been drowned by advancing waves of esthetic movements. But from this transformed perspective I cannot help but consider post-modernism as an esthetic wave in retreat, without generative force. For poetry to speak

to the heart, to forge those lightning bolts of meaning, it needs, within a profound and complex esthetic form, the courage to speak from its own heart and in service of a true vision.

## **Lesbia Considers Temptation**

Pandora's sweet honey vase tempted you, lover, with its riches:  
dusty rose horn of plenty, golden liquid sheen at the mouth.  
Rhea Pandora! All gifts come from you. It was Zeus, tricky devil,  
who grafted your name onto women and crafted a box of misery  
to torment men. How his creation torments me, too: black gadflies  
of lost innocence sting my open hands—and still I lust for more.

## **Bow Down, Catullus**

You do have a cunning tongue, and I've reaped its  
rewards—a well-plowed field is sweeter than honey  
and the barley blooms like heaven, rich heads bursting.  
It is an ancient law: first the plow, then the scythe.  
I know you'll rise again, love, for the occasion—  
don't regret the sharp blade's bite or the nip of death.  
Words sown on the surface give a scanty yield;  
cutting gives life, and the slit earth is immortal.



## **Catullus' Lover Invokes the Muses**

Delicious boy, didn't you beg me to play?  
To ruffle you, rouse you, make you peck and sing,  
lodging that deft poetic invitation  
next to your pale invocation of the Muse—

*O virgin patroness!* What shallow memory  
lets poets forget the rank couplings behind  
inspiration, sublime union where the dark  
tendrils of snakes clamor around the first cave?

Let me remind you: the Muse Polymnia  
bore Orpheus, some say she bore Eros—god  
of piercing love—himself; Terpsichore carried  
the Sirens in the briny sea of her womb;

Calliope spawned the priests of Cybele.  
Take care whom you invoke. Any act of love  
can call her down, my lady Aphrodite—  
perhaps you have called her to us, for I feel

her doves feather my thighs, feel her fleet sparrows  
kindle my skin with wingtips dipped in ardor.

## **Lesbia Reads the Omens**

You offered sparrows to Aphrodite, and I came to you,  
veiled in saffron clouds of glory, musky with divine perfume,  
as if I myself had broken into Aphrodite's alabaster box  
and anointed myself with oil perfumed with myrtle and sea foam.  
O hubris! Such a daring act will surely call down vengeance  
and the goddess is as careless with revenge as with her gifts—  
our scents are mixed—will she bless me with wrath or you?  
Quickly, lover! Lift my skirts, taste where she has wounded me.

## **On Catullus' Ingratitude**

It is you who should be on your knees to me,  
ungrateful poet! Without me, your little trifles  
would fade as quickly as petty smells. Without me,  
you are the poet of the boasting cock: now proud,  
easily humbled. I am the Muse who brought you  
immortality, who seasoned your boyish heart  
into a man's—and gave your words eternal life.  
Do it now, ungrateful poet! On your knees.

## **Lesbia's Last Confession**

There are unmarked hours when Aphrodite's golden shimmer  
lights your fingertips, courses through your lips as if kissed  
by immortal bliss, all your dark weight translucent to love.  
Now your celestial touch destroys me—dawn's radiance breaks  
beneath my eyelids and blood-stars die a thousand crimson deaths.  
In the afterworld all is dust. In the grey shadows my bones  
hunger, and so I feed on the flesh of others, grazing mortal  
flesh to clothe myself in life—or who would come to you?

NATHAN ANDREW WILSON grew up in Brantford, then moved to Ottawa and, later, Halifax for undergraduate and graduate work. He has recently returned to Ontario where he is pursuing a doctoral degree in History at Toronto's York University. *A Melody* is his first published work of fiction.

## **A Melody**

**Nathan Andrew Wilson**

*THE SUN'S CRUEL RAYS bear down upon Melody's bare shoulders. Leighton watches his daughter from the side of their house. Her blond curls dance with the breeze blowing across the field. She smiles and hums—plucks a handful of dandelions from the earth.*

*She scrambles up the hill that leads to the house.*

*Chirp-chirp, cries a bird, going about its business. Melody plunks herself down upon the back porch.*

*Chirp-chirp.*

*She looks around.*

*Chirp-chirp.*

*The weeds fall from her hand as she rises. She looks left and right, up and down. She harrumphs loudly.*

*"Who's doing that?" she demands of the early afternoon.*

*A pebble whizzes overhead and lands in some nearby bushes.*

*Chirp-chirp.*

*"Who's there? Show yourself." Another pebble hurtles through the air, landing in and rustling the bushes. Melody scrutinizes the foliage. She teems with excitement at the thought of catching the voyeur. It's the female lions that do the hunting, she thinks as she stalks whomever is lying in the bush.*

*"Got ya!" she yells, leaping madly into the thicket, finding . . . nothing.*

*"Dammit," she whispers, suddenly jumping to her feet and spinning around into arms that easily lift her into the air and swing her about.*

*Melody giggles with glee. "Higher, higher," she demands of an obliging father.*

*"Chirp-chirp," whistles her father to his daughter's delight.*

*"You tricked me," she laughs.*

*"That I did," smiles Leighton, the sun's rays kissing his upturned face.  
"That I . . ." And that's when he hears the thumping.*

*"Daddy. Why aren't you smiling? What's wrong?"*

*No, not thumping . . . rather, drumming . . . the awful drumming of the  
helicopter's propeller blades.*

*"Daddy! What's wrong? Daaaaaaaaaaddyyyyyyy!"*

The clouds break and Leighton watches the black mechanical bitch descend to earth. The thunderous roar of her blades rolls in on the encampment from all sides now. Any paper not weighed down blows off desk tops and makeshift filing cabinets. The medical tent's front flap whips back and forth violently. Dirt billows in as the chopper touches down.

Doctor Leighton Blain grabs one of the more hardened nurses and asks what the call is . . . *what's coming in?*

"Soldier. Young. Severe eye trauma. One or both of his eyes. Not sure. Sounds like splinters from a grenade caught him," clips off the nurse.

Leighton watches a pair of soldiers lift their broken comrade from the bitch's belly. They lower him onto the gurney, allowing the nurses to take over from there.

*Christ, he's young!* thinks Leighton.

The soldier's arms flail madly about. Shock guides his movements. His fingernails catch an attendant's cheek, clawing three catlike scratches into her soft, pink flesh.

The rookie attendant gasps and shakes like a Parkinson's victim. Leighton pushes her aside with an audible curse.

His voice booms over the chopper's noise. "Restrain him, goddammit!"

The man splayed out on the gurney spasms, foam seeps from the corners of his mouth. Leighton knows that saving this man was never in the cards, not with the amount of head and eye trauma sustained.

The doctor punches a needle into the soldier's leg. *Morphine. Like slipping into a warm bath.*

The man's eye sockets stretch open when he dies a few minutes later. A dark red tear masses at one end of the wound and rolls smoothly down the stubbly curve of the dead man's cheek.

Had the man before him had eyes, Leighton would have shut them. As it were, he lifts a sheet up and over the soldier's head.

\* \* \*

Leighton works feverishly through the afternoon. He tries to forget the invasive memory of his daughter.

The black bitch touches down around dinnertime and throws up a man whose lower jaw has been blown off. *Physically he'll live, mentally . . .* Leighton bows his head. His only consolation in the terrible things he sees is the knowledge that the rookie attendant from this morning is gone,

despite her braying protestations that she will never overreact again.

"The doctor doesn't like anyone fucking up his universe," one attendant says to another late in the day.

Leighton emerges from the medical tent around midnight. He walks toward what he has fondly come to call his "thinking rock."

He sucks smoothly on a cigar. He shifts his weight to one side, trying to find comfort on the craggy mass of stone beneath his bum. The cigar's smoke clouds around his head and helps clear his mind. He wishes silently that his other hand held a glass of Scotch.

*Such things are not to be.*

The doctor adds the day's dead to the running total he keeps in his head. He remembers the man with no lower jaw. There was a time when he would have shuddered if not been paralyzed by a wave of nausea at the sight. But no longer. He adds the man to an alternate list he keeps in his head—the maimed.

Leighton takes another long suck at his cigar and exhales a perfect smoke ring. He looks up at the starry night sky.

*"I love you, daddy."*

*"I love you too, pumpkin. Good night."*

*"But I'm not sleepy."*

*"You will be soon, sweetheart. When you close your eyes the stars will sprinkle their dust down upon you to help you sleep."*

Leighton shakes his head in frustration. He stubs out the stogy, rises and journeys to his tent. He hopes the night's stardust will bring him a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

*"Did you have fun outside, sweetie?" asks Leighton's wife as her daughter enters the house.*

*"Oh, she had fun," replies Leighton, traipsing in after her.*

*"It was pretty good," corrects Melody, adding: "Daddy hid near the bushes and jumped out at me."*

*"Scared you, did he?"*

*"No," snaps Melody defensively, crossing her arms. "He tried to, though. Here, I got you some flowers, mommy."*

*She extends the bouquet of dandelions for her mother to take.*

*"Why thank you, sweetie, they're lovely. I'll put them in some water."*

*"Daddy showed me how you can tell if someone likes butter by using a dandelion," she adds, kicking off one shoe and then the other.*

*"Did he?"*

*"Yep. Wanna know how?"*

*"Sure."*

*"k. Pass me one of those flowers and I'll show you." Leighton's wife takes one of the longer dandelions from the batch and hands it to her daughter.*

## The New Orphic Review

*“Now you have to kneel down.”*

*“Kneel down, do I?”*

*Leighton smiles at his wife.*

*“Yes, please.”*

*“Alright, just one moment.”*

*“Now hold still. You put the dandelion under someone’s chin and if it shows up yellow on their skin it means they like butter.”*

*Leighton watches as Melody takes the dandelion and holds it beneath his wife’s chin.*

*“Well . . . Do I like butter?”*

*Melody pouts.*

*“I think you may like peanut butter better.”*

*Leighton’s wife roars with laughter. She rises from the kitchen floor and hugs her daughter tightly. “You got it right, sweetie, I love peanut butter. I’m a peanut butter monster,” she says, picking up her daughter and tickling her.*

*“And I’m a dinner monster, hungry for some supper,” cries Leighton, rounding the kitchen counter and scooping both mother and daughter up in one big hug.*

*“There’s no such thing as a dinner monster,” challenges Melody.*

*“Oh, yes, there is, and you’d better go wash up lest you make him angry,” Leighton says, patting her bum. “Off you go.”*

\* \* \*

Early the next morning, before sunup, an attendant wheels in a charred corpse—only one in a string of corpses Leighton sees on a daily basis.

The young man’s pulse doesn’t need checking, but Leighton goes through the motions anyway. He glances at his watch, notes the time in the log book next to the name on the dog tags, and closes the boy’s eyes for the last time. He pulls the bloodstained sheet up smartly over the mangled body.

A little past six a.m., Leighton goes to the canteen. He sits at a table and slowly eats his food. Men sit all around him, shoveling grub into their mouths.

With a cup of thick, black coffee in his hand, Leighton tries shaking off the remnants of last night’s dream.

He stirs in some sugar then lays the spoon off to the side.

*“Can you balance the spoon on the end of your nose, daddy?”*

*“Like this? Ta-daaaa!”*

*He smiles as Melody claps her hands and giggles.*

The canteen works like an assembly line: one group arrives, gets its food, sits down, eats, and then rises to make room for the next.

Talking between large mouthfuls of egg, men mull over their own dreams—a cathartic exercise.

*“That’s nothing, that’s nothing,” starts one man.*

“You think you’ve got a better one?” asks another seated across from him.

“Fuck, yeah, you crazy bastard! I gotta better one.”

“Well, let’s hear it.”

“Yeah!” chimes in another soldier. “Dreams about fucking your mother don’t count though,” he says to thunderous laughter.

“Very funny, pillow biter. It’s your mother I dream of”—another round of laughter from the men at the table.

Leighton allows himself a small smile. He directs his attention toward another table and the smile falters.

Some men don’t speak, don’t share their dreams. They come, they eat, and they leave. There is neither sharing dreams nor brief sojourns to realms of sordid sexuality.

Leighton tips the rest of the coffee down his throat and makes his way toward the medical tent.

“Good morning, doctor,” says a nurse as he enters the enclosure. “Sleep well?”

*“How did you sleep, sweetheart?” asks his wife, kissing him on the cheek.*

“Fine, thank you.”

“Did you dream?”

The doctor turns and examines the nurse full on. “No,” he replies, his mouth making a perfect ‘O’. “I never dream.”

Leighton begins making his rounds.



SANDRA HARTLINE has lived in Canada since 1969, and in Nelson, B.C. since 1981. She has been published in *Celebrating Canadian Women* (prose and poetry by and about Canadian women, edited by Greta Hoffman Nemiroff), *Border Crossings*, and two local anthologies, *Bread and Bones* and *Journey to the Interior*.

## **Gourmet Di Bella**

**Sandra Hartline**

THE GIRL WAS called Frannie. Frannie Di Bella. She was the youngest of seven children, all of them strange. Her mama Vi was a Catholic and clothing sorter at the St. Vincent de Paul. Frannie's father worked in the railroad yard and sang filthy tavern songs when drunk. Frannie recalled one of the cleaner ditties:

In this whole world over  
It's the poor what gets the blame  
It's the rich what gets the pleasure  
Ain't it all a bleeding shame.

The boy was Steve Fortune. Frannie knew him in high school, when he'd been in the stream of the university-bound and she'd been distracted and suicidal. He had been to university and was home now, saving money while working three jobs, including a weekend stint minding Frannie's children.

Steve had turned up at her door four months earlier, with a delivery from Gourmet to Go.

"Hey," she'd said. "I know you."

Steve smiled noncommittally.

"Want to meet my kids?"

Frannie had been wearing red shorts and a halter top. Her children, Charlotte and Bernice, peeked out between her legs.

"Hey, Frannie," Vi yelled from the kitchen. "Who's at the door?"

Frannie sighed. "It's Steve Fortune, Mom. With the chicken."

It was getting rather crowded for Frannie, who was living at home with her parents and a layabout older brother. She figured Steve Fortune, arriving on her doorstep with a load of chicken and clam linguini, was a direct sign from God.

“Come and visit when you’re off work,” she said, flashing him a smile. “We can talk about old times.”

Although, truthfully, there was not a lot to talk about. Those Grade 11 Family Life classes in which she’d described in detail her father’s blackout binges? The days her mother couldn’t get out of bed? Or the time she had slashed her wrist with a razor blade and almost bled to death? Give me a break, Frannie thought. Best left forgotten.

“Umm, right. How’re you *doing*, Frannie?” Steve said. She thought he sounded impressed or something. Later, he told her it was Charlotte and Bernice who impressed him. He figured two kids was further ahead than an arts degree, in the long run.

The twins were the result of an accident on the last night of a production of *Oliver Twist* in which Frannie had taken the role of Mrs. Sowerberry, the undertaker’s wife. Excited, fueled by a few tokes and several drinks of wine, Frannie had succumbed to the Artful Dodger after a cast party thrown by Fagin. Getting into the bar had been no problem—she’d always looked old for her age, towering over the heads of other kids in her kindergarten class picture, beginning her periods at the age of ten. Climbing out of the back seat had been more of a problem, as she’d been hurt and scared.

“A baby!” Vi wailed when she heard Charlotte was on the way. “Now you’re in for it.”

Frannie’s father took Frannie for a walk around the block. “You’ll be all right now,” he said, hoping to keep the worry out of his voice. “No more offing yourself, I hope.”

Her brother said, “You’ll go straight to Hell, Frannie, and everything will come to me.”

\* \* \*

Frannie had twins, which wasn’t so bad. Charlotte and Bernice meant she now had an excuse to stay home and look after her inept parents. She washed and dressed the babies, took them to the park and showed them off on the main street of town. Why finish high school? She’d been failing anyway.

When she thought of him at all, she remembered Steve Fortune as a quiet guy who lived across town and played a bagpipe in parades. He delivered pizzas for a while and then disappeared.

“Frannie, are you getting religious again?”

“What do you mean, religious? Don’t I get to Mass every Sunday?”

“I mean special rosary prayers, I mean candles, I mean that ad in the paper,” Vi said.

“Wasn’t me,” Frannie told her. She knew her mother was referring to the prayer that had appeared in the town newspaper the previous Wednesday:

St. Jude, Glorious Apostle, faithful servant

## *The New Orphic Review*

and friend of Jesus, the true Church invokes you universally as the Patron of things despaired of. Pray for me, who is so miserable, pray for me, that I may finally receive the consolations and the succour of Heaven in all my necessities, tribulations and suffering, particularly my desire to get out of my parents' house once and for all, so I can bless God with the Elect throughout eternity, Amen.

"Wasn't me," Frannie repeated.

Vi continued to worry. Frannie kept secrets and was standoffish, but then hadn't that always been the case? Nevertheless, it was clear Frannie wasn't happy.

Here was the situation: Vi's husband hadn't always been a drunkard and she, Vi, hadn't always sorted rags for a living. They'd been young once. It was life, Vi decided, gritting her teeth while attempting to get the dust off the carpet her husband, Rocco, had found at the city dump. Life had nudged them down.

\* \* \*

In the city, Steve worked as a telemarketer for Trendwest Resorts. He had picked up a few tips from Sky Jones, the politician, a man never at a loss for words.

"Never ask a yes/no question," Sky said. "I never answer those myself. Not directly."

Sky was an MP for a party not in power. Steve's mother worked as Sky's assistant. Steve had been on picnics with the two of them, sitting in the back of Sky's red convertible and staring at the roots of his peroxidized hair, inhaling his aftershave. Like Sinatara, Sky liked Tootsie Rolls, and shared them liberally.

"Give the client a choice," Sky told him. "Guide her through some options." He smiled at Steve's mother, whose name was Kate.

"Stay in school," Kate said, adjusting her stockings.

So Steve taught English to Japanese students in the daytime, and in the evenings he sold options for a string of spas and condos across the west. He was filled with a strange hunger, selling mini-mansions. He dreamed of Tootsie Rolls and spas in the country surrounded by fir trees and outdoor skating rinks. His students, who took miniature Teddy Bears to class dangling on tiny key chains, had similar fantasies.

Then Steve's mother broke two limbs while skiing. His father, a personnel director for the Ministry of Highways, moved back into the family home temporarily to help look after things, but was greeted by a litany of complaints. "On top of everything else," Steve's mother told him, wheeling around the upstairs of the house, peevish and exasperated,

“you just can’t get it up, can you?”

Steve’s father began drinking heavily. When Steve came home for a visit, thinking he had to hold things together, the house felt suffocating, filled with empty gin bottles. His dad wore an apron all day long, and watched game shows on TV. Steve’s mother read romance novels and had long conversations on the telephone with Sky Jones. Just who was the parent here?

Steve got a temporary job with Gourmet to Go, and found work as a guide to some Japanese tourists who wanted to charter kayaks and go hiking. As it turned out, Steve also became caregiver twice a week to Charlotte and Bernice, after Frannie took a part-time job as a flag person for the Ministry of Highways.

Steve wasn’t sure whether Frannie got hired because of her height (5’11”) or because he put in a word to his father, the personnel director of the Ministry of Highways. When he took Charlotte and Bernice on a picnic on the other side of the lake, they spotted Frannie just before the bridge, holding a sign and stopping traffic with her bright red shorts.

“Mom! Mom!” cried the little girls, while Steve smiled and waved. After the picnic they would come back to the house and make cookies. Later Frannie would come, and they’d make spaghetti, linguini, fettucine with cream sauce, spinach and herbs.

\* \* \*

When Steve helped Frannie cook the sauce, the fragrance of tomatoes seemed to blend with her smell, at the same moment homely, intoxicating and exotic. He wandered with her through the garden patch, lush with green pole beans, ripe with eight kinds of tomatoes her mother had grown from seed. “It’s only the Italians that make good gardeners,” Frannie said, complacently.

Dinner with her family was a fractious affair. There was fighting in the grand manner with lots of drama and waving of arms.

“Nick, dear, I want you to fix the front steps.” That was mama Vi.

“Yes, Ma,” replied Nick, Frannie’s older brother. He had large brown eyes and had been in jail more than once.

“Yeah,” said Frannie. “Anybody could slip.”

“Meaning you?” Nick said. Frannie thought there was more than a touch of menace in his voice.

“No, Nick, not me. I’ll just keep going out the back way, down those real steep stairs, with twins that can hardly walk.”

“I said I’d fix them. So.”

Frannie knew that Steve could fix the stairs, no problem, but it was better not to say so. Steve could not fix the steps in the same way that Nick could not babysit Charlotte and Bernice, not that Frannie ever wanted him to. It was a matter of roles. Her mother would never quite get the housework done, because nobody was good enough to help her. Her father

would always be blabbering about something or other. She, Frannie, would have to wash a mountain of dishes after supper, while Nick sat around watching hockey on TV.

There were five other siblings, their lives in various guises of doom. Frannie's sister Ann was locked up in a mental hospital where she knitted afghans all day long. Frank chased women, Joe had broken his back logging up north, Emmy worked in an office and said she'd never visit them ever, and Bart—well, nobody knew much of anything about Bart.

At this point in dinner, Charlotte began lobbing bread across the table.

"Eat nice," said Frannie, absently.

"Why don't you teach her some manners?" Nick asked.

"So she'll eat like you?"

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with the way I eat."

"We cook all day, you wolf it. All you do is sit around drinking orangeade."

Frannie's father said, to no one in particular, "Can't that Sky Jones do anything about the rail yard closing? Nick was hoping to get on at the CPR."

Nick, the ex-con, was silent. He was always looking for a job.

"It doesn't matter about me, I'm gonna retire soon," Frannie's father said, wiping his rheumy eyes. "But my son needs a job."

"Please. Have some more wine," Vi urged Steve. She smiled ingratiatingly. "How is your mama?"

Steve knew he was walking through landmines.

After dinner Frannie explained, "Nick doesn't really want a job. He's waiting for my parents to die so he can sell the house and live off the income."

Steve was helping her with the dishes, a daunting task what with the faulty Di Bella electrical wiring problems. In the dying light he was wiping off china with the aid of a desk lamp, because the overhead light fixture did not work. Despite the poor light Steve did the best he could, noticing that Frannie's mother had put out her best china (for him, probably).

When they were done Steve took Frannie's hand. "Let's go for a walk . . . just the two of us."

Frannie stopped sulking and smiled brilliantly. It was still bright outside. Charlotte and Bernice, their heads framed by clematis vines, flashed him the Victory sign they had learned from Sky Jones.

They walked carefully down the back stairs (as the front steps were broken) and opened the gate. Apple trees flourished on either side of the lane, while neighborhood dogs sniffed after garbage. There were piles of lumber, broken tricycles and rusty bicycles that had stayed out too long in the rain. When they had passed a few houses, Steve turned Frannie against him and kissed her.

"Frannie," he said, "I was raised United Church. Do you think I need

to change my religion?"

When they got to Steve's house half an hour later, Sky Jones and Steve's mother were at the kitchen table, going over plans for a backyard hot tub.

"How about cedar?" said Kate. "We can jump in when the snow falls, right after skiing."

"You're going skiing again?" Steve asked.

"Why not? The bones are all mended. Sky and I went water-skiing last weekend."

"Where's Dad?"

"Working."

"On a Sunday?"

"Well, sure. Somebody working for the Ministry died and they're taking up a collection. He has responsibilities, you know."

As if on cue, Steve said, "Mom, Frannie and I want to get married."

"What!" His mother could not hide her dismay.

"Yes, I'm going to become a Catholic."

"Then the kids will have a proper upbringing," Frannie said, primly.

"Well, great," said Sky. "How about a drink?"

Frannie accepted a shot of Jack Daniels, neat.

"But where will you live?" Kate asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Steve said. "We can't live at home. Maybe we'll buy a trailer, travel around in it. What do you say, Frannie?"

She looked at Steve for reassurance, and in his mild and amiable face she saw their lives winding forward, filled with fracas and debris. More children. Sorrow and death.

"I do," said Frannie. She took a proffered Tootsie Roll, and a slice of cake.

LOUIS E. BOURGEOIS teaches writing at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. He is the author of seven books of poetry. His most recent work, a memoir, *The Gar Diaries*, has been accepted for publication by Community Press. Bourgeois is also the editor of the avant-garde literary journal, *VOX*. He was the Featured Poet in Vol. 8, No. 2 of *The New Orphic Review*, which also included some of his stories. He has received The Robert Penn Warren Award, among many others.

## Louis E. Bourgeois / **Five Prose Poems**

### **The Mansion**

They began to mutilate one another; sister became armless, mother faceless, father voiceless, brother and son went blind—servant became master, master piled up loaves of shit in the outhouse. The dogs took over the table and the caged birds settled down into bed with a good book.

The home owners knew there was no way of stopping this; outside always gets in no matter how hard you try.

### **Cannibalism is Conformity**

I wake at sunrise to the sound of squealing pigs; outside, an idiot child is eating pig shit and rat meat in a dish of black decaying rice. Next door, a virgin is being washed in a huge zinc tub; she is being cleansed for a political sacrifice of dubious worth. Tonight, her loins and buttocks will be served in rich sauces at the Imperial Table. I do not know what they will do with the rest of her, except that she'll disappear forever with the rest of the sacrifices—

But before then, I too will fall into a trance, intoxicated with the dinner conversation of Aristotelian logic and Middle Eastern affairs.

## **Heidegger Playing with Children** (A Seaside Story)

Gather 'round me boys and girls; see, this is not a fish. This is definitely not a fish and if you look above, you'll see that there is no sky there, nor has there ever been a sky.

The only reality is ash. Jewish ash and stardust ash.

Ash is an image that keeps me up late into the night. Some nights, I never sleep a'tall.

This ball, children, this ball is too much of itself. This ball is too much reality. Gravity is a sin against my philosophical efforts—

Do you understand, children?

I will dance with you, yes, we will dance and dance in the lovely meadow with the Charnel factory smoking in the distance, but, first, I must ask you, don't you loathe the color green? Don't worry, one day you'll understand the essence of this question better than I do.

Questions are the highest piety of thought . . . but, remember well, this is not a fish; this is most certainly not a fish and that Sun, if only I could crush it—

And put it into a glass tube, or into the very filaments of a telephone.

You need to understand that the reality of this world is only ash, Jewish ash and stardust ash.

Now, children, drop that ball and go home and read *The Complete Works of Plato* and come back tomorrow and tell me what you found there.



## **The Magic Hand**

*For the old whore in Cuba, Alabama  
who once gave me a dollar without  
asking why.*

He was forced to eat a star, although all he wanted was bread. All he wanted was to be normal, but he was predetermined by the Butcher Shop to have his limbs chopped off for mystical purposes he didn't understand and didn't want to understand—the village priests apparently saw something sacred in deforming him, all the old gods were now held suspect, and in the air an incessant storm was brewing—they said to him, We will feed you and give you a name—You are to speak without imperfection—but as in all matters of society, the village soon became bored of their sacred amputee and starved him to death with moon dust and with solar interstices in his belly.

## **Home**

I arrived at the house hours before the sun was up and fell asleep in the tall grass of my childhood—someone was whispering to me in monotone *éclat, éclat, éclat. Dieu est éclat*, but I was not afraid. I have never been afraid. I have never been afraid, but the voice wouldn't leave me alone and it said further, *All the fruit in the orchard is poisoned, and all the flowers are yellow*. How did that happen? I answered out loud. I also asked the voice why all my dreams were of blood and crabs and it responded, *Because you were born with a divine disease*. I wanted to get up but couldn't, nothing held me down but my own weight.

When I awoke, the sun was just coming up and the grass had withered all around me and I knew I was in Hell because I was surrounded by tall clocks.

A. S. PENNE has published and won awards for her short fiction on both sides of the Atlantic. An excerpt from her first book, *Old Stones* (Touchwood, Victoria, 2002) won the 1999 *Prairie Fire* Creative Nonfiction Contest and was shortlisted for the 2000 Western Magazine Awards.

## **Paths of Ascent**

A. S. Penne

“YOU KNOW WHAT Mom says?”

The left side of Jake’s mouth tightens but he doesn’t take his eyes off the road.

“No,” he says to Samantha, “but I bet you’re going to tell me.”

“She says you never take us anywhere nice on summer vacation because you’re too cheap.”

Jake stares at the British Columbia vista beyond the windshield in front of him, the rolling grassland yellowed by a long, dry summer, its hills undulating into the distance like the cliché backdrop for a western. The jack pines on the hillsides, sparse and scrawny, give meager shade to clumps of white-faced cattle chewing mechanically and Jake wishes that he could transport himself à la Star Trek, into the body of one of those brown beasts.

Jake nods his head in response to Sam’s remark then says, “I guess she can think that about me if she likes.” He’s heard this complaint before, first from Gloria and now from a daughter who seemed to be following in her mother’s footsteps.

Twelve-year-old Sam blows an oversized bubble with her chewing gum, letting it explode with gusto.

“Is that what you guys think?” Jake looks into the rearview mirror, hoping to catch the eye of seven-year-old Jerry in the back seat. But Jerry is elsewhere, staring wide-eyed at the countryside beyond the car, completely removed from the conversation in the front. His one chance of support lost, Jake turns back to the road.

“How come you never take us to neat places like she does?” Samantha asks now.

“What!” he scoffs. “You don’t think it’s neat hiking into the mountains

and camping in an old goldminer's cabin, going to sleep listening to loons and coyotes?"

"I mean like Disneyland and stuff."

"How many kids do you know who've been to places like you and I have, huh?"

"You're just saying that because you don't like spending money."

Jake checks the person next to him but it really is his daughter and not his ex-wife leaning against the passenger door.

He takes a deep breath as he looks out his side window. "Look," he tries again. "It's okay for your mom to think I'm cheap just like it's okay for me to think something else about her, but . . ."

"Don't say mean things about Mommy," Jerry's voice squeaks from behind Jake.

"I'm not, Jer."

"But you're thinking them. I can hear your thoughts, Dad."

Jake finds his son in the rearview mirror again. "You can?" He raises his eyebrows in mock disbelief. "I didn't know you were psychic!"

Jerry frowns briefly and then his face crumples. "I'm not!" he blubbers as the first salty splash runs down his cheek.

"Hey, Jer—what's up?" Jake softens his voice.

"I'm not a psycho!"

"No, son!" Jake laughs. "Psychic doesn't mean . . ."

"Ha!" Samantha throws her head back against the headrest. "I told you you were weird!" she cackles.

"Am not!" Jerry howls.

"Are too!"

Jake feels his shoulder muscles tightening. After a month of summer vacation spent refereeing disagreements like this one, the rushed and overtired weekends spent with them during the school year are beginning to seem better and better. He'd naively envisioned a long period of reconnecting with the kids in a way that he realized wasn't going to happen and now Jake sags with the weight of being with them at all. He thinks how, if it were Gloria sitting there beside him and tossing insults and hurtful comments as though they were mere words, he'd stop the car, open the door and let her find her own way home.

"Sam," he searches for a safe tone, "you wouldn't like it if Jerry said that about you . . ."

"He says it all the time!" she spits. "He calls me names and if I get mad at him, he runs to Mom, the little baby!"

"Do not!"

"Do so! But now you're stuck with Dad. *He's* not gonna buy you off with ice cream or a new toy. Too bad, brat!"

Jake's foot hits the brake. He swerves onto the shoulder and slams the gearshift into park, then turns and takes Samantha's arm by the elbow,

pinching it hard. “Why can’t you learn when to stop, for Christ’s sake! You’re just like your mother!”

Sam’s eyes widen with fear and then narrow with venomous hate. She turns away from Jake, wrenching her arm from his hold. In the back seat, Jerry begins to wail. Jake twists uncomfortably, reaching a hand back to his son’s knee. “It’s okay, Jerry. I’m sorry.”

Jerry rubs at his eyes with balled fists. Jake turns back and sees the way Sam has pressed herself against the passenger door panel. He reaches for her shoulder. “Sam—I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry I lost it.”

Sam lurches away from his hand.

Jake shuts his eyes and slumps in his seat, leaning his head against the headrest. His daughter sobs quietly beside him, face squashed into the passenger window, and his son snuffles in the back seat.

Behind closed eyelids, Jack sucks a deep breath into his belly. He sighs it out long and slow through his open mouth, trying to focus on relaxing his neck and shoulders. He tries not to hear the thought in his head: *No matter where we go, she’s still there.*

Jake looks across the crumpled body of his daughter squeezed against the door. He decides to leave her alone for now and sits forward to put the car into gear, turn back onto the highway. He wants to take advantage of this silence in the car to regroup.

It is amazing, Jake thinks, how Sam can work him like a hawk, flushing him into the open and then diving for the kill as soon as his soft spots are exposed.

Gloria always said he was just too sensitive. “It’s not me leaning on all your buttons, honey,” she used to say. “It’s you not making your boundaries clear.”

Gloria was ultra-clear about boundaries. Three years ago she’d asked Jake to move out of the family home.

“I don’t love you any more,” she told him. “I’ve met someone else.”

Jake had reacted in disbelief, pulling his wife against his chest and tucking her head beneath his chin where it had once nestled so snugly. But Gloria had pushed away and Jake had seen the way her eyes glistened, the same way they’d shone when Jake met her.

\* \* \*

The first time Merle came to the house, he was a dinner guest. Gloria sold insurance and she liked to invite prospective clients into their home.

“I like them to see that I have a family, that I’m not doing this just for the money,” she said. “That way they know I’m human too.”

She and Jake had stood in the doorway and watched together as Merle parked his expensive motorcycle in their driveway. Jake saw someone in his late fifties climb off the bike, tucking a black helmet emblazoned with flying eagles under his arm as he strode up the path towards them.

The conversation had centered mostly around Merle’s detailed

knowledge of motorcycles, particularly the Honda Goldwing he rode.

“What a nerd,” Jake said after he left.

“You think so?” Gloria seemed surprised.

“You don’t?” Jake turned at the kitchen sink where he stood washing a wine glass, the bubbles of dishsoap dripping onto the floor.

It was one of those telling moments that Jake went back to every time he fell into the trap of wondering where things had gone wrong, that memory of Gloria looking so surprised about Jake’s opinion of Merle. It was less than a year later that Gloria brought Merle home again, this time to stay.

Since Merle had moved in, Jake’s status had changed. Now whenever he arrived to pick up the kids, Jake stood awkwardly inside the door, his coat sleeve brushing against the leather jacket so prominently hung there. If Merle invited him to sit, Jake would refuse the La-Z-Boy beside the stack of motorcycle magazines, choose the sofa instead. But his old territory felt newly marked, diminishing Jake’s presence and reminding him that he was only a visitor. As if to confirm his new role, Gloria gave him a nickname.

“Uncle Daddy’s here,” she called when Jake arrived for one of Sam and Jerry’s first weekend visits.

“Hey!” Jake bristled at her.

Gloria shrugged, avoiding his eyes. “They can’t call both of you ‘Dad.’”

Jake had wanted to make Gloria understand and so he grabbed the soft flesh of her upper arms in his long fingers. “Listen, Gloria,” he hissed, shaking her to attention. “This time you’ve gone too far.”

When she flung his hands off her arms, there were large red welts where he’d squeezed too hard.

Jake imagined Merle in his house—Jake’s old house—tuning up the engines on that Honda Goldwing and Gloria’s Saab, balancing the household accounts, cooking veal parmigiano for dinner, fixing all the broken things on the list Gloria kept taped on the fridge door, being the driven, ambitious person that she had once sought in Jake.

It was hard not to want to blame everything on Merle. If the guy had shown any amount of sympathy when Jake came for the kids, maybe they could have worked things out. But after the arm-squeezing incident, Merle always came to the door with Gloria, his beefy body filling the entire gap beside hers. He stood there like some kind of sentinel while Jake waited for his kids to appear from somewhere behind their human fence.

When Jake picked Sam and Jerry up in early July, Gloria handed him a list of the kids’ preset activities and summer lessons. “And don’t forget to wash their clothes before bringing them home,” she added.

Jake had clicked his heels together and saluted and Gloria had sneered, then shoved at the door. Before the slam, though, Jake saw the smirk on Merle’s face. It was all he could do not to break down the door with his

fists.

The intensity of his anger at Gloria unnerved Jake: he hadn't been this out-of-control while they were married. If Gloria had pissed him off in the old days with another of her unending requests, he had dealt with his annoyance by throwing himself into physical chores. He'd put the garbage into the battered aluminum cans, then crash the lids on top as if they were cymbals, sometimes repeating the noise for effect. He tore at the starter cord of the lawnmower and drove the machine carelessly, maiming low-hanging branches on shrubs and bushes. And he ran the dog with such ferocity that even the long-legged mutt came home exhausted. Just before the end, just before Gloria had told him she wanted out, Jake made a final desperate attempt. He sent up prayers, silent prayers in the black of their bedroom, asking for a miracle to turn his life around, make this marriage bloom again, but it felt to Jake as though he was on the losing side of a tug-of-war, the rope slipping through his hand despite his tight hold.

Sometimes when he feels the simmering low in his abdomen, that urgent roiling sensation he feels now, Jake wonders how in hell Gloria and he had ever decided to marry, let alone have kids. Not that he wishes Sam and Jerry hadn't been born. He's never wished that, not even when he was packing to leave and hating Gloria with more fervor than he'd ever felt loving her.

It was the kids who made his life worth living and whose presence had sustained him through the worst of the separation. Now it was the memories of their early childhood and stories from special vacations like these that Jake clung to. He thought back to the day Jerry had come home from the Sunday school classes Gloria had sent the kids to, the book he'd brought home when he was first learning to read. Jake pulled his son onto his knee to listen to him read out loud, and it was all he could do not to laugh when Jerry announced the title proudly: *Dog in Heaven*. Out of the corner of his eye Jake had seen Gloria take Sam's hand and squeeze it, winking so that Sam wouldn't laugh at her brother's mistake. After that it had become a family joke: *That Big Dog in heaven wasn't listening*, they used to say whenever anything went wrong.

Jake takes his right hand off the steering wheel and massages the tightness at the back of his neck. For the briefest of moments, he allows himself to relax the vigilant hold on his feelings and to wish that just once the Big Dog would hear him, would make something happen to Gloria.

\* \* \*

On the stretch of road between Kamloops and Salmon Arm, a large green sign announces an upcoming exit: Highway 5A, the old road that winds through the cattle country south of Kamloops. Jake smiles, remembering childhood summers spent on a nearby cattle ranch.

He breaks the silence in the car. “You guys want to see where real cowboys live?” He looks at Samantha, still twisted into the passenger door, only her back and shoulder presented to him, and then he peers into the mirror at his son.

“Can we go riding?” Jerry sits up with interest.

“Maybe. Want to try?”

“Sure!”

Jake reaches out a hand to Samantha but she curls away more tightly. Unwilling to give up, Jake strokes her slinky blond hair. “Come on, Sammy—let’s not have the last day of our holiday end in a fight.”

Nothing.

“Sam?”

When she speaks, the resentment is palpable. “I wish you were dead!”

Jake carries on a father-son banter with Jerry as the car snakes along the old highway. He tries not to notice the hunched figure on his right whenever his eyes switch from the rearview mirror to the road, and he listens with escalating appreciation to Jerry’s stupid, grade-school jokes.

“What’s brown and sounds like a bell?” Jerry asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Dung!”

Jake slaps his thigh in approval. He wonders momentarily if Jerry’s infatuation with bathroom humor shouldn’t be outgrown by now and then he hoots with laughter.

Twenty minutes later Jake turns to see if Sam is coming out of her funk. Looking at the bony protuberance of her shoulder blades, he realizes that even after all those years with Gloria he’s learned very little about love.

Highway 5A threads its way through miles of gentle hills into a twisting valley and, as the road sinks lower into the earth, Jake feels as though he is slipping into his past. After half an hour they see a weather-beaten ranch off to the side of the road. The spread is a poor one: the porch on the sagging house is at a dangerous incline and the roof of the old barn has gaping holes in it. But the silver in the aged siding of the buildings gives the farm a soft glow in the late summer sun.

“When I was little,” Jake announces to Jerry and the not-listening Samantha, “my dad brought me up here to work on my uncle’s ranch. I used to spend whole summers here.”

“What’d you do?” Jerry asks.

“Fed the animals, fixed fences. Just helped my uncle wherever he needed it.”

“Didja ride horses?”

“Every day.”

“Can we go visit him?” Jerry leans over the front seat, hopeful.

“He’s not here anymore, Jer. He died a long time ago.”

“What happened to his farm?”

“I guess it got sold. Don’t really know.” Jake takes his foot off the gas pedal, slowing to take in the spread of grassland outside.

“Did he have a wife or a kid?”

“He had a wife, yeah. No kids.”

“Didn’t she stay on the farm?”

“No. She moved away afterwards.”

“Why’d she do that?”

Jake shrugs. “Too hard, I guess. Too much for one person.”

“Couldn’t she find another husband?”

He smiles wistfully. “It’s not as easy as that, Jerry.” He puts his foot back on the gas and the car picks up speed again.

The heat of the afternoon sun beats through the passenger seat window and now, from somewhere just beneath a restless sleep, Sam shifts in her seat. Jake turns at the sound of her movement and notices the sweat-dampened hair stuck to her forehead. He notices too that she’s unfolded her tight body, relaxed the distance between them. He reaches for her hand and Sam’s eyelids flutter at his touch but she doesn’t wake. He glances in the rearview mirror and sees Jerry, head lolling uncomfortably on his chest. He wonders about pulling over, stopping for a snooze himself.

The countryside mellows, sleepy creeks and more greenery accompanying the road as it levels off. Jake remembers a myriad of lakes beyond the sight of the highway and thinks that if he can recall which one is a good swimming hole they should take advantage of this last afternoon together, drive home in the cool of the evening instead of this blazing heat. There isn’t any need to rush and, anyway, Gloria is likely to be snappy at the sudden invasion of children into her quiet space.

The thought creates a vision of Gloria in a snit. The way her shoulders lift so high she looks like she’s wearing football pads. The way her voice coughs out sentences of only two or three words. The way her gaze seems permanently fused on something behind Jake. As though looking into his eyes would crack her stony exterior.

The last spat they’d had was over Merle. Jake had gone back to working the pipeline in northern Alberta, a job he’d had before the marriage and one he happily returned to when he needed an excuse to drop out of the MBA program Gloria had wanted him to do.

“I can’t afford the fees if I’m paying child support *and* part of the mortgage, Gloria,” Jake said.

Gloria rolled her eyes and sighed. “Nothing’s changed, has it?”

Jake spent those first few months of separation watching the flares of the gas line shooting up to the heavens and hoping to learn something about paths of ascent. In that constant twilight beneath the northern summer stars, Jake ruminated about his failed marriage and what had gone wrong. And then one day he drove into the nearby town and called



## *The New Orphic Review*

Gloria on the pay phone.

“Gloria,” he said when she answered. “I understand now.”

There was a tiny pause before she said, “I’m glad you’ve figured it out, Jake.”

“I guess I just needed to be alone, you know? To sit and think about it all.”

“Sure.”

“Look—I’m coming into town at the end of the month. How about we go out for dinner somewhere?”

“Jake, honey . . .” Gloria’s voice was low and sweet. Jake closed his eyes and listened to his heart thudding, the whoosh of big transports on the nearby highway. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she finally breathed.

“Why not? Glo’, listen—I’m going to call the lawyer. Tell him to put everything on hold. C’mon—let’s at least talk.”

“No, Jake.”

“What’s wrong?” Jake slumped against the glass door, his free hand on his brow.

“It’s not going to work. It doesn’t matter any more.”

“What about the kids, Gloria? I’m their dad!”

“And you’ll always be their dad. But I’ve changed.”

“It’s that asshole, isn’t it?” Jake thumped his fist on the metal shelf beside the phone.

“Jake, let it go. This isn’t going anywhere.”

“Put the fuck on the phone. Let me talk to him.”

“Stop it, Jake.”

“Not until you say you’ll meet me.”

“I’m going to hang up now.”

The dial tone stung his eardrum. Jake crashed down the receiver and then picked it up again and redialled. When Gloria’s voice came on the answering machine, Jake screamed at her.

“Tell that prick to get the fuck out of my house!”

\* \* \*

Sam stirs and Jake turns to look at her. He extends his arm and lays his hand lightly on her shoulder, wondering what field of thorns she’ll make him cross in order to reach her after that last squabble.

“Dad?”

Jerry’s small voice brings Jake’s eyes to the mirror.

“You’re back.” He smiles at his son.

“I’m hungry.”

“There’s cheese and apples, some juice in the cooler.”

“Can’t we stop for a hamburger or something?”

“Not out here, buddy.” Jake gestures at the barrenness of the land beyond the car.

Jerry sits in a sleepy daze for a minute, yawning and staring out at the

heat-miraged countryside.

“Want to stop for a swim?”

“Where?”

“Lots of lakes around.”

Jerry looks out the other side of the car, frowns. “No, there aren’t, Dad.”

“Yep,” Jake drawls, back in the saddle again. “Up there, behind the road.” He points out the windshield, craning his neck to look as he does. “We can even go skinny-dipping.”

“Sam won’t. She doesn’t like people looking at her boops.”

“Her what?”

“Boops.”

“You mean her breasts?”

As if she’s heard, Sam’s eyelids lift slightly, focusing on Jake’s face with a stare of nonrecognition.

“Hey, Beauty,” Jake smiles at her.

“Yeah. Sam has breasts now,” Jerry’s voice continues in the back seat.

Sam’s forehead buckles as she registers his voice. She twists suddenly, makes an animal lunge at her brother. “You little dink!” she spits.

Jake grabs her fist as she drives for Jerry.

“Sam,” he says softly. “He doesn’t understand.”

She clicks her tongue in the loudest demonstration of disgust she can make but withdraws her hand. Once again she crosses her arms and stares out the window, wishes herself elsewhere.

Jake searches for familiar landmarks on the road ahead, but he listens for Sam. His breath is shallow as he waits to see if she will make another move.

“Dad?” Jerry asks querulously. “Can I sit in the front?”

At the side of his vision, Jake sees Sam’s face twist into a mask of pure venom. And then outside the windshield he sees exactly what he’s been looking for.

An old willow stoops to brush its tendrils against the dusty earth of a rutted turn. “Here we are,” Jake announces. “One of the best swimming holes in the world, coming right up!”

\* \* \*

From where he sits on the towel near the shore, Jake watches Jerry, sees the layers of leftover baby fat folding over his shorts as the still-small body splashes in the lake, leaping and jumping as though the water were a trampoline. Sam, though, lingers at the edge, arms still crossed and toes barely touching the rippled shoreline. While she tests the water, Jake stands and rubs his hand over his thickening belly, stretching as he wades into the lake. He dives, then swims with a long stroke, turning back near the other side of the small lake. Emerging from the water, Jake is panting as he reaches for a towel.

It occurs to Jake that if Sam has breasts, maybe she has also started menstruating. He turns as he towels his still-blonde head of hair, tries to see through the arms she holds against her chest, trying to hide what the bathing suit reveals. Jake feels a tightness in his throat as he recognizes that his daughter is leaving childhood. It makes him feel suddenly old, as though she has gone off on a world tour without saying goodbye. He understands that when she comes back he may not recognize her any more; that she may not be the same person who left. And it makes him feel even more like one of those fathers who doesn't know his children very well.

It was how he had felt during Sam's first visit to the orthodontist. After the specialist had introduced himself, he shut off the overhead lights and Jake was confronted by four lurid X-rays of Sam's skull hanging on the blue lightboard. And while the dentist pointed at irregularities and problems on the negatives, Jake found himself paralyzed by the dark holes of his daughter's eye sockets and the leer of her teeth on those shadowy transparencies. The vision choked at his heart and he felt himself withdraw from the dentist's presentation, reaching for Sam's hand in the chair beside his. But Sam, embarrassed or unwilling, pulled away from him, squirming to the far side of her chair, and Jake was left to face the obvious on his own: the absence of the soul in those blue outlines of bone and shadow.

"Hey, Dad!" Jake hears Jerry from somewhere outside his thoughts. "Can we fish in this lake?"

Jake turns his head to find his son but a sudden reflection off the water is so strong that he has to close his eyes, cover them with one palm. He reaches out his other hand, trying to balance himself from a reeling sensation, and waits for the instant of blindness to pass. He opens his eyes again and squints into the glare but can find only a black, shadowy shape somewhere across the water. He blinks as he attempts to walk, mesmerized by the sunspots in his vision and weaving like a drunk towards the lake.

"Dad?" Sam's voice reaches out from somewhere to the left of him. "Dad, are you okay?"

For the smallest instant Jake is disoriented enough to think the voice he hears is Gloria's, speaking with an old tenderness.

Jake stops, stares in the direction of the voice, squinting to see past the garish colors dancing in his vision. He shivers, holds his hand out tentatively. "I . . . I think I got up too fast," he says, bending his neck and holding his face in his hands, willing the blood back to his brain.

The cool touch of a hand on his shoulder, another on his forearm. Sam.

Jake tries to joke himself back to the present. "For a moment there I thought we were all on the other side!"

"Why don't you come in the water with me and cool off, Dad." It's a

demand, not an invitation, and Jake hears the fear in Sam's voice.

Hours later, back on the road headed south, Jake feels Sam's eyes sneaking sideways looks at him. He wonders if she's ready to talk about what happened earlier in the day. He is grateful, even hungry for her concern, feeling the huge gap of time since anyone has actively worried about him.

The sun is low in the sky and its rays pierce him from either side of the lowered visor. He drives with a hand held against the worst glare.

"Are you sure you're okay to drive, Dad?" Sam's voice is tentative, unsure.

"I'm fine, sweetie." Jake turns to her with an inquisitive glance. "Did you have a good afternoon?"

She doesn't look at him but she nods, even smiles a little. "The lake was beautiful, yeah."

Jake turns back to the road, pleased. "Want to go back some day?"

"Sure. But I was wondering . . ."

Her voice trails off and Jake glances at her. "What?"

"If you and Mom died, what would happen to us? To Jerry and me?"

Jake forces a weak laugh. "What are you worrying about?"

Sam shrugs her bony shoulders against her still-wet hair and looks out the passenger window. "I just wanna know."

Jake glances at her again and shakes his head. "I guess you'd go live with Grandma and Grandpa."

"You aren't going to die, are you, Dad?" Jerry whines.

"Not me, Tiger. You guys got a lot more hiking and camping trips to go on before I let you off the hook!"

Sam shakes her head. "I'm serious, Dad. And I don't want to live with Grandma and Grandpa."

\* \* \*

Up ahead the highway disappears down around a hairpin turn. *Slow to 30* cautions the yellow road sign and Jake eases his foot onto the brake as the highway slips behind a rock face. He is speeding as he comes into the turn, doing closer to 45, but the car isn't straining and so halfway around the corner he releases the brake and reconnects with the gas pedal. He is coming out of the hairpin, increasing the speed, when he's forced to stomp on the brake. His right arm flies out to prevent Sam's skull from slamming into the dashboard as the car skids sideways towards a huge semitrailer jackknifed across the double yellow line. Against the streaming rays of the sunset, Jake sees the truck's emergency flashers dulled behind a cloud of dust still rising from the road.

"What's wrong?" Sam croaks when they stop.

"An accident." Jake puts the car in gear as his eyes jump to the mirror. "You okay, Jer?"

Jerry's eyes are as round as saucers and Jake undoes his seatbelt to

turn around. He reaches an arm out to both his kids.

Sam's fingers grab at his arm and Jake hears a tremor in her voice. "Someone's on the road."

Jake looks over his shoulder and sees the driver of the semi standing on the double line, removing his peaked cap and wiping his brow, putting the cap back on and looking around, stunned.

"I'll go talk to him," Jake says, shutting off the engine. "You two okay?"

"No, Dad," Sam whimpers again. "Over there."

Jake swivels in his seat to look forward again, and now the full specter of the scene comes into focus. Underneath the cab of the semi lie the crushed handlebars and front wheel of a motorcycle. Jagged pieces of chrome and metal are scattered between the shoulders of the highway like toys across a driveway. The truck driver lifts his head, sees Jake and begins walking towards the car.

His boots kick feebly at stray pieces of debris, as if to clear a path through the wreckage, and Jake sees him stoop to pick something up. Jake wonders numbly where the motorcycle driver is, realizing that he—or she—wouldn't have lived through the impact. He sees the trucker's boot jab at a round black object and then the driver stumbles, turns to retch.

A black helmet rocks in place where the driver's toe nudged it, a dark pool of blood beneath. The trucker finishes vomiting and turns back, giving the helmet a stronger shove to send it over the shoulder. The black roundness of the helmet wobbles, rolls half a turn and as it does, Jake sees the dead face.

"My God!" he whispers.

Sam whimpers as her fingers dig at him, her face burrowing into his shoulder.

"What's happened, Dad?" Jerry's hoarse whisper comes from behind.

Jake cradles his daughter's head, tucks it beneath his chin and notices the familiar way it feels nestling into him. He is aware of Sam's clinging hands and he feels the smallness of her body against his. He holds her trembling body quietly, unsure how to relieve her of the horror she has seen.

Jerry wiggles out of his seatbelt, crouches between the bucket seats and presses himself against Jake's shoulder. Jake lifts an arm to pull his son in and all three of them huddle together until they hear the truck driver's tap at the window.

"You might wanna pull over." He points his chin at the shoulder. Jake nods and then they both stare at the litter of metal beside the car. "Maybe back a ways," the trucker says.

Sam makes room for Jerry in the front as Jake restarts the car. When he puts his arm along the back of the seat, Jake sees the way Sam has wrapped her own arm around her brother, protecting him as much as herself, and

again he feels the beginning of a knot in his throat.

He backs up slowly, easing onto the gravel shoulder as soon as a clear spot presents itself. He puts the gearshift in Park and starts to open the door before turning to the kids. "You guys okay?"

They nod at him silently, squeeze a little closer to each other.

"I'll be just a minute." He gets out of the car, looks around to find the trucker behind him on the road, squatting in the middle of the curve to set a warning flare. Jake walks back and stands to one side, watching.

"You all right?" he asks when the trucker stands again. "You hurt at all?"

The older man shrugs and Jake sees his fingers fidgeting with something small and round, turning it over and over like a lucky coin. "I couldn't do nothin'," the trucker shakes his head back and forth. He closes his fist around the object, then opens it again, stares at the piece of metal pressed into his palm.

*Goldwing*, the round medallion says.

"They came round the corner in my lane." His hand trembles.

*Honda*, Jake thinks. A shiver passes down his neck and along his right shoulder and he lifts his hand to the spot. He thinks about Merle, and then about Gloria, about the unlikely possibility that it might have been Merle's *Goldwing*.

Then Jake feels his legs start to shake. He turns to the trucker. "They?"

The trucker blinks at him, uncomprehending.

"You said 'they.' Where's the . . ." Jake feels the muscles in his throat close in on him and he tries again, sucking at the air: ". . . the other one?"

The trucker's arm lifts but Jake doesn't follow the direction of the man's pointing finger. He thinks about Gloria waiting at home, wondering why the kids are so late and then he turns to look back at the car and stands, wanting now to gather up his children and feel the pressure of their warm bodies against his chest.

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*. Set in Switzerland, *To Travel the Distance* is a novel-length work in progress. It deals with the nostalgic longings and nagging dislocation of Ulyssa Segantini, a character who first appeared 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 8**

#### **Margrith Schraner**

OVER THE NEXT COUPLE of hours, the image of the village fountain kept rising in Ulyssa's mind and each time it was accompanied by a sound—not as she would have expected, of water trickling into the stone basin, but curiously, of a dull roar like that of a distant waterfall.

How could it have happened? She felt mystified: as far as she could tell there was no discernible logic, nor was there any definite train of events that would have helped to explain her plunge into the fountain. What remained of the incident were a few isolated moments starkly imprinted on her memory—a solitary cloud set adrift in an August sky, and the sun glancing off the surface of the water. Giovanni Segantini had also appeared. Of that she was certain. She clearly remembered his gaze. She might have let out a small cry upon seeing him, but now she wasn't sure. When did she fall into the water—before or after noticing him?

She remembered with certainty that two elderly women in black had pulled her away from the fountain. They had ushered her up a cobbled side street, their talk resembling the cawing of crows. She had shivered uncontrollably despite the blazing heat. Etched into her recollection was the sharp contrast between the sun-drenched, open plaza that held the fountain and the dense shade of the back street. The incessant flow of words between the crones had intrigued her; to her ears, the Rhaeto-Romansh dialect sounded like an odd mixture of Latin and Celtic syllables, spliced together and running effortlessly, like water through a sieve. A few words had gotten stuck in her memory, small chunks that seemed to have some commonality with her own language: *Prescha*, signifying Hurry, and *Temps*, meaning Time.

Even now, she could feel their resolute grip on her wrists. The tolling of a single bell could be heard, measured and leaden, drifting over from the village church. She had caught unexpected glimpses of herself—first in a butcher shop window and then in a shoemaker’s—her hair matted against her forehead, her clothes dripping wet. For an instant, she had seen herself as others must be seeing her—as someone from another country, a stranger, perhaps, or an intruder. She had not wanted to draw attention to herself.

As she was being led down a narrow, twisted side street somewhere behind the municipal office, and later along an alleyway, she was struck by the sight of the dwellings huddled close together, their stucco brittle and yellowed, resembling old parchment paper that gave the houses the appearance of being lit from within. The shutters along the street were closed, without exception, to ward off the slanting rays of the sun or, perhaps, to shut out the curiosity of onlookers.

She looked back several times to make sure Tomas was following with the camera. Once, she thought he had vanished. Perhaps a twist in the street had put him out of sight, or else he had gone back to the square. At an urn planted with woody sage, over which hung a wrought-iron sign depicting a treadle sewing machine, the crones slowed their pace. Ulyssa wanted to take a picture of the detailed filigree, but when she turned around to ask Tomas for the camera, he was nowhere to be seen.

She followed the crones down a couple of worn steps and along a lengthy corridor that gave out to a dimly-lit but spacious room. She stood for a moment to catch her breath. Shafts of daylight seeped through slats between the shutters, and the sound of a bee buzzing against a window-pane made it seem as if time had stopped. The cool air was laden with the scent of new cotton. The entire wall at the opposite end of the room was taken up with a large bookcase. The shelves did not hold books, however; they held sheets and pillowcases and stacks of tablecloths adorned with traditional embroidery.

Ulyssa’s eyes were drawn to a pool of yellow light where a young woman was seated at a sewing machine, next to a table stacked high with colorful bolts of cloth—velour, silk and tweed. The young woman called out a traditional greeting, *Bun de*, and the crones replied to it eagerly by releasing a flood of explanations and gesturing at Ulyssa’s wet clothes and bare feet.

“Linens for table, bath, and bed,” the seamstress announced, indicating the items on the shelves of the bookcase. Ulyssa felt relieved to have found someone who spoke her language. “We also carry a small selection of clothing,” she added, walking toward a clothes rack. “I’ll try to be of assistance.”

Ulyssa watched her fingers move deftly along a row of garments and pause at a blue cotton dress. She pulled out the dress and held it up against



Ulyssa's figure. The crones stood off to one side, clucking their tongues and nodding their approval. Ulyssa was shown up a short flight of stairs to an airless cubicle without a mirror, where she would be able to divest herself of her wet clothes and try on the new dress. It was a pretty dress, indeed—low-cut and sleeveless, with a gathered waist and a flounced skirt. The neckline was embroidered with a traditional motif consisting of alpine flowers entwined with tendrils and leaves.

As she bent down to peel off her wet shorts, she heard a rushing sound; her ears, stopped up ever since her unexpected plunge into the fountain, were finally clearing. "Out with the old, in with the new," she thought while pulling up the zipper on the left side of the tight bodice and smoothing down the flounced skirt. The dress seemed quite short; in fact, it barely concealed her knees. It was a bit too girlish, she thought; Tomas might object.

She found Tomas waiting in the store when she came back down the stairs. She noticed that the buttons on his shirt were no longer undone. He stood with her straw hat clasped to his chest, like a young suitor who had come to ask for his lady's hand, acting bashful in the presence of the crones.

"The owner of the Bar & Grill sends you his regards," he told Ulyssa, handing her the straw hat. "The old codger was relieved when I came back to pay the bill. Here's your daypack and the shoes you left under the table." Raising an eyebrow, he pointed at the dress she was wearing. "How much?"

Ulyssa noticed that the crones had inconspicuously left the room; she could hear them talking with the seamstress in the adjacent kitchen. "The price is a bit steep," she told him, lowering her voice. "A hundred and fifty Swiss francs; it seems rather high."

"It's a small price to pay for such a treasure." He tilted his head to one side, giving her an appraising look. "It's perfect for my pretty, little peasant wench," he added, pulling her close to him. He gave her a peck on the cheek. "Consider it a gift from the Rhaeto-Romansh gods."

The seamstress, upon coming back into the room, looked puzzled when she saw Tomas proffering two one-hundred franc notes from his wallet. She reached for the glasses that dangled from a string around her neck, as if she wanted to make certain that the bills were genuine. "We don't often see bills of such high denominations here in our village," she told him, smoothing them between her fingertips. "It is a rare occasion when a visitor wanders into my store."

"I don't think *she*"—Tomas nodded in Ulyssa's direction—"actually wandered into your store. I think she was guided."

The seamstress seemed not to have heard. She looked at Tomas as if she might have some doubts. For a moment she became absorbed in studying the countenance on the reverse side of one of the bills. "Alberto

Giacometti,” she said. “He’s one of our treasured artists—born in our canton, in the mountain hamlet of Borgonovo, near Stampa. It’s been a good twenty years since he died, but his sculptures will, of course, live forever.”

Ulyssa cleared her throat. She couldn’t think of anything that lived forever. “They say that time obliterates everything but memory,” she began, speaking directly to the seamstress.

“We were extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to see Giacometti’s work,” Tomas chimed in, before Ulyssa had had time to finish her thought. He smiled at the seamstress. “We visited the *Kunsthaus* in Zürich a couple of days ago, to see the special exhibit commemorating the centenary of his birth.”

Ulyssa wanted to tell the seamstress how disturbed she had felt upon viewing one of his sculptures, *Man Falling*, but the seamstress seemed to no longer be interested. She had turned away and was now crossing the room, ostensibly to stash the large bills in the top drawer of her sewing machine.

She came back with Tomas’s change. “May I ask you what has brought you to our village?” she asked, handing him two twenties and a ten-franc note.

Tomas told her they were trying to find someone who had lived in the village long ago—someone Ulyssa had known as a child of six or seven—when, together with her mother and her aunties, she had spent a holiday week in Riom. They had apparently rented a floor in the woman’s large, sprawling house.

“What was her name?” The seamstress was showing a great deal of interest.

“Janutin,” Ulyssa said, surprised by the sudden feeling of fondness that surged up in her.

“It’s one of the most common family names in our village,” the seamstress said. “Would you by chance know the woman’s first name?”

“Her first name was *Fräulein*,” Tomas said, speaking on Ulyssa’s behalf.

“Unfortunately, that’s not much of a clue,” the seamstress replied. “The name tells me only that she was not married.” She stood gazing at the shuttered windows for a long time, seemingly lost in thought. “There have been numerous *Fräulein* Janutins over the years. The one you are hoping to find is most likely very old by now.” Her gaze veered toward the door. “Then again, she may be dead. In that case, you might try the churchyard.”

There had been something definitive, if not final, about her remark. Ulyssa got the impression that the visit had been brought to an abrupt close; it was as if she had been expelled from the shop by the sheer forcefulness of the utterance. Before long, she was passing by the fountain for

a second time, her wet clothing draped over her right arm, crossing the village square unhurriedly in the searing afternoon heat.

A crow perching on the cast-iron gate flew off when she entered the churchyard. Tomas stood waiting for her by a large tree, his face dappled with shadows cast by its glossy, dark-green foliage. She stared at the scarlet berries that lay crushed on the flagstone path beneath her feet.

“The yew tree is one of twelve sacred trees in Celtic mythology,” Tomas remarked, when she joined him in the circle of shade. “I’ve heard it said that it acts as a kind of bridge—between the living and the dead.”

“How so?” Ulyssa studied the patterns made by the scarlet berries that lay on the ground.

“It’s said that a yew tree planted in a churchyard will spread a root to every grave,” Tomas said, “and that a new tree will sprout from the mouth of each corpse.”

Ulyssa looked up, struck by the thought of roots spreading everywhere and reaching the remotest corner of a churchyard crowded with tombs.

“You might speak of a tree that sends up new trees as a kind of bridge,” she countered, “but to me it’s a link—between one life and the next.” She walked on ahead of him, passing by a row of graves with ornate metal crosses that glinted in the sunshine, along a pebbled pathway that led to the back of the churchyard.

Tomas hurried to catch up with her. “It seems, from the evidence I see displayed here, that no one gets out of life alive,” he muttered, gesturing at the tombstones in a remote corner of the cemetery, where recent graves were decked out with indigenous plants. The words *Eternal Rest* caught Ulyssa’s eye. Who could speak of eternal rest if the soul traveled on? She looked at the names that were chiseled into the slabs of granite, names of people she had never known.

Tomas wondered out loud if the Miss Janutin they were seeking might be among them. Ulyssa began to read some of the names: Tega Janutin-Collet; Iona Janutin-Janutin; Pierre Caspar-Janutin; Elvira Collet-Collet. Were some of these people perhaps related to the Miss Janutin she had known?

Tomas remarked about the names on the headstones. “It looks as if the good citizens of Riom had a mere handful of family names at their disposal. I get the impression they were tossed together at random, like a garden salad—an inbred garden salad, at that. But I guess that was a common practice in mountain valleys. No wonder they lacked the necessary smarts to find their way out of this village.”

“*Mamma mia.*” Ulyssa looked at him with consternation. How long did it take for a man to grow up, she thought, walking away from him.

She rejoined him later on, leaning against a low concrete wall, next to a small grave adorned with garish plastic flowers whose color had faded over the course of many summers. Blue star flowers were sprouting from

the base of the tombstone. *Isider Buzzetti*, she read, looking more closely at the portrait of the man who smiled back at her from the small, oval photo affixed to the granite stone. If this man was enjoying an after-life, she reflected, it might be because others were alive enough to return his smile.

The harsh resonance of the church bell cut into the stillness of the afternoon, interrupting her thoughts. Tomas came to stand beside her. “I apologize,” he began. “I don’t think the names on the tombstones are even remotely connected to the practice of inbreeding—or intermarriage, if you prefer. After all, why would anyone imbued with even a smidgen of intelligence ever consider leaving a paradise like Riom?”

Ulyssa had heard enough.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Tomas rambled on. “I like this Isider Buzzetti—a nice, single man with a nice, simple name—not hyphenated like the others. It’s highly unlikely he ever got the chance to pass on his genes, thank God.”

“I think it’s time for you to have a beer. The sun has obviously shrunk your brain.” Handing him her wet clothes, she gave him a playful shove and shut the gate behind him.

She went back to wandering among the graves, jotting down names she saw on the tombstones in her small spiral notebook. Twice, she heard the harsh sound of the church bell tolling above her head and twice it was followed by a leaden silence. It might have been the rustling of a sudden breeze in the leaves of the tree, but she could have sworn that what she heard was the faint, rushing sound of a faraway waterfall. The sound unsettled her. She felt shaky and weak. Fearing she might fall, she tried fixing her eyes on the ground to steady herself. In the end, she credited the image of the yew tree sending its roots into her mouth and eye sockets with helping her to regain her balance. Oddly enough, the image had arisen of its own accord, providing her with a sense of reassurance that settled her nerves. It must’ve been the heat, she told herself later on, crossing the square to join Tomas on the terrace of the San Lorenzo Bar & Grill.

“Well, my dear, have you finished communing with the dead?” he asked as she approached the table.

“No, not quite, but I’m ready to leave now,” Ulyssa told him, finishing what was left of the beer in his glass. She was in dire need of getting back to the *Trais Fluors*; she wanted to take a shower now that she was feeling hot and sweaty all over again.

Walking back along the lane in the direction of Savognin, Ulyssa heard the twittering of the jackdaws as they swooped and soared around the castle. Turning to look at the tower, she caught sight of one of the birds disappearing into the castle through a narrow, slit-like opening below the eaves.

“Look, there’s a car parked outside the entrance,” Tomas said. “The door to the castle is open. Let’s have a look.”

Ulyssa followed Tomas up the grade to the castle door, but resisted entering the dark interior. What if something unforeseen were to occur? She was afraid that Giovanni Segantini might appear to her again, as he had done when she was a child of six or seven. From the doorway she was able to make out what looked like a concession stand to the left of her. Opposite the door was a wooden stairway that led to a loft. She thought she saw jackdaws roosting high up in the rafters. Her nostrils pinched shut of their own accord, due to the dust and dung she imagined being everywhere inside the castle. Despite the fact that the interior was quite spacious, it struck her as oddly confining—like an ancient catacomb with recesses for tombs.

At the far end of the castle, in light filtering through narrow, vertical slots through which archers had once sent deadly arrows at the enemy, two men could be seen standing on stepladders, fastening stage lights to a 36-foot pole that spanned the width between the side walls.

“*Bun de*,” Tomas called out in his baritone, announcing his presence. The man closest to Tomas climbed down his stepladder.

“It looks as though you’re re-commissioning this old *Burg*,” Tomas observed, nodding at a stage in the process of being set up. A number of rudimentary props were piled at one side of the stage; a theater curtain attached to a long rod was draped against them, the lower half lying collapsed in a heap on a fake Greek column tipped on its side.

“We’re getting things ready for the big summer bash,” the lighting technician explained. “August 10<sup>th</sup> is the Feast Day of St. Laurentius, the patron saint of our church. On Saturday evening a celebration will take place here at the castle—with lots of music and dancing.”

“Will the Bishop of Chur be attending the festivities?” Tomas said, alluding to the castle’s past. His remark was met by baffled silence. Meanwhile, the second technician descended his ladder and came to join them.

“Ah, you’re the couple who’s been asking after Miss Janutin,” he said, proffering his right hand.

Tomas shook hands with him. “How did you discover that?”

The man smirked. “Riom is a small place. Everyone knows everything in the minutest detail.”

As Ulyssa was listening to Tomas converse with the lighting technicians, she began to feel oddly agitated. She got the impression that the echoing of their voices was growing fainter and fainter, receding further and further into the distance. There was now a persistent pounding in her ears and she was no longer able to follow what was being said.

“I’ve got to leave,” she told Tomas, touching him on the forearm. Her throat felt constricted and dry, and her voice had turned to a mere whisper. The drumming in her ears had not diminished. If anything, it had

increased; it had now become an ominous roar.

Tomas turned to glance at her. “What’s wrong? You barely got here, and now you wish to leave?”

“It’s the dust,” she said, clutching at her throat. “It’s like a tomb in here. I can’t breathe.” She turned abruptly and headed outside, toward a shallow pool of shade lingering beyond the doorway.

Tomas had gripped her elbow.

“Don’t forget to come back for the big summer bash on Saturday,” one of the technicians called after them.

“We won’t,” Tomas said, giving them a quick wave.

A sense of relief flooded through Ulyssa upon stepping outside, despite the overpowering heat that struck her body like a blow.

“I’ve never felt so claustrophobic in my whole life,” she told Tomas, taking a gulp of air. “How could anyone have lived in such darkness?” She looked back at the castle. “Not to mention all of those people who endured being incarcerated in the tower.” She cringed at the thought of the witches who had awaited trial.

In the distance, a bell began to strike; an involuntary shudder ran down her spine.

Tomas looked at his watch. “Five o’clock,” he said, eying her as though from a great distance. “I think you need to lie down, my pretty peasant wench. Come on, I’ll take you back to the *Trais Fluors*.”

ERNEST HEKKANEN'S novel, *Saint Julian of Southwest Wyoming*, is forthcoming in the spring of 2008. *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills* is a work in progress.

## **OF A FIRE BEYOND THE HILLS**

(a novel based on news stories)

Ernest Hekkanen

1

IN THE LATE SPRING of that year, a forest fire began to rage in the tinder-dry mountains to the south of Nelson, down near the border between Canada and the United States, and as a result, the air was constantly hazy with smoke. Sometimes the smoke was thicker than at other times, depending on which way the wind was blowing, and that spring the wind which whipped up a little after high noon each day seemed to invariably come from the south. It was too early in the year to be having serious forest fires, but due to the effects of global warming we had come to expect the unexpected. What made this forest fire unusual was the fact that we had had a deeper than usual snowfall in the Selkirk Mountains as well as the Purcell Mountains to the east of us and by rights that should have assured us of not having an early forest fire season. Unfortunately for those of us in the West Kootenays, spring had been unusually hot and dry and the snow cover in the mountains had disappeared by the first of March, almost three months ago now.

In the early hours of the morning we were usually able to count on having several hours of reasonably pleasant fresh air, although I should probably qualify that last statement by saying it was never truly 'fresh'. During those hours I would sit on the front balcony of our house where the New Orphic Gallery sign hangs between the posts on either side of the stairs letting down to the front yard, and there I would write at my laptop on the table with the round glass top and antique-finished steel frame. That spring I had finished working on a novel I was allowing to age on a shelf in my office until later on that fall, when I would be able to peruse it with the sort of clarity that time brings to a writing project. In the meantime I was treading water by writing some short stories having to do with Tomas Kurikka, a character I returned to every now and then

when all my other characters decided to go on vacation.

But, to tell you the truth, although I looked like I was busy at my laptop, I was involved in a lot of unproductive daydreaming, because, in two weeks' time, Margrith and I would be leaving for Europe, and knowing that, my mind had also decided to go on vacation. I refer to this state as being 'set adrift' or as having 'lost my moorings,' which can be a pleasant enough feeling if I'm looking forward to a trip abroad, but which can be really annoying if I'm not going anywhere or don't have a pleasant outdoor task to occupy myself with while I'm waiting for my unconscious mind to come up with the plot to my next novel. That year happened to be the second year of the Bring It Back Home Reunion. Because of that event, and because of the turmoil my former country, the U.S. of A., was in due to its continued occupation of Iraq, lots of television, radio and newsprint journalists had come through Nelson to ask former Vietnam War resisters their opinions on the state of the nation to the south of us, as well as what they thought of the current crop of military deserters who had fled to Canada. Because I was the guy who would be having the War Resisters Monument plunked down on a raised plinth in his front yard, the international news-gathering agencies also wanted to know a little something about it, because, you see, the monument had a rather colorful history and no one except yours truly had been brave enough to offer to exhibit it. I always gave the same standard reply to such journalists: "What does the monument mean to me—to me personally? For me, it's a middle-finger salute to the White House, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and all the other right-wing morons who determine foreign policy down in the United States." That answer was usually enough to cause a flurry of angry emails to the local Chamber of Commerce and sometimes even anonymous death-threats addressed to me. I didn't take the death threats very seriously, knowing how my former compatriots, especially those on the political right, loved to bravely puff up their pigeon breasts.

That spring the journalists came in waves to Nelson. During the past eight weeks I had been interviewed by crews from CNN, NPR, News 4, the CBC, Fox News, the London *Daily Mirror*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and now a stringer with the *Helsingin Sanomat* was scheduled to show up at my door. The *Sanomat* stringer was coming to interview me because my last name was Finnish. The editors of the *Helsingin Sanomat* had seen my name in print here in Canada and abroad, and after looking up my vital statistics on the World Wide Web (yes, I was still very much alive) I became a person of interest to them because I was the author of forty-some books and had a political streak as wide and long as the Transcanada Highway.

The stringer with the *Helsingin Sanomat* was a woman by the name of Lyyli Välimäki. She had been expected in Nelson the previous afternoon, however, because the smoke from the fire to the south of us had obscured



the Castlegar Airport right up to the tops of the surrounding mountains, the plane had been rerouted to Kelowna. There the young reporter (she had sounded awfully young on the telephone) had rented a car to drive to the West Kootenays. Near Rock Creek in the Interior of British Columbia, she had become tired as well as a little bit confused as to which way to go and so she had ended up staying overnight at a motel before heading on to Nelson, where she wasn't expected until at least noon that day. During our conversation on the telephone, I had related a story that was going around town, one that had to do with the Yanks trying to smoke us recalcitrant war resisters out of the West Kootenays. After telling her the story I realized it had lost something in translation, and because of that I had felt rather foolish. It wasn't the first time I had felt foolish, nor would it be the last. At sixty years of age, my inhibitors had more or less flown the coop, and because of that I was liable to say just about anything that popped into my mind, regardless of the circumstances and regardless of the company I happened to be in, something which often made my partner, Margrith Schraner, squirm with embarrassment.

Because the next few days of my life were going to be busy entertaining the *Helsingin Sanomat* reporter, I had decided that morning, as I was daydreaming at my laptop, to take Margrith out for breakfast at the Hume Hotel and, therefore, I was listening with one ear for the sound of the Tibetan bell in the upstairs bedroom at the front of the house. I was expecting at any moment to be distracted by the bell and so I wasn't putting a lot of effort into the story about Tomas Kurikka, the one in which he travels to Sointula on Malcom Island to confront the ghost of his late Great Uncle Matti Kurikka. Even though I was listening for the ring of the Tibetan bell, I must have been concentrating rather hard on the story, because I failed to hear the bell's clarion call. The next thing I became aware of was Margrith's footsteps descending the stairs from the floor above and then, turning in that direction, I glimpsed her padding in her terrycloth robe along the hallway to the kitchen.

"Ah, you're awake," I called out to her.

"Only for the past ten minutes. Didn't you hear me ring the bell?"

I could tell from the sharp edge in her voice that she was a little perturbed.

"I've been working on my Tomas Kurikka story. I guess I must've been concentrating awfully hard," I said as I got up from the round glass table and headed in through the French doors to the hallway to intercept her before she could make her own coffee. "Slow down. Don't take my job away from me," I added by way of making a joke. It was common knowledge among our friends that I was her in-house barista, at least in the morning before she had plucked up enough courage to face the day. "I'm ready to rise to the task, now."

"You don't need to get me my coffee if you're actually working on

something.”

“I just finished working,” I lied, not wanting to confess that most of my morning had been spent in unproductive daydreaming.

“I need a drink of water, anyway.”

“Your wish is my command,” I told her, flying past her into the kitchen and becoming quite busy all of a sudden.

I poured her a tall glass of water from the plastic Brita-filter pitcher and then I started cleaning out the basket of the stovetop espresso-maker in preparation of making coffee. She drank half the tumbler of water as she stood gazing out the kitchen window at the grape vines which had put out so much foliage we were able to see only patches of sky. Our living canopy kept the south-facing kitchen from overheating during the long summer months and it also camouflaged our view of the large Dutchmen trailer sitting across the alley in our neighbor’s yard. Our neighbor used the Dutchmen two weeks out of every year to travel to a RV resort in the foothills of Alberta. The rest of the time it served as a place for his teenage sons to shag their girlfriends.

“It smells like Fauntleroy might’ve passed through the yard last night,” Margrith said after taking another sip of water. “Why do you keep the French windows open when you know he’s gone through the yard?”

Fauntleroy was the neighborhood skunk.

“The smell didn’t strike me as all that bad.”

“I could smell it all the way upstairs. That’s what woke me—Fauntleroy’s horrible stench.”

I could tell she was piqued about something and I could guess what that something might be. Margrith is a henna redhead—that is, a redhead by choice rather than by design—and right then, her unruly shock of red hair made her look like a wrathful deity.

“So, would my princess like to have her coffee down here or upstairs in her traditional place in bed?”

“I hope you’re not trying to humor me?” she said.

“No more than usual, my dear. Please forgive me for not hearing the bell. Had I heard it I would have risen to the occasion like one of Pavlov’s dogs.”

“You’re definitely trying to humor me,” she concluded.

I scooped some coffee into the basket of the espresso maker, screwed the halves of the device together and set it on the red-hot burner of the kitchen range. I took Margrith’s tumbler from her hand, squeezed some lemon into it, added some aloe-vera juice and filled it with warm water.

“There you go, my lovely. Take your stomach soothers upstairs. It will soon be followed by your first cup of coffee.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m feeling out of sorts today. I think it’s due to Fauntleroy and all the damned smoke that’s in the air.”

Margrith coughed to let me know that she was feeling distressed by the

atmospheric conditions and then she headed upstairs to crawl back into bed. A couple of times during the past two weeks she had told me, because of all the interviews that had been conducted at our house and all the smoke from the forest fire to the south of us, that she wished we had booked our flight to Europe a lot earlier in the spring. I knew because of her history of asthma that particulate matter could be quite annoying to her; it produced a physical sensation of panic that spilled over into other areas of her life, and something as inoffensive as the smell of Fautleroy the skunk, which was almost nonexistent that morning, could add to her overarching sense of panic.

When the coffee was ready I took two cups of it upstairs and set hers on the nightstand beside the window next to her side of the bed. She was sitting up against the headboard and, judging from the journal lying open on her lap—it had a black fountain pen lying in the crease created by the spine—she had been spilling her thoughts into it. Judging from the amount of ink on the pages, she had had a lot of thoughts that morning.

“I had the strangest dream last night,” she said.

My job was to say, “Oh yeah, what about?”

“I dreamed we left the windows wide open last night. A large, prehistoric bird took advantage of it by flying into the bedroom and landing squarely on my chest. It resembled a vulture of some kind and it had all this slobber dangling from its beak.”

“Sounds to me as if you’d like to transcend your current predicament . . .”

“The smoke *is* getting to me,” she said.

“I know it is.”

I sat down on my side of the bed and stared for a few minutes out the window at Elephant Mountain, which was already being obscured by bluish smoke. As usual, my left hand sought out her right hand, and for the next little while we just sat there, in total silence, reassuring each other with our presence.

“What would you say to having breakfast at the Hume Hotel this morning?” I asked her.

“Is that your way of making me feel less jealous about the young reporter who’s coming to interview you?”

“It sure is,” I told her.

“You needn’t feel as though you have to do that, you know.”

“I’m not getting much of anything done on my story, this morning. Tomas Kurikka is taking his own sweet time about getting across the strait between Port McNeill and Sointula, and a little trip downhill to the Hume Hotel might be just what I need to distract myself from the fact that the ferry is rumbling under his feet and his mind is in a funk.”

“Perhaps we should take another trip to Sointula. We haven’t been there in ages—not since ’93, I think.”

“Perhaps we could do that after we’ve been to Europe. Maybe we could fit it in before going to Reckoning 07 in the middle of September.”

Reckoning 07 was a publishing and writing conference coordinated by Alan Twigg of *BC BookWorld*. The event would be taking place at the downtown Vancouver campus of Simon Fraser University on the 14th and 15th of September.

“I would have to take some time off work,” Margrith said. “I don’t know if Nature’s Health would like it very much.”

“You could always ask Kathy,” I suggested.

“I could . . . .”

We let the idea of going to Sointula hang in the air between us, for another morning when we would pick up the thread of that conversation.

“So, would you like to have breakfast at the Hume?” I inquired again.

“That might be a pleasant diversion, sure.”

Just then, the telephone rang in my upstairs office. “That’s probably the *Sanomat* reporter,” I said, rising from the bed and heading into my office. When I picked up the receiver, our grandson from down around the corner of the next block was on the line. “Can I speak to Granny, please?”

“What, you don’t want to speak to your old Grandpa?”

“Granny, please.”

“Granny’s just now having her first cup of coffee. She’s still a bit grumpy. Are you sure you want to risk speaking to her?”

There was a short hesitation at the other end of the line.

“Very funny,” he said. “Hand me over to Granny, please.”

“Okay, but she’s still just about as ferocious as a lion,” I told him as I headed with the mobile receiver back to the master bedroom. “It’s your grandson,” I said. “Maybe he’d like to come to the Hume Hotel with us.”

“He can’t. He’s still going to school.”

“Right. I forgot about that,” I said, handing her the receiver.

2

Margrith’s grandson asked her to walk him down to the city bus that would whisk him away to the local Waldorf School located several miles out of town, and in addition to that, he asked her to stuff some dried plum slices into a plastic bag for him to take in his lunch box, and Margrith, being a grandmother par excellence, told him she would do exactly that. Taio was eight years old and was quite capable of walking downhill to the bus stop all by himself, but it had become a tradition for someone to escort him—his mother, grandmother and sometimes even grumpy old

grandpa. We picked Taio up at fifteen minutes to eight, whereupon Margrith forked over the dried plum slices in the Ziploc bag. She made sure she did so down around the corner out of view of his mother's apartment windows, because his mother forbade him sweets of any kind and dried plum slices qualified as sweets, apparently.

"So, how did the visit with your father and your Grandmother Ice go?" Margrith said, trying to coax details out of him.

"All right."

"Did you stay overnight with them at the Dancing Bear?"

The Dancing Bear was one of the local hostels—a very well appointed one that had a following in Europe.

"One night, yeah."

"One or two nights?"

"Two nights, I guess it was." Taio was at that age when a boy begins to swagger; his swagger became even more pronounced after spending a few days with his birth-father. He became more 'the little man'.

"I hear you got a new bicycle," I said.

"Yeah, a 21-speed. Can we go for a bike ride after school today, Grandpa? Huh, can we?"

"Let me see. I have to meet a reporter from the *Helsingin Sanomat* some time today, but after four o'clock this afternoon I think we could go for a ride."

"Can we go all the way over to Bealby Point, and beyond that?" he asked with fervent gusto.

"Maybe not that far today, but pretty far."

"Can we go up to the old railway line?"

"Sure, we can go up there and then we can go down that trail beside the creek that flows under the trestle and after that we'll veer over to that steep hill you love going down so much."

"Great," he said with even more gusto, and took off at a run down the sidewalk along Josephine Street, his backpack pitching from side to side on his small shoulders.

"I don't know why you choose to let him wear you out like that?" Margrith told me.

"He loves wearing out his old grandpa. It gives him a sense of pride—a sense of accomplishment."

We caught up to Taio at the bus stop on Ward Street and there we waited for five minutes until the city bus arrived to pick up the Waldorf children. As always, Taio pushed to the head of the queue getting onto the bus. He sat by himself on a side seat over the rear wheel, taking notes on how the older children behaved so he could mimic them when he became a teenager. He didn't turn around to wave at us standing on the sidewalk as the bus pulled away from the curb, something Margrith never failed to remark on. "He used to wave to me. I guess he's too big for that

now.”

“Poor old granny girl,” I told her. “You’ve been thrown in the ditch. I hope you’ll manage to survive it.”

From the bus stop at Ward and Baker Streets it was a short hop, skip and jump downhill to the Hume Hotel. The waitress showed us to a table beside the tall windows that looked out onto Vernon Street and for a few seconds all I did was stare outside at the traffic streaming through town. The restaurant, lobby and lounge of the Hume Hotel tried to evoke the bygone era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Indeed, the entire town of Nelson tried to evoke that era, with the result that it was often described in information brochures as a “heritage city harkening back to an earlier century when the world moved to the clip-clop of horses’ hooves.” That picturesque image, combined with our much vaunted setting in the Selkirk Mountains, “where hiking, canoeing, mountain biking, skiing and camping are some of the pleasant activities enjoyed by residents and visitors alike,” created a charming impression which our city fathers worked hard at fostering, and anything that detracted from it was roundly criticized. The Bring It Back Home Reunion, which portrayed Nelson as the epicenter of war resistance in Canada, had been vilified because it brought the wrong sort of attention to Nelson. The respected members of the Old Guard maintained it had besmirched the town’s image.

When on the rare occasion we went out for breakfast at the Hume Hotel, I ordered ham, eggs and hash browns, food that I never allowed myself to eat at home. That morning, Margrith had difficulty choosing what to eat, but settled for poached eggs, fruit salad and coffee. I had already had far too much coffee to drink, and pushed my cup to one side of my place mat.

“Will you be conducting the *Sanomat* interview in Finnish?” Margrith asked me out of the blue.

“You mean with my horribly flawed command of the Finnish language?” I said. “Certainly not.”

“Is the reporter going to translate everything you tell her into Finnish, then?”

“I guess so. I didn’t think to ask.”

“Don’t you think you should have?”

“Her coming to interview me was presented to me as a *fait accompli*. You know how the Finns in Finland are. They love studying the Finnish Diaspora—to see how diluted our sense of Finnishness has become over here. Maybe she’s going to take that sort of approach.”

Margrith sipped at her coffee. “You should present her with the book I wrote about you. Tell her to read it before she asks you any questions.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “I’ll present her with the book, but I don’t think I’ll make it mandatory reading.”

“Why not? The Finns should know you’re an important writer here in

Canada. Quit hiding your candle under a glass; the flame will go out.”

“Thanks for your unqualified support.”

“You know what your problem is? You’re too reticent.”

“I’m becoming less reticent all the time,” I said, winking at her. “Thanks to you.”

While Margrith was sipping at her cup of coffee, her gaze wandered to my left, followed by discreet nod. “The mayor just walked in. He gave me the most withering look you can possibly imagine, before hiding it with a jovial laugh.”

I heard laughter and loud voices to the left in back of me.

“Does the mayor know you on sight?” I asked her.

“I’m sure he has seen the two of us together. Plus, you’re not all that unrecognizable, even with your back turned to him.”

“It’s comforting to know that our mayor takes a personal interest in each of his subjects,” I snickered. “I should go over and say good morning to him.”

“Don’t you dare,” Margrith said. “I’ll leave the restaurant right now, if you do anything like that. Believe me, I will.”

Mayor Jack Doherty and I had been engaged in a public spat for a little over a year now. In May of the previous year, it looked as though the Doukhobor Village Museum in Castlegar was going to place the War Resisters Monument in its Peace Park. The curator had been in favor of it. He had approached the museum’s board of directors and the board had given him an enthusiastic thumbs up. Ira Richler, the director of the Bring It Back Home Reunion, had sent out news releases to the effect that a major announcement was going to be made with regard to the placement of the monument. A news conference was held at the Doukhobor Village Museum. It was aired on television and radio, and all the local newspapers had carried articles about it. The announcement had caused such a fire-storm of controversy, the Castlegar city council had decided to intervene, with the result that the sculpture had been turfed out of the Peace Park. Never before had Castlegar’s city councilors interfered with the activities of the Doukhobor Village Museum and this unprecedented move had generated even more media coverage, all of which was fairly negative. Ira had put on a brave face, however, I could tell that his demeanor was masking a deeper depression. That’s when I had decided to offer my front yard as an exhibition site, which he had enthusiastically accepted.

In order to turn the Castlegar defeat into a triumph, Ira and I had decided to drive the plasticine model of the War Resisters Monument to Vancouver on the West Coast and to hold a press conference on the lawn of city hall, in hopes of getting a little more publicity. There we informed the world that the monument would now be placed in front of the New Orphic Gallery. The news conference took place on the first Monday after a three-day-long holiday weekend, when news departments were thirsty

for news. By Wednesday morning of that week, Ira and I had been interviewed on a morning news program on Global TV, and by Thursday morning of that same week, a photo of my house had appeared on the front page of the *Nelson Daily Examiner*, with headlines to the effect that the ‘Monument to Monumental Shame’ would now be placed in my front yard. The New Orphic Gallery sign that hung above my porch had appeared quite prominently in the picture.

In the front-page article about the New Orphic Gallery, Mayor Jack Doherty had said with consummate Irish hypocrisy that he was against the Monumental to Monumental Shame being exhibited in Nelson—on public property *or* private property! “There’s a rouge element in this town that seems to think it’s in charge of the city’s affairs, and that simply isn’t the case,” he was quoted as saying. Further on in the article he had suggested rather strongly that the City Building Inspector pay a visit to my house at 706 Mill Street and that moreover I should be required to take out a business license. Then he made the remark that “galleries aren’t allowed in residential areas. I don’t care who the curator is or what sort of name he has made for himself.”

By the following week, I had replied to the Mayor’s outburst with a Letter to the Editor:

I’ve never been one to shy away from controversy or indeed animosity, and so I would like to reply to some of your utterances in the op-ed piece entitled “Statue Saga Continues.” I would also like to reply to some of Jack Doherty’s responses of last week.

First of all, you seem to think that the Bring It Back Home Reunion attempted to force the War Resisters Monument on the good citizens of Castlegar. Wrong. The curator of the Doukhobor Village Museum asked Ira Richler whether the statue was available for placement. Ira said it was. The curator then went to the board of the museum, which voted in favor of placing the statue on museum grounds. We weren’t informed that a decision made by the Museum Board had to be blessed by the City Council of Castlegar and neither was the curator, apparently, because the City Council had never before interfered with the decisions of the board.

So, Brad, you were wrong to assume that we were being sly or devious about our plans.

Second of all, I take exception to you repeating the often recited line that “there were vicious emails sent to the City Hall [of Nelson] from patriotic Americans who couldn’t believe a Canadian city would have the



audacity to erect a statue to honor ‘a bunch of cowards.’”

Our patriotic neighbors to the south would like us to ignore the fact that 3.5 million Vietnamese civilians were killed in the Vietnam War. Indeed, it would be a lot more truthful to call the Vietnam War a massacre. Check out the World Book Encyclopedia if you don't believe me. The number of Vietnamese civilians killed by patriotic Americans is only a few million short of the Holocaust figure of the Nazi era, and those who perpetrate such crimes should be brought to trial at The Hague.

Americans don't have a lot to be proud of in Vietnam, but Canadians have every reason to be proud of the decision to let draft evaders into the country.

Should this be a community concern? Apparently you and Mayor Jack Doherty don't think so. However, you should note that Canada is the sixth largest producer of arms in the world and that our Canadian Pension Plans are pegged to companies that grow rich off arms sales. That should be of concern to everyone in every community across Canada.

We Canadians should also be concerned about the men who have orchestrated Stephen Harper's rise to prominence in this country. Tom Flanagan, who ran Harper's war room during the election, and Barry Cooper, who is now the head of the Fraser Institute, are front men for the Republican White House. That should be of concern to every Canadian. Now that Stephen Harper intends to commit even more money to the procurement of arms, I see us heading in the same direction as the United States, which Harper would like us to buddy up with in a very intimate fashion.

I'm sorry our community leaders have very little regard for what the Bring It Back Home Reunion is attempting to do in the Kootenays, but you shouldn't expect leadership of our leaders. Leaders are in fact followers; that's why they consult polls so frequently. Men like Jack Doherty are corporate men who follow the corporate agenda. War is big business. It makes huge profits for corporations, and corporate men espouse the tired clichés that Doherty is becoming famous for.

## *The New Orphic Review*

Please send the following message to Jack Doherty, will you, Brad Fall? I'm not going to charge anyone to look at the statue that will be placed in my front yard, and therefore I'm not required to have a business license. However, I do appreciate the low-level threat.

\* \* \*

By now, breakfast had arrived and Margrith and I were enjoying a pleasant conversation having to do with the day ahead. Later on that day she had to go down to the Touchstones Gallery to replenish the stock of her book, the one she had written about me. Sales of the book weren't brisk, not by any stretch of the imagination, but by the end of nine months all but one copy had sold.

Again, Margrith's gaze wandered off to my left. "The mayor keeps looking in this direction, and his looks aren't very friendly."

"Don't return his looks if they make you feel uneasy."

"They don't make me feel uneasy. I just find it kind of interesting, nothing more."

"It probably has something to do with my most recent letter to the editor, in which I suggested that he and the police chief were protecting each other's backsides because of Kyle Snyder's illegal arrest."

"His friends are looking this way, too."

Suddenly, I got a zealous feeling down in the pit of my stomach. "Are they?" I said. "I think I'll get up and go to the bathroom. Maybe I'll wink at the Mayor as I go by his table."

"Please don't get into an argument, Ernest."

"Don't worry. I won't."

### 3

I heaved myself up from the table and headed in the direction of the lavatory. There were two routes I could take through the restaurant. I could go the more direct one past the pillar, a route that would put me out of effective winking distance of the mayor, or I could veer to the left around the pillar, a slightly longer route that would put me in close proximity to him and his friends from the business community. I chose to take the latter route, so I could bestow my winning smile on the mayor. However, as I was drawing up alongside the table, I stopped.

"Good morning, Mayor," I said. "I trust you haven't choked on any bones in your breakfast."

Mayor Doherty was a few years younger than I. He was a thin fellow with grey hair and a grey scraggly beard and he still had a substantial

Irish lilt to his voice. Standing there, looking down at him, I saw the fingers of his right hand fidget with the handle of his coffee cup.

“Excuse me, but what exactly are you trying to tell me, Mr. Hekkanen?”

“I’m trying to tell you that you should watch out for bones in your breakfast. My wife found one in her hash browns.”

“I’ll be careful, thank you.”

“By the way,” I said, “is it true that you and the police chief hatched the plot to arrest Kyle Snyder over several beers at the Legion, not long after attending a police board meeting at the station?”

I could tell by the color that rose in the Mayor’s pale cheeks that my remark had struck a sensitive nerve.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

“I’ll have to crosscheck with my sources to make sure the information is absolutely correct . . . . Have a nice day, Mayor Doherty.”

A couple of minutes later, as I was standing at the urinal taking a piss, Mayor Doherty and one of his associates entered the lavatory. When I went to wash my hands at one of the sinks along the wall, Mayor Doherty stepped directly in my path. He looked as if he was visibly pumping up Irish courage. Again, I gave him my winning smile. “Are you going to assist me in washing my hands, Mr. Mayor?”

“You know, I didn’t appreciate the way you tried to malign my name just a little while ago.”

I stepped around the Mayor and went to the sink.

“I have no desire to malign your name, Mayor Doherty, no desire whatsoever. You do an excellent job of that yourself.”

Doherty spoke with trembling Irish fervor, knifing his words at me through tight, thin lips surrounded by scraggly beard. “Who in God’s name do you think you are, Mr. Hekkanen? You’re not an elected official in this town. You’re nothing at all.”

I washed my hands at the sink and then I went to the paper-towel dispenser to dry them. I looked for several seconds straight into the Mayor’s eyes and then I said, “If I’m nothing at all in this town, you should treat me accordingly, Mayor Doherty. You should treat me the same way you would treat an annoying mosquito. But obviously, I’m not an annoying mosquito and obviously you know I’ve got something on you, now don’t you, Mr. Mayor?”

I lobbed the damp paper towel into the wastebasket and gave him another winning smile.

“Have a nice pee,” I said. “I hope your prostrate isn’t acting up so badly you can’t relieve yourself.”

I shouldered past the Mayor and his friend who worked at a local real estate office. His friend was a balding man who had once played professional hockey and who was now looking at me as though he’d like to take a pistol out of his trouser pocket and shoot me in the chest. Sid

Caulford was even older than I was and so his expression of towering hostility managed to look quite comical.

“Hi there, Sid. Don’t forget to lace up your skates before heading out onto the ice,” I chided him as I reached for the door handle and pulled back on it.

“You should do the same,” he said.

“I always do,” I told him, heading down the hallway back to the restaurant.

Be part of the **New Orphic** adventure!

Subscribe to  
***The New Orphic Review***

706 Mill Street  
Nelson, British Columbia  
Canada V1L 4S5  
Fax: 250-352-0743

SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

ONE YEAR:

Individuals	Canada	\$30 (CAD)	Institutions	Canada	\$35 (CAD)
	USA	\$30 (USD)		USA	\$35 (USD)

TWO YEARS:

Individuals	Canada	\$60 (CAD)	Institutions	Canada	\$70 (CAD)
	USA	\$60 (CAD)		USA	\$70 (USD)

Yes, please sign me up for a subscription to ***The New Orphic Review***. I have enclosed a cheque of:

\$\_\_\_\_\_ for a one year subscription

\$\_\_\_\_\_ for a two year subscription

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Province/State \_\_\_\_\_

Country \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

## Go on a New Orphic Adventure!

### Read a *New Orphic* title!

[www3.telus.net/neworphicpublishers-hekkanen](http://www3.telus.net/neworphicpublishers-hekkanen)

*The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen* by Margrith Schraner ISBN 1-894842-10-3, \$25.00

“*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

*To Break the Wheel of War* by D. B. Wilton ISBN 978-1-894842-12-9, \$19.95

*To Break the Wheel of War* is a radical, global and concise exploration of human consciousness and its propensity for inner and outer conflict. It explores consciousness and culture from the parallel perspectives of Western biology and Buddhist psychology, showing how conflict evolves from primate survival drive to the evolution of language and abstract thinking which enables the dualistic mindset of absolute good versus absolute evil. Between the two, the dualistic mind struggles in a nightmare circus which Buddhists call the wheel of samsara and Western myth calls fate. The author’s faith is that we humans are capable of building a world of enduring peace, but only if we completely understand and deconstruct the wheel of war.

*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*

“Joyce’s poems—unlike the supposed poetry being funded by taxpayers across this country—are fierce, clearly relevant, to be read and heard by this impassively deceived age.” - Chad Norman

“Excellent...” bill bissett

*Rotary Sushi: Many Kinds of Stories* by Hillel Wright ISBN 1-894842-01-4, \$20.00

“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*