

The New Orphic Review

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 39 books. The most recent are *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, *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.

Blurring Fictitious Lines

Ernest Hekkanen

Back in 1966, when Truman Capote's nonfiction novel, *In Cold Blood*, was published to much acclaim, a debate took place over whether the dividing lines between fiction, nonfiction, journalism and biography ought to be blurred, out of fear that it might confuse the lowly reading public.

Nowadays, it is difficult to believe that the reading public was thought to be so naïve it would not be able to discriminate between fiction and nonfiction; however, after the horrors of World War Two, there was a desire on the part of many people to retreat, to go back to simpler times, when categories were well maintained. Blurring of categories of any kind was deemed a threat to our innocence, morality and values, and it was in part this attitude that allowed Joseph McCarthy, who understood how to confuse fact and fiction, to rise to prominence in the United States. Capitalism and communism, good and evil, black and white, and such things, were well-delineated, as were fiction and nonfiction.

Anyone who went through the American public school system was likely to run into at least one of Truman Capote's short stories, for they were frequently anthologized in text books designed to familiarize impressionable minds with the works of American literature. When Capote's nonfiction novel became a newsworthy item in magazines such as *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker*, anyone with a predilection for literature knew something important had occurred. *In Cold Blood* was succeeded by other nonfiction novels such as Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and, later still, *The Executioner's Song* (1979).

Back in the early 1990s, Margrith Schraner and I co-authored a book entitled *Black Snow: An Imaginative Memoir*, which dealt with a pivotal

week in our lives. It was highly personal in nature, but, to some extent, it incorporated events surrounding the first Gulf War. In my covering letter to publishers, I called *Black Snow* a nonfiction novel that dealt with memory. In the process of writing it, Margrith and I discovered how differently two people can view events they have experienced in common. Indeed, I have since come to the conclusion that we retain islands of more or less accurate memory that we then bridge with a fictional through-line. I would even go so far as to say that our memories end up being subsumed by the fictional through-line, making it extremely difficult for us to separate fact from fiction.

Black Snow made the usual round of publishers. One editor wrote back to us that “*Black Snow* gave [her] a bad case of the oh-my-godsies and woolly fuzzies.” Another said: “If this is a nonfiction novel, I never want to read another one in my life.” Later, when *Black Snow* was published under our own imprint, one reviewer remarked that “*Black Snow* pushes the boundaries of creative nonfiction. In it, two characters with the same names as the authors write a novel about themselves recalling something that actually happened. The work is concerned with the idea of journey, both exterior and interior, and the writers are completely candid about their wants and failings... These artists are serious about the impersonal nature of what they create. Whether a person is embarrassed by Hekkanen and Schraner’s work, or wants to cheer them on, to write this book took guts.”

Black Snow might have erred a little too much on the side of Henry Miller or, indeed, it might have been a little too postmodern for general consumption. Regardless, the above review introduced me to a genre I was unfamiliar with at the time, namely, creative nonfiction, which was just starting to come into vogue back then. From what I can tell, most creative nonfiction is extremely ‘personal’ in nature. It assumes that our ‘personal’ experience of events should be accorded some respect. Now, after nearly twenty years, I have begun to think that the ‘creative’ component of ‘creative nonfiction’ is little more than a euphemism for ‘fiction’. The ‘creative’ part of the exercise involves personal perception and our personal perceptions end up fictionalizing the events we are attempting to describe with words.

In 1999, I ‘co-authored’ a historical novel entitled: *Good Ol’ Boy: Willis V. McCall*, about a red-neck sheriff who ran Lake County, Florida like a police state from 1945 to 1972. My co-author, Ed Roy, paid me to write it. *Good Ol’ Boy* was based on research that Ed had paid somebody else to do. Indeed, the ‘research’ amounted to little more than a pile of photocopied news stories and an extremely biased ‘autobiography’ by Willis himself. To supplement the ‘research’ I went to the law library in downtown Vancouver to familiarize myself with a case that dealt with Willis McCall’s slaying of several black prisoners in his custody. How-

ever, here is the point I wish to make: in order to write the novel I had to extrapolate from the ‘facts’ what might have occurred ‘behind the scenes’—that is, I had to perform the feat of creating ‘fictional bridges’ between ‘islands of questionable fact’.

In the past ten years, there has been a stampede in the direction of ‘creative nonfiction’ and ‘reality programming’ here in North America. This might have something to do with the subliminal perception that we are living our lives according to a piece of prefabricated fiction. The underlying assumption seems to be that ‘facts’ or ‘reality’ should govern our conduct rather than ‘fiction’. This is an error that badly needs to be corrected. Our lives, it seems to me, are governed by socially accepted stories of one sort or another—from the time we are born to the time we die. This is due to the ‘fact’ that we are tribal in nature, and stories that advance the ‘cause’ of a tribe are the ones that get enshrined in a culture. Stories tend to create in-groups and out-groups, and those groups fight tenaciously on behalf of their little ‘fictions’, which, for them, embody ‘truth’, no matter how questionable that ‘truth’ might happen to be.

This, in a roundabout fashion, brings me to my book, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, which bears the subtitle ‘a novel based on news stories.’ On the page opposite the verso page there is a disclaimer that says: “Please note: *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills* is a work of fiction. Any resemblance the characters might bear to individuals living or dead is purely accidental.” But, as we all know, such disclaimers are often little more than fiction.

Since the publication of my novel, at least eight people have arrived unannounced at my front door, all of them wanting to know which of the events are ‘real’ and which of them are ‘fiction’. Most of my visitors are at least a little bit familiar with the proposed War Resisters Monument that was supposed to be plunked down in my front yard and which gave rise to an angry outburst by right-wingers across North America. To the extent that I am able to, I help them separate ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’, but then, by way of summation, I add: “To get to the underlying truth of a matter, one must sometimes tell a lie,” which usually results in them giving me a rather baffled expression.

Most of my unexpected guests are experienced readers and yet they find it difficult to separate ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’, which leads me to believe that human beings continue to be pretty naïve about such things. This might have something to do with the way I wrote *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, or it might have something to do with a certain propensity in humans. Whatever the case might be, I shall continue to pursue my investigations into credulity—that of the individual and that of the masses—for our credulity has resulted in some rather interesting displays of noble and ignoble behavior.

By way of summation, I would like to say that ‘story’ often trumps

'fact', and this 'inconvenient truth' is something that human beings will struggle with till the end of time, because 'story' is much more alluring than any 'fact' could ever be. Indeed, it is 'story' that leads us willy-nilly through the 'forest of facts'. The tendency on our part to enjoy a good story has resulted in a fatal flaw being sewn into our fabric, one that playwrights have been making use of since the era of the ancient Greeks. Indeed, it has resulted in much of 'history', which, I think, could be accused of being one very long 'creative nonfiction' project.

ROSS KLATTE is the author of *Leaving the Farm* (Oolichan Books, 2007), an account of his growing up on a Minnesota family farm, the opening chapter of which won first prize in the CBC Literary Competition for 1990. After service in the U.S. Navy, he worked as a journalist in Chicago and Detroit before emigrating with his wife to Canada in 1971. He's been a book reviewer for *The Calgary Herald*, has published a story in *Event*, and wrote movie reviews for the online *Nelson Observer*. He lives with his wife April near Balfour, B.C.

That Winter in London

Ross Klatte

IN THE GRAY November of 1963, I crossed the North Atlantic to England on a British freighter, the S.S. *Bristol City*, one of only five passengers on the ship. I'd boarded the ship in New York after a brief correspondence with the Bristol City Line and payment of the \$154 one-way fare, and after quitting my job as feature editor of the *National Bowlers Journal*, in Chicago.

I'd discovered this adventurous way of escape, the winter before, while covering the annual American Bowling Congress tournament, held that year in snowy Buffalo, N.Y.—“72 pin-clashing days,” as the ABC hyped it—for the wire services, AP and UPI, and some 60 regional newspapers that subscribed to my magazine's press service. The press room's Western Union operator, a sweet, middle-aged spinster who regularly took trips on freighters, lent me her copy of *Freighter Travel*, an exciting little directory, that soon had me writing off to various shipping companies.

I was setting off now, with \$1200 in savings, on something like either Henry James's “passionate pilgrimage” to the Old World or D.H. Lawrence's “savage” one to the New. Old or New, in my case it didn't seem to matter.

James and Lawrence were my literary heroes then; their disparate lives, more than their disparate writings, alternately inspired me—though truth to tell my preferred model was Lawrence, whose sojourns in exotic places like Italy and Mexico, whose turbulent life with the lusty Frieda (never mind his suffering from tuberculosis that killed him at age 44), was the stuff of dreams for the lonesome, horny young man I was then. Still, what I might have to settle for, I feared, was a latter-day version of James's sort of literary bachelorhood. That would be all right, I thought,

so long as I achieved something of James's success.

Of my fellow passengers on the *Bristol City*, three were composed of a plump, witty, currently unemployed Marxist history professor, lately of Monteith College in Detroit, then an experimental branch of Wayne State University; his attractive young wife, formerly his student; and his wife's younger still, equally attractive sister. The fourth was a chipper little Englishman from Crewe, returning home after the breakup of his marriage in the States. The Englishman and I shared a cabin. He was British working class, like Lawrence, I noted, while the ship's officers, with whom we shared meals at the captain's table, were definitely upper class, like the Anglicized Henry James. Their dry, merciless teasing of their fellow countryman was my introduction to the British class system. The poor chap's American car, for instance, part of our cargo, was a constant worry to him, and he was made to dash from the table one stormy evening when the officers impishly hinted it had broken loose in the hold.

We were at sea for ten days, wallowing through gale-driven waves all the way across to the Old World. Though an ex-Navy sailor, I got seasick. So did the other passengers, except for the younger sister, who never missed a meal. Presently we all had our sea legs and spent the remainder of the crossing quite pleasantly in the ship's lounge, reading, playing cards, talking about our lives. By the end of the voyage, we (that is, we fellow Americans) were intimate friends. Moreover, I was in love with the younger sister.

I was in love with her voice, its sweet alto. I was in love with her English-looking beauty, like the young Virginia Woolf's; her shyness that was like my own. She was quietly intelligent, vaguely mysterious—there were depths in her I wanted to know. Still, she was far too young for me, not yet eighteen, while I was soon to turn twenty-nine. Besides, she was an inch or so taller than I was.

The evening before we disembarked, November 22, while steaming up the Bristol Channel, the awful news reached us over the ship's radio: *President Kennedy has been shot*. Then: *The President is dead*. The professor's reaction struck me as callous, almost gleeful: "This could mean revolution!" My own uncertain feelings were those of a bookish, apolitical, but essentially patriotic American. I was shocked by the fact that a man as important as the PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES had been murdered. Having absorbed, however, a little of the professor's radical view of history, I imagined myself an exile now, one who, after leaving his flawed native land, looks back to see it in flames. With a kind of pleasant melancholy, I brooded on whether I would ever return.

The next morning, having docked at midnight in Avonmouth, the port for Bristol, we passengers were visited on the ship by Customs and Immigration officers, who inspected our luggage and interviewed us in the lounge. They were severe, it seemed to me, with the little Englishman, as

if his expatriate years in the United States had been somehow a disloyalty to the Queen. Questioning us Yanks, though, they were merely stiff and officious. After a few grave inquiries as to why we'd come to the United Kingdom and how long we intended to stay, they stamped our passports with three-month, renewable visas and allowed us to step ashore.

The Englishman said goodbye to us and headed north to Crewe. But we four, reluctant to part just yet, explored Bristol together and then took a bus tour of Somerset, visiting Wells and Cheddar, among other places. We rode atop a double-decker, past high rocky outcrops and enclosed little fields, through ancient villages (at times the bus came near to scraping the eaves of the houses as it negotiated the narrow, crooked streets), and found it all wonderfully foreign to our American eyes. Everything we saw, the landscape, the buildings, seemed on a miniature scale and too crowded together. The phrase "tight little isle" came to me. In the towns there were masses of people on the sidewalks and droves of vehicles on the streets, odd-looking little cars, motorcycles, scooters, mopeds, in perpetual traffic jams and sending clouds of petrol fumes into the cold, drenched air.

After three days and back in Bristol, we boarded a train for London and spent that night in a hotel near Paddington Station. The next morning, after three weeks of shared travel and camaraderie, I said goodbye to the professor and his wife and his wife's, by now, utterly appealing sister. We promised to keep in touch, of course, to contact each other once we were settled, but I expected we'd all lose ourselves in the vastness of the great city and never see one another again. All at once I was alone, and already lonely, as I began my London winter.

I studied the classified sections in newspapers and visited various parts of the city for their postings on neighborhood kiosks, looking for a place to rent. Most offerings were too expensive for me to consider, and those I viewed extremely dismal; one especially, deep in the bowels of a sub-basement, promised clinical depression.

Within a couple of days, however, I found a tiny but adequate—and affordable—one-room "flatlet" in South Kensington, an area within equal walking distance, I discovered, of rich-hip Chelsea and somewhat grungy hip Earl's Court. Down the Old Brompton Road was an Underground station where I could take "the tube" to Piccadilly Circus or, with transfers, to anywhere else in the city. I rented a typewriter, supplied myself with paper and envelopes, and settled in to write each morning and to explore the city each afternoon. I had James's example, his first lonely days in London a century earlier, to inspire and sustain me.

As dark and wet November passed into even darker and wetter December, I played at being the expatriate writer in London. "The great grey Babylon," James had called it, and in my daily forays by tube or on foot—mostly on foot, armed with a map, and clad in a trench coat against

London's penetrating damp—I searched out the places where James had lived in the city. His earliest abode, on Half Moon Street near Piccadilly, where he resided for a couple of months in 1869 during his first adult trip (his “passionate pilgrimage”) to Europe, apparently no longer existed; nor could I find where he'd lived on Bolton Street, just two blocks away, for ten years, after firmly settling in London in 1876. But I found what had been his flat, identified by a plaque, at 34 De Vere Gardens in Kensington, where James lived, obliquely across the street from the elderly Robert Browning, in the 1880s. It's said they used to wave to each other from their windows.

Knowing such anecdotes, visiting these literary sites, was intensely satisfying to me as a would-be writer. It made me feel at least part of what they represented. It eased my loneliness.

And I was writing—at least in those first days in London, spurred on by my loneliness and James's productive example. I revised a couple of old stories and submitted them, unsuccessfully, to Stateside little magazines. I wrote a couple of new stories, immediate reactions to my new surroundings, and sent them to British publications, hoping by some miracle to crack that market. (I didn't.) I also, somewhat dutifully, forwarded the letters of introduction I had from my former boss in Chicago, the editor and publisher of the *Bowlers Journal*, to managers of Brunswick Ltd. and AMF Ltd., affiliates of the American bowling firms, with requests for interviews as a journalist. I got my interviews, received tours of two or three of the new bowling centers in and outside London and, again somewhat dutifully, wrote a series of articles for my old magazine on “Bowling in Britain.” The modest payments I received from the *Bowlers Journal*—plus a short stint writing publicity for AMF and being paid under the table—eased my anxiety about my thinning book of traveler's checks.

Freelance journalism, though, took time away from my serious writing. But then hadn't James himself boiled the pot with travel pieces, literary essays, book reviews? And indeed wasn't *I*, despite pub crawls in Soho and Earl's Court, visits to my “local” down the street or the coffee bar across from the South Kensington tube station (in the vain hope of connecting with one of London's “birds” in their short skirts and Avenger boots), becoming a literary bachelor like James, probably doomed, unlike Lawrence, to celibacy? James, therefore, must be my master; while Lawrence was a writer whose sensual experience would be forever, it seemed, beyond my fervid grasp.

Then, one particularly lonely evening in my boxlike room (I'd written a letter home, cheerfully disguising my homesickness, and was now disclosing my true feelings in my journal), the phone rang in the hall outside my door. It was the professor, inviting me to dinner. They'd found a place in Camberwell, across the Thames from me in southeast London,

and would I come?

It was the first of many such invitations. I became a regular guest and then, in effect, an adoptee of the professor and the two sisters (the professor called me, an ex-Minnesota farm boy, “Huck Finn in the city”; I liked the sound of that) during the remaining months of that drafty, educational, intensely romantic winter in London, until—after traveling with them through England’s “Black Country” and across Scotland on a speaking tour of the professor’s about the American working class; being put up by “the comrades” and talking socialism in the pubs; accompanying them that spring on a month-long tour of continental Europe; finally joining the circle with them around C.L.R. James, a well-known and respected, I soon learned, West Indian writer and Marxist intellectual, and taking part (I had strayed that far from the other James whose mind was too fine, T. S. Eliot said, to contain an idea) in the writing of a revolutionary pamphlet called *Negro Americans Take the Lead* (Facing Reality Publishing Committee, Detroit, 1964)—I was deemed “family,” and the younger sister and I were considered a couple. We *were* a couple, but only in the Jamesian platonic sense, though the worldly comrades assumed otherwise.

In May 1964, after six months in Europe and everybody broke by then (personally, I was also suffering twinges of homesickness and revived patriotism from an overexposure to the comrades’ blanket condemnation of the United States; I could no more totally reject my native country than I could completely accept the Gospel according to Marx), the four of us, via economy class Icelandic Airlines, flew home to an America in turmoil after the Kennedy assassination. We landed at the former Idlewild Airport, now JFK International, and stepped off the plane into the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, the emergence of what soon would be called the counterculture, and the government’s escalating involvement in Vietnam.

We lingered in New York, the professor’s hometown, where he and the two sisters lodged with his mother in Brooklyn. I stayed, as I had before boarding the *Bristol City*, in Brooklyn Heights with my old friend from our days together in journalism school at the University of Minnesota; took in the World’s Fair with the younger sister; toured Central Park and Coney Island and various museums and other New York City landmarks with the professor and both sisters.

I followed them to Detroit, where I met the professor’s circle of colleagues and former students and the sisters’ parents. The professor found me a bed near the university campus in a student communal house, where I watched a boy eat peyote (my introduction to the Sixties drug scene) and promptly throw up. Before that I’d spent my first night in town in the basement of the sisters’ parents’ house in east Detroit, from which I heard the younger sister being grilled about me upstairs by her mother. Her

mother was a brisk former Girl Scout leader, her father a stern Ford Company foreman. Both regarded me with beady eyes.

Finally, after a week or so of mooning about, I took a bus to Chicago and another to Minneapolis, where my mother met me at the station. I was given a room in my parents' house outside Minneapolis and worked that summer on the golf course my father had built on what remained of our old farm. (On a wall in the house, beside iconic pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, my devout Catholic mother had hung a photograph of the martyred John F. Kennedy; later, after JFK's rampant sex life had been revealed, the picture disappeared.) The younger sister and I corresponded.

That fall, ostensibly on my way to Mexico (I had Mexico in reserve), I swung by Detroit and found myself, after a couple of cautious, reacquainting days, agreeing to stay. For in a swoon like Gabriel's at the end of Joyce's great story "The Dead" (my imagination never ceased to be literary), I had happily yielded my Jamesian celibacy for Lawrencian carnal knowledge, and my platonic affair with the younger sister was platonic no longer.

The following spring, we were married. And so we've remained.

DANIEL J. LANGTON has had work appearing or forthcoming in the *Iowa Review*, *Fiddlehead*, *New York Quarterly*, *Harvard Advocate*, *Vallum* and the *Mississippi Valley Review*, among other journals. His books include *The Inheritance* and *The Hogarth-Selkirk Letters*, both from Cheltenham Press. A collection of his poems, translated into Chinese, will appear soon.

Daniel J. Langton / **Five Poems**

The Western Front

I'm sorry I haven't written, I wrote to god,
I've owed you a winsome poem, my god, for ages.
I couldn't say, as Frost could say, I had to clear
the god damned lower forty; I suppose god damned
doesn't corner the market for tact, nor make your day,
nor start to ease your growing scarey snit with me.
Shakespeare can do no wrong, and you lunch with Mozart.

I really meant to write, even you must find it odd
poets think of games and dances while the pages
sit there in their resplendent white. But then, I fear,
how can you know fear; has ever a door been slammed
on you? I'll change my ribbon. Yes. I'll try today.
Maybe I'll try today. I will. I'll have to see.
I guess it's time. As the star said, I'll do my part.

The Temptation to Sum Up

A love affair is starting as we speak;
somewhere near, a fingertip tips a wrist,
calm brains become a washer and a dryer
on a spin cycle; their eyes, as they say,
light up at the pleasing prospect; the meek
may inherit the dirt, but don't get kissed
on the fly, on the bed, near the fire
that feeds on November, and makes it May.

Now that I'm settled in, I tend to think
it's close to watching dogs, or pleasant games
played for a while to make a point or two,
then I remember all the pain, the stink,
the feints, the joys, the chills, the blending flames,
and I relent, and give the fiend its due.

One Side, the Other Side

Even when looking at the granite stars
vacillate like pinwheels on a mission,
a glance from you will delay that vision,
invite my mind to earth's abrupt careers,
some part of me your virtue could approve,
acting with the slight but startling thrill
grace would surely add, wavering could build
on, love might recognize as steady love.

Of all the changes, of all the flaws in-
dustrious envy chose to send, of all
great forces that alter, or try to mar
in supple ways, none has the strength to bend,
return, retract, divert the steadfast skill
love brings as a lesson to the shaky stars.

Eventually all is as should be,
virtue is its own reward, society's fine
in lieu of prison, taken as a sign
each of us can hear, or smell, or see.
I went along, but in my fancy's eye
some residue was sparked, the law was quelled,
a soul I never even knew I owned rebelled,
birds asleep in my chest began to fly.

And so we wander, that's how we stay put,
dance to the music we had time to write,
glide to a place our daring built alone,
incite what we are, and what we are about,
revel in the shattered rules, the right
love gives, to know, to glory, to condone.

When We're Gone

Some things won't change, the ugly fish will bolt
the gorgeous fish; though when we're gone, all of us,
nothing will be shot, nothing will be built,
no souls will be cleansed of their sins, no polt-
ergeists banished, monkeys as tall as us
will rummage in our stores, and feel no guilt.

When we're gone, the deer will just be deer
again, the sun will turn the light flowers
in a fine wave, will stir the sleepy snake
to find its den, will warm the backs of birds
in hungry flight, coat the flat sea, will sear
the formal gardens that once were ours,
will crack the silent boulevards, will bake
the books that, in the end, had only words.

Time and Again

We walked toward the beach, not all the way,
just past the last houses to the pebbled bed,
two people, the waves, and the clouds sky-high.
You took my elbow, all I knew was the Key,
the reign of sand, the disheartening day
as the sun pulled the covers to its head,
your brazenly guarded eyes, ready to lie
if called upon; a faint flicker of me.
You let go. You spoke. "Tell me, should we stay?
I want to know." It wasn't what you said,
as our chests touched I noticed the light die
of its own accord, and now I could see,
on this day when our eyes, as they say, met:
you have forgotten what I can't forget.

ARLENE TRIBBIA'S poems and short stories have appeared in literary magazines in the United States and Canada. Two of her stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She is writing a novel, *What did you do with your life?* This is her second appearance in *The New Orphic Review*.

Paisley Naked

Arlene Tribbia

PAISLEY. HOW AMERICAN. So unlike her Russian name Taisiya Novikov, which was difficult for the twin boys to pronounce. So she was agreeable when Diane suggested they call her Paisley, "It's easier and it's close enough, right?" just as she was agreeable when Diane suggested she work in Nick's office on the weekends, "You'll make spending money."

What could she do but agree? After all, she was a guest in their country and home and she didn't want to appear ungrateful for these gestures of hospitality. As her mother was fond of pointing out: *You cooked the soup so you have to eat it, Taisiya*, meaning since she wished to come to America and her wish had come true, she must be grateful and accept it as is.

What could Nick do but agree? It was apparent he listened to his wife. She noticed this even before they left the airport. Diane was quick to command, "Don't leave Taisiya's luggage where anyone can grab it. Nick, you go get the car. I'll stay here with her and the boys."

Taisiya was a student from Russia. None of them knew much of anything about Russia before she came, except information given to them from the exchange program and the books and DVDs Diane had bought online. Taisiya Novikov could teach them about Russian life while Diane, Nick, Haven and the boys would give her America. "Aw, come on, guys," Diane said brightly to all of them at breakfast one morning. "It's win-win. We get to learn about another culture and she gets to come to America. It's not as if we don't have the room."

That was true. They lived in one of the old rambling homes in Northbrook where even three exchange students could fit comfortably. "We'll give it a whirl then. It's settled. What have we got to lose?" she added.

Taisiya carried a half dozen wood eggs hand-painted with golden swirls and bursting stars in her suitcase as gifts from Russia for each of them when she arrived. As soon as she handed the boys an egg, it was like pushing an invisible button. They started running in circles around the living room, tossing the bright eggs back and forth to each other like baseballs while Lily, the Maltese, barked and ricocheted after them.

“My country is much different,” Taisiya-Paisley said in a Russian accent and apologized for somehow creating this commotion, “but I am ready to learn,” she stammered, unsure about what she should do. Take the eggs back?

Diane took charge of the situation. She clapped her hands, pointed at the suitcases and said, “Let’s get these up to Paisley’s room, shall we?” She gestured for the boys to take the bags, then turned to Paisley, “You’d like to see your room, wouldn’t you?”

The twins reluctantly trudged off with the suitcases, dragging them noisily behind, when a door slammed from somewhere deep inside the house and a girl sauntered in. The first thing Taisiya noticed about her was: she sparkled. Her tanned skin was sprinkled with some kind of glitter. *Is this what the magazines meant by golden girl?* Taisiya immediately felt frumpy in her wrinkled jeans and plain t-shirt. “Hey,” the girl said, barely bothering to look at her. “I need the charge card.”

Diane stopped in mid-step. “You remember Haven from the pictures, right?”

Taisiya smiled at the girl, “I’m Taisiya—I mean Paisley,” she offered.

They had exchanged photographs online, but Haven-as-in-raven looked completely different. Her once blonde hair was now black, a dark glare falling to her shoulders in an undulating wave. And she looked much thinner than she did in her pictures. Paisley sucked in her stomach. She wished she had changed out of her t-shirt and jeans in the airport restroom and wished she hadn’t eaten so many of her aunt’s pirozhky filled with gooey plums the week before she left. She felt like a whale.

Haven bent to pick up one of the Russian eggs from the bowl. “How precious.”

“We were just getting her settled,” Diane said brightly. “Maybe you’d like to show Paisley her room.”

“I’m going to the mall. She can go with me if she wants.” She glanced at Paisley. “You wanna take a ride?”

“Don’t be silly. She’s just come off a long flight. Take her upstairs and get to know her.”

“Oh, my god,” she whined. “You promised I wouldn’t have to stay home all day.”

“But Paisley’s plane was delayed and—”

“That’s not my fault.”

Nick, sensing the beginnings of familiar mother-daughter bickering,

excused himself and a few seconds later Diane shook her head and hurried off after him. Haven rolled her eyes and sighed. “Get used to it.” When Paisley didn’t say anything and didn’t look like she was going to, Haven said, “Come on, follow me to your lair. Lair. There you go. A SAT word.” She made a face.

The bedroom was large and sunny and the bed was filled with pillows the same color as the large glass container of seashells on the living room table.

“This is beautiful,” she lied. She expected bright American colors. Red. Orange. Magenta.

“Hey, can you levitate?” Haven asked.

“What?” The strangeness of the word startled her. She didn’t recognize it.

“I’m learning how and I thought maybe you might know about it, you know, since you’re from somewhere else.”

She was serious. Should she pretend she knew what she was talking about? Her teacher told her that Americans lived by the motto: *Fake it until you make it*. But before she could answer, Haven shut the door and left the room. She quickly grabbed her dictionary. *Levitation: to float in apparent defiance of gravity*.

Maybe in America anything really was possible.

Within a couple of weeks, she quickly discovered the secret rhythm of their lives. Nick worked late downtown most nights. Diane was a stay-at-home mom who was never home because she was always shopping. Paisley saw that she needed two of everything she bought: serving platters, sets of sheets, *Scrabble* games. It made her wonder if she had somehow planned during her pregnancy to have the two boys. When she wasn’t shopping, she was carting the twins to soccer games, swim meets, baseball games, karate lessons, piano lessons or math tutoring. Haven tended to stay in her room with her door closed whenever she was home—which was hardly ever. The neighborhood itself was all flowerbeds, rose bushes and rolling lawns and the water sprouted from the ground to sprinkle the lawns at six every evening. Sometimes when she looked out the window she saw a little girl with long butterfly hair not more than six or seven years old, skipping rope.

While the rest of the family slept in on Saturdays and Sundays, Paisley and Nick—he wouldn’t think of letting her call him anything else—headed in his Bentley GT to the city. At first, she felt shy spending time alone with him, but then she discovered she shouldn’t have because he was easy to talk to. No one had ever listened so carefully to her. And he was considerate. He always held doors open for her. He patiently explained the file system, how the copy machine worked and he bought her coffee and magazines to read when she didn’t have anything to do. She looked forward to going to his office, sitting at his secretary’s desk where

his name seemed to be embossed on every envelope and paper. One afternoon, he even offered to show her around the city. “You have to see Cloud Gate.”

“What is it?”

“A gate to the unknown—you’ll love it,” he promised.

They took a cab from his office on Wacker Drive to Millennium Park where she gazed, surprised, at their twin reflections in the shiny silver surface of the jelly bean shaped sculpture, Cloud Gate. It was a giant fun-house mirrored surface reflecting odd versions of themselves while the clouds floated past and the skyline bent.

He touched her arm, “See—you’re inside the world, the clouds. It’s like watching yourself in a movie.”

Paisley closed her eyes, opened them and saw herself standing next to a handsome business executive, in a city far from home at the gate to an unknown world. Suddenly she realized how far she had traveled from all that was familiar and it made her feel adult. It was scary and thrilling at the same time.

She had a boyfriend, Vlad, at home in Russia. He was two years older, nineteen and not at all happy when she decided to leave for America—even if it was only for the school year. “I want new experiences,” she told him one night as they kissed. He pulled away from her, then uttered seriously, “We can try different positions—do it in other places if you want.” That he actually thought she meant exploring sexual experiences emphasized his boyish thoughtlessness and fueled her desire to leave.

* * *

Haven pretended to befriend her. Paisley tried to be agreeable in return, but the truth was, she didn’t find their interests in video games, magician movies and shopping at the mall compelling. Her friends screamed and laughed at things she didn’t find funny. Paisley, who had no trouble chattering in Russia with her friends, didn’t know what to say here. She hoped to discuss literature, religion or politics. At sixteen, none of them cared about those things. They cared about boys, parties, clothes—sometimes all three at once. *Oh, my god, are you going to Razor’s party? What’re you going to wear?*

Diane tried. She took her shopping, but whenever she went with her, they ended up in stores far too expensive for her to buy anything and Haven acted pouty afterward, so mostly, she spent her days sitting in the garden next to the pool, watching the wind spin the inflatable sea lion around on the water and pretending to read one of the thick novels she found in a bookcase in the family room. Because she didn’t know how to swim, she’d sit at the edge of the pool, dangling her legs in the water. She could hardly wait for school to start in two weeks—something Haven and her friends looked toward with dread.

She wrote Vlad a long email that ended: *I love America! The people here are so friendly. Haven is teaching me how to levitate. They do things like that here. Can you believe it?* She didn't want to tell him the truth.

"Let's go in," Haven waved to her when she saw Paisley coming out the back door carrying her book and towel. She stood with her hands on her hips near the deep end of the pool, by the diving board, flicking her toes through the water. "It's still warm."

Paisley spread her towel down on a chair and sat. "I have to study my vocabulary."

"Hey, I think somebody lost a ring on the bottom of the pool," Haven said, peering into the water. "Come see."

She got up and walked over to see the ring and just as she came to the edge of the pool, Haven reached out and pushed her into the water with a swift movement. She couldn't quite grasp the situation, how it blurred from Haven's face, twisting, her mouth open, grinning, white teeth flashing, the blue sky splashing up over her face into her eyes, over her head. She instinctively gulped air along with pool water and squeezed her eyes shut.

Instead of seeing her own life pass before her eyes, she saw the lives of strangers. One after another, after another, after the other, they flashed past. *Is this dying?* She gasped. *Is this what it feels like to die?*

She held her breath and watched a parade of people before her eyes. *I'm drowning? This is it?* She kicked her legs and paddled her arms, windmilling through the water, frantic for air, fighting dizziness.

She saw the raft floating nearby and lunged toward it.

There was nothing to grab.

She lunged again, trying to propel herself forward.

It slipped away.

Or did Haven kick it away?

She fell back under the water.

The world spun and blurred. The sun was a swinging chandelier.

She knew she couldn't last much longer.

The sunlight swung around in another direction. *Which way was up?*

Hot stars exploded deep within her chest. *How much longer?*

Ten seconds. That's it.

Ten possible endings to stories, nine mirrors to peer into, eight games of cards to play, seven secrets to keep, five boys to kiss goodbye, four letters to send, three doors to open, two hands to hold, one story to tell.

She reached for the top of the water, following the swinging light and gasped, then coughed as a hot slash of air razored through her lungs.

And just as quickly, sputtered and fell back under.

Haven-the-raven stood in the sunlight at the edge of the swimming pool, smiling down at her for a few moments before diving smoothly into the water. She bobbed to the top and swam a few feet away to the inflat-

able sea lion and hoisted herself up on its back, giggling as she mounted its colorful body. Her hair was sleek and wet like the lion's.

Paisley grabbed for one of the rafts and it slipped through her fingers. She lunged for it again and with both arms grabbing on, she pulled herself up, sitting and coughing. She gulped at the air, finally catching her breath. "I could've drowned. This is the deep end."

"Daddy picks me up and tosses me into the pool without any warning all the time," she shrugged, kicked her feet in the water and floated away.

"You tricked me," she gasped.

"Oh, my god, who doesn't know how to swim? Everybody in the world knows how to swim—except you." Then she laughed and slapped her hands through the water, splashing her.

"You could've asked. I would've told you that I can't."

"That's what I mean. I can," and she paddled her small feet in the water, propelling the sea lion to the deep end of the pool, away from Paisley.

* * *

It was going to be one of the last hot days. *Maybe the last, superb day of the year*, Diane announced at breakfast. "The weekend forecast is perfect. We have to do something. We have to throw a party one last time before we close the pool. We'll introduce Paisley to everyone—it'll be like an informal coming out party. Wouldn't that be fun?"

When no one said anything, Diane muttered, "I don't know about this family. Really I don't."

"It's last minute," Nick finally said and pushed *The Wall Street Journal* aside. "People've made their plans by now."

"Like that matters. The best parties are unplanned. Haven, invite all of your friends. Paisley needs to meet everyone."

Though she looked away before her mother could see, Paisley saw Haven roll her eyes. Nick saw too and frowned momentarily, recovered, then smiled at Paisley as he got up from the table.

"It's settled. Saturday. We'll do it in the afternoon, but not too late, so maybe you and Paisley can be home early?" She looked up at him hopefully.

Nick looked over at Paisley. "We can arrange that, can't we?"

"Yes." She decided she liked how he included her in his decision, as if she was important.

Most of what she did at the office was simple. She made copies, went downstairs to get coffee at the *Starbucks* around the corner and filed documents in the great wall of file cabinets at the back of the office. Plenty of the time though, because it was Saturday or Sunday, there wasn't much to do. She'd sit at the large polished desk outside his office door and listen in to his conversations which seemed to consist of nothing more than laughter and every once in a while, a loud *hell yes!* Then it

would become quiet again for hours. In America, maybe this was how easily money was made.

She wanted to learn how this tricky America worked. American people were disappointing so far. And this made her disappointed in herself. They were all friendly upon meeting her and then she'd never see or hear a word from them again. Haven and her friends appeared to like her at first, but they disappeared back into their own lives which she knew she'd never be a part of. She always thought of the right thing to say long after the moment to say it had passed.

School was an anonymous hive of boys and girls flitting through the hallways and pushing into and shoving out of classrooms carrying confusion and loneliness along with the notebook paper and books in their backpacks.

She imagined that she was missing a critical aspect of how to behave with them. Haven and her friends liked playing silly juvenile pranks on each other. Once, before they left for school, she watched Haven slip a tiny pair of Diane's sewing scissors in her pocket. Later that morning after P.E., while they were standing at the mirror together fixing their hair and putting on lip gloss, a girl shrieked and Paisley saw two sleeves fly through the air. Haven met her gaze in the mirror and grinned. She had snipped off the sleeves and buttons of the girl's blouse.

* * *

Diane was right. It was a superb day for a pool party. Their backyard was crowded with people. The twins and a group of younger children scurried around the adults playing hide and seek and chasing tiny Lily around the pool. Haven had gel in her hair, glitter on her cheeks and shoulders and invited many of the faces Paisley had seen in the hallways at school to the party. Diane and Nick knew everyone. Haven knew everyone. Paisley pretended she wanted to know everyone.

Diane steered her by the arm and introduced her to so many people that her face ached from smiling. This was how she had always envisioned America: bouncing beach balls, turquoise skies, glittering people laughing and the sunlight throwing its arms around them all.

She watched Haven squirt lighter fluid on the grill for hot dogs and hamburgers and felt a bit of excitement as she struck the wooden match, but then—*how could it happen?*—Paisley watched horrified as an arc of fluid squirted and landed.

On her.

A second later, the flame spun away from the can of fluid that Haven held in her hands until she squealed and dropped it and it raced over the empty space onto Paisley's sandal, swerved around her ankle, then trembled a bit before leaping onto her leg.

"Paisley!" someone screamed.

Then someone else: “Grab her!”

“Hurry!”

“She’s on fire!”

Paisley didn’t move. Couldn’t move. Haven eyed her, defiant. Paisley was paralyzed, unsure what to do, not yet feeling the fire licking her leg, just watching it sway from its tight little space, growing larger. Everyone stared at her and no one moved—until the very last moment when Nick rushed forward, swept her up into his arms and jumped with her into the pool, saving her. He was strong shoulders and muscular legs, solid and cool, while she was dizzy, blind, a spinning top. She held on to him until the voices drowned and it was quiet.

* * *

Nick was there often enough to make her laugh, bringing her silver balloons and caramel-filled chocolates. He guided her away from the fear and pain with his hand which rested protectively on her shoulders those first hours in the hospital and rubbed away the fear, until she felt safe and after a time—a *few days? a week?*—there seemed to be secret places where she longed to follow with him.

Did I fall in love with you then? How could I not? You were the only one there for me. I couldn’t help it.

Within a month, there was only a small scar left on the side of her calf, a raised pearly mound of flesh, like the inside shade of one of Diane’s sea shells that she would pick up when no one was around and listen to the tiny flush of ocean inside. She wondered if every natural thing stored a memory of the places it had been. When she picked up one of the wood eggs from Russia and held it in her palm, she hoped she might feel the lingering sensation of a tall Russian tree, its branches swaying in the wind and rain, but there was nothing.

It was a Saturday afternoon, late, and the days were becoming shorter and colder. Russia was far away, as if it were a place she might have known long ago, like the faint remnant of a dream. She was homesick and yet, she didn’t want to go home. She thought of her mother, dusting off a table, chopping onions, beets and carrots for soup or shopping for fish. Diane performed the same chores, and yet, somehow it was different. She might polish a candlestick or wipe off a plate, but usually she told the housekeeper who came in weekly what she wanted cleaned. And there was a man who rang the doorbell every Thursday morning to water the plants and polish their leaves.

It was the money that made life easier. She watched Diane flutter about their lives, paying for a lost text book or buying a new polo shirt when one of the boys tore theirs. Once, she ordered a new sofa online when Nick spilled a glass of red wine on it. Money could solve anything. Any problem—except a Chicago winter. Everyone in the family complained about it. Whenever she walked past Diane sitting at her kitchen

laptop, she saw the screen filled with blue skies and palm trees.

“We can’t leave in December or January. I’m in the middle of the project. You know that,” Nick would say.

“You never want to do anything fun,” she’d whine. “We’ll do a resort. We can go for Thanksgiving—a short trip to get out of town. That’s all.”

“I can’t leave the designs to anyone. That’s something you don’t seem to understand. You go if you want. Take the kids. Go to Florida. Disney. I can’t do it. Not now.”

“I’m sick of that project. That’s all I ever hear about around here. How about thinking a little less about yourself and your project and considering us once in a while?”

Paisley strained to listen from wherever she was in the house, but it was always the same. Their American method of arguing never had any resolution. In this way they were like her own family arguing, except her mother complained about not having a new coat instead of a vacation.

And once when she was walking past Haven’s bedroom on her way to the kitchen, she heard her say, “Everything’s a joke. My parents are a joke. Piss-face Paisley is a joke. I have an algebra exam on Friday. Life sucks. And I still can’t levitate.”

When she was alone in the house, she’d slip the black leather photo album from the bookshelf in the family room and stare at their pictures. Page after page of smiling faces. A perfect family. And there were photographs of Nick as a teenager—handsome as any boy in a movie magazine. She could hear Vlad’s voice: “*He’s nothing but a pretty boy, Taisiya. How could you even like such a kalbasa?*” Sausage.

* * *

Paisley hadn’t emailed Vlad in over a week despite the flurry of emails from him. She didn’t want to write anything to make him feel pity for her. She stared at the dark sky outside the office windows. In Russia, a charcoal-smudged sky meant snow. Here, it could mean anything. The weather in Chicago was next to impossible to decipher. She sighed and began an email to Vlad when she heard Nick open the door to his office behind her.

His face was serious. “Why don’t you come in here?”

She got up from the desk, smoothed her skirt and followed him into his office. There was nothing lonelier than an empty office building at nightfall on the weekend. It was still. They were the only two on the floor.

He went to the windows and gestured for her to move closer next to him to see. It was starting to snow. The first snowfall of the season. Even the snow was different in America, instead of sad Russian snow, this snow twirled and the thick flakes glowed as if lit from within. They stood hypnotized watching it disappear into the night.

“What’re you thinking about?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“You’re missing home, aren’t you?” He studied her face.

“Not really.” She was thinking of Vlad. Simple Vlad. He wouldn’t be able to appreciate the beauty of a snowfall. He’d immediately want to run outside no matter how cold it was to make snowballs and play fight with her.

He turned to her and looked into her eyes. “You don’t have a friend you miss?”

She thought of her friends from school. They’d never be able to imagine her, Taisiya, in an office high above the city, having a conversation with an important and sophisticated man. Her friends teased her about her desire for all things American.

Who do you think you are? Her mother would say to her with that look in her eyes. When she saw her, filling out the application to come to America, she said, *climb the tree that’s in front of you instead of always looking for a better tree to climb*, which meant that it wasn’t right for her to reach for something beyond her life in Russia. To wish for more could only bring unhappiness.

And Vlad would be jealous to know that she was alone with a handsome man in his office, a man who wore elegant dark suits and colorful neckties with a different tiny design every day. Even his hair with its shiny precision cut layers was perfectly designed. If she told Vlad this, he’d tease her. *Get real. He’s almost as old as your father.*

“Say yes for me.”

“Say yes? For what?”

“Just say it, say that word for me.” He held her gaze.

She was unsure, but she said what he wanted.

“Say it again.” He moved closer to her until he was so close she felt as if she should move away, but she didn’t dare.

Instead, she said, “Yes.”

“That’s what I want to hear,” he murmured. “Yes.”

Thick flakes of snow glittered and swirled in the light. He turned to her and as if it were the right thing to do, she instinctively looked up when he bent his head toward hers and pulled her to him and kissed her. She didn’t think it was possible to feel such a thing as the sky opening and closing and the earth falling away. But she did.

* * *

Just before Thanksgiving, Diane was going to throw a surprise 40th birthday party for Nick. She enlisted Paisley’s help to keep him away from the house so he wouldn’t discover her preparations. Paisley pretended she needed a ride to an office supply store for school supplies or a ride to the mall or someone to talk to. He listened to her as if she was more than just a teenager, as if her opinions mattered. And she was eager to learn more about him, why he would subscribe to magazines like *Metropolis*, *Art*

Forum, *The New Yorker* or buy expensive art and architecture books and never read them. Or buy things like a brass telescope or a Hasselblad camera and leave it unused in its case. Or put his arm around Diane but look at her instead with longing. He was mystifying. She knew exactly what Vlad would say: *he's a typical, self-centered American. Don't trust him.*

“Are you happy to be an architect?”

“Happy? Who’s happy? Everybody does what they have to do, that’s all.”

“But to create something in your mind, like a building, and see it become real.” She had imagined her dream trip to America and despite protests from her family and Vlad, she was here. “What would be better than that?” she added.

“I can think of a few things.” He touched her shoulder.

She thought about how she planned to get here and how she had worked for good grades and pretended to be thoughtful to her teachers so they would write her impressive letters of recommendation and how she had worked long hours in her uncle’s bakery pouring endless cups of sugar and flour and rolling slabs of dough for the Kolyadki and that awful gingerbreadly smell from the Pryaniki that clung to her even when she wasn’t there, just to make extra money to buy new clothes for America and how the clothes turned out to be all wrong anyway and how she dreamt of escaping the melancholy skies of Russia and Vlad’s meager ideas about life, how she ended up in this office high above the city and how every time they were alone together now he would kiss her and she would let him. After Vlad’s clumsy and soupy kisses, she reveled in his.

Besides, it seemed harmless enough to sit in the dark parking lot of the mall and neck—she had done it with other boys besides Vlad too. Only once did he touch her breast through her white blouse. Only once. An accident? Still, she was surprised at how her heart pitched when he did. Surprised and secretly thrilled, she replayed the incident over and over in her mind. She’d study her face in the mirror, the faint redness he left on her chin from the rub of his beard when they kissed. In school, she doodled *Dominick* in the margins and was careful to crumple the paper and throw it into the wastebasket on her way out.

The night of his birthday party, she decided to wear a new dress, the color of a ripe pomegranate and made of a silk that shone in the candlelight. She bought it earlier in the week with money saved from working at his office. Then she undid her ponytail because she remembered he once said that he liked how her hair looked falling loose. Maybe he would see that she was doing this tonight for him.

She stood off to the side waiting in the living room with his friends and family, when he arrived home with Diane.

“Surprise!” all of them yelled. She blushed when his astonished gaze

met hers. Had he been so preoccupied with her in the car all of those nights that he failed to discover Diane's surprise?

Later, Diane carried out a large birthday cake full of glowing candles and they sang *Happy Birthday*. With the lights of the candles glowing in his face he was as winning as any movie star in *People* magazine. As if he sensed what she was thinking, he looked up from the cake and at her across the room.

"Make a wish!" someone yelled.

He hesitated for such a long time that Diane yelled at him, "Hurry up! The candles are melting!" and he looked at her and then over at Paisley and stared directly into her eyes. Then blew out the candles.

* * *

"Every summer I promise myself I'm going to read *Anna Karenina* and I never do," Diane told Paisley one afternoon when they were alone together in the kitchen where Paisley was showing her how to make *Ponchiki*. The exchange program people always had all kinds of suggestions for the students to try when things became strained with a family. This was one of them: share an activity together.

Paisley rolled out the dough while Diane sat on a stool drinking glasses of white wine and watched. As she pressed the dough to make rounds, she idly wondered what Nick was doing.

"That's life. A lot of promises," she sighed. "In fact, let me show you something." She left the room and came back carrying a large wooden box, carved with an intricate design of flowers and swirls and opened the lid. "My dream box. It's from Tibet." Inside there were photos of large houses, paint chips, shards of glass in different colors, pages torn from magazines. "When we build our next house, I'll be ready. I have it all here."

"Really?"

"Nick promised me that we'd start building by next spring. Of course, he's been saying that for two years now, but this time I'm holding him to his word. Did you ever see a color so gorgeous in your life?" She held up a shard that was a watery blue.

"It's beautiful." It made her think of the sky in Russia after it rained. It was somehow disorienting to see Diane holding the sky in her palm as if it belonged to her.

She remembered one of Haven's SAT words from the stack of index cards she kept on her desk. She knew them better than Haven by now. *Covet: to desire or wish for longingly.*

* * *

She found it easy to slip with him into the world of a darkened office behind closed doors after hours or afternoons of stolen cigarettes and tipped martini glasses on hotel balconies, miles of road driven away, far away, no answers and no questions, until finally, he was more than Diane's

husband, Haven and the twin's father, more than the chairman of some board, more than a builder, an architect who owned expensive oil paintings of black streaks splayed across white canvases that lined the hallway to his office overlooking Lake Michigan, more than a man who would whisper to her, "I'm notorious for going after what I can't have."

Nick unfastened the cheap necklace her grandmother had given her before she left on the plane to America and he slid her underwear off without bumbling and that first time it was like infinity inside her hips and how he made it all seem so easy like the pouring of honey and even when she felt hot she felt cool and it was the first time in her life when she understood how it was possible to feel two things at once.

She touched his arm and traced a finger along a small tattoo of an airplane. The tips of its wings, faded on his pale skin.

Later, she asked, "Why a plane?"

He took her in his arms again and laughed. "That? It's from my college days. I always wanted to fly planes."

He made her feel as if she was more than gawky Taisiya from Russia with his smooth hands. His shirt, always a dazzling white on Monday, was a field of linen she felt she could rest in and his trousers, when she touched them, were thin and made of an elegant material that was as mysterious as anything she had ever touched. And his shoes were either black or deep burgundy and polished. Vlad always wore jeans, thick cotton shirts and scuffed boots and he had never whisked her up off her feet and carried her through doorways.

Nick's skin, always cool and fragrant, even felt different from the other boys she knew, stronger and more substantial, so unlike Vlad, who was all tough angles and if he smelled of anything, he smelled like boy—the inside of an empty gymnasium before school started, or maybe like plain paper that had been kept in a folder too long.

Nick spent his days sitting around a polished mahogany table and unrolling large rolls of paper, signing pages of contracts for tracts of land in ink from expensive fountain pens and closing deals with clients from other countries while sipping on Swiss coffee and iced water with cut lemon. His office was full of importance, with file folders on his desk labeled: *spaces*, *interiors*, *exteriors* and *towers*, and the air held the scent of cleverness, capture and victory. But when he held her, it was as if they were like simple Matryoshka Russian nesting dolls together: separate and yet matching.

* * *

She knew what her mother would say about her yearnings. *A person who follows two courses at the same time arrives nowhere.*

* * *

Diane arranged to have a twelve foot tall White Pine delivered and set up for the holidays and scheduled different activities for almost every night

in December: caroling, cookie baking, drinking hot chocolate in front of the fireplace while decorating the tree, wrapping toys for poor children which she would pack and deliver by the armload later in the week with the twins. She even arranged a round of festive afternoon and early evening parties where young people in black and white uniforms arrived and served trays of hors d'oeuvres, spiced meats rolled inside flaky pastries, sugary confections that rose to a perfect tip, tall glasses of champagne and orange punch with sherbet.

Haven sat cross-legged in her bedroom swallowing whiskey straight from a silver flask and tried to levitate. Sometimes she smoked marijuana, secretly blowing the smoke out her open window. Then later, she'd stagger downstairs into the kitchen for a glass of milk and cookies shaped like angels. The twins stayed in their room playing sniper video games with the other children who had come to the party with their parents. Nick mingled for ten minutes at a time and then excused himself to head for his office in the back of the house to peer at his computer. Everyone was together—and yet not.

Paisley was happy when the house no longer smelled like the pine tree and cookies baking and smiling drunken people who asked her questions about Russia in slurry voices and then didn't bother to listen to her answers. She couldn't wait to drive into the city with Nick on Saturday. She imagined her mother saying: *Every seed knows its own time*, which meant that her impatience for certain events would only lead to disappointment because there was a right time for everything. It didn't make her feel any better.

She dressed carefully for her first day back to work after the holidays, selecting a bright coral shirt, one that he had admired on her previously, along with a black skirt and boots. He was quiet on the drive into the city and by the time they parked the car in the underground garage and made their way in the silent elevator to the top floor of his office, she thought he might be displeased with her for some reason, he was so quiet.

She sat at her desk pretending to read about couples who filled their second homes in Tuscany and Miami with antiques. No one called him. He wasn't on the phone saying *hell yes* to anyone. She eyed the clock. For lunch she went down the street and picked up two tuna sandwiches which they each ate alone at their desks. She thought about her best friend Natalya and tried to picture what she would be doing on a Saturday night. There might be a party. Vlad was probably drinking Imperia and playing Doom with his friends, laughing over something juvenile. Everyone was busy. Everyone except her.

Nick would want to leave within the hour. She chewed on a *Twizzler* from the large glass jar his secretary kept on her desk and stared out the window which was a tricky shade of dark ocean blue that turned transparent in the night. She didn't see him when he stepped out of his office

and said, “For you,” and handed her a small silver box tied with a perfect gold bow. It weighed less than one of the fountain pens on his desk. When she opened it, she found a silver necklace with two rubies tucked inside. The twin beads dangled on the chain like the unlit eyes of a small animal as she twirled them in the light.

No one had ever surprised her like this. There were only presents on her birthday or on the typical holidays. And Vlad had once given her a clock radio with an alarm but she couldn’t stand the loud buzzing sound the alarm made because it reminded her that she was late. She hated it.

“I didn’t give you anything before,” he said.

“But I don’t have anything for you.” It was true. She hadn’t given him a Christmas gift. She had only bought a large box of chocolates for the entire family. “You didn’t have to get me anything.” Diane bought her an expensive furry hat with large flaps that covered her eyes, soft leather gloves and an iPod.

“Do you like it?”

She nodded and unclasped the necklace when he placed his hand on top of hers.

“Not yet. First you take off your clothes. Then I’ll watch you put it on.” His eyes shined. “Would you do that for me?”

Before she could think, before she could stop herself, she did as she was told and slid out of her clothes and turned around so he could place the necklace on her. She felt her face flush from pleasure or embarrassment. She couldn’t figure out which—it was as if the rubies had started tiny twin fires on the sides of her head.

He reached for her and pulled her close. “You can watch or close your eyes.” She closed her eyes and sensed him move away and she felt her nakedness, but refused to open her eyes and couldn’t understand what he was doing—*another surprise?*—until she heard a familiar sound from Christmas morning: the tiny shutter of a camera’s eye, opening and closing.

She opened her eyes and watched him and when he told her to lift her arms she did and when he told her to bend over, she did and when he told her to sit in his leather chair she did, and when he told her to come to him, she did and felt his hands moving, tracing circles along her body over her collarbone, and further into places until she felt him enter her and she gazed over his shoulder at the dark rooftops of the buildings, the windows with the lights turned on and she pretended to leap from the top of one building to another like one of those bouncing balls that dropped and bounced over and over again onto the words of a song from the twin’s karaoke games. When she looked at him, his eyes were magnetic, a pattern of quiet violet circles, the invisible force of one man inside her at all times, even when they returned home and she went to her room and slid under the covers of her bed.

* * *

In the coming weeks, other accidents seemed to happen when she was with Haven. Once, she tripped her, making her tumble down a staircase at school. “Paisley! Your feet are beyond big!” Haven yelled. Fortunately, there was a group of boys a few steps in front of her and she was able to catch herself, fall into them and land on top of a football player.

And then there was the time Haven pushed her off a street corner and into an oncoming car. She leapt back from the street, feeling the whip of wind from the car on her skin as it passed.

“Hey, what’re you doing?” Haven looked at her surprised, as if Paisley had been the one to purposefully step out into the street.

The light turned green and they crossed the street. “Why’d you do that?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“You could’ve killed me.”

“Oh, my god, fat chance. You’re not the only one who knows how to play games,” she uttered as she bent to light a cigarette.

“I’m not playing any game.”

Haven pouted and suddenly exclaimed, as if to distract her, “Look!” she pointed to a store’s window where mannequins stood surrounded by gumball machines and an old-fashioned jukebox. They wore t-shirts the color of gumballs.

“Let’s get shirts. They’re adorable.”

A week later, she wore the tiny red t-shirt and Nick pronounced it, “intoxicating,” as he quickly drew it up over her head and tossed it aside.

“Haven has the same one.”

“I know.” He smiled, and reached to touch her breast. “She wore it to school today.”

She closed her eyes and pretended she was blind, feeling his lips make silent conversation until finally she was spent from trying to listen so hard to one man for so long tell stories that made no sense and she no longer remembered if she was in Russia or America—the off switch of her mind flipped and she no longer remembered him, her name, this time, his name, herself. She’s waving goodbye, saying hello, taking a test, watching the clouds, standing at the top of the stairs, reading a letter, taking a train, saying *I love you*, opening a window, touching the ring on his finger, holding a ticket in the palm of her hand, leaving.

* * *

The only person who could understand was her grandmother. In her own old-fashioned way, she knew about right and wrong. She wished she could call her. It would be night now. She’d be sleeping.

She went to Haven’s bedroom and knocked on the door. As soon as she went in she smelled marijuana. Nick was still at the office. Diane was at a boyscout meeting with the twins.

"I feel random today." It was one of the things Haven was always saying. She didn't understand what it meant, but it seemed to be the right thing to say because Haven gestured for her to sit down with her on the bed.

"Yeah?" Haven looked up from her bed. She was bleary-eyed, stoned, a pile of pillows under her head. Open books were strewn around her. She picked at a loose string on the hem of her jean shorts. Her usual bored and sullen self.

"You're lucky and you don't even know it," she blurted out. Haven would get to stay for the rest of her life in America, splashing from one pool to another. She would turn seventeen next month. She knew Diane had a big party planned. Nick told her that Haven's red convertible was a present for her last birthday. It would be hard to top that. But if anyone could, Diane would figure something out. She'd always have cars, boy-friends, whatever she desired. She'd never know what it was like to want something she couldn't have. Maybe one day she would even levitate.

"Yeah, right." She rolled her eyes. "I hate my life."

* * *

On Saturday afternoons they'd go to the Art Institute and gaze at Picasso paintings. Van Gogh. Kandinsky. He took her to his favorite room in the museum away from the crowd: the NYSE room which was a model made from original woodwork and design of the real one. They stood inside the middle of the empty room and felt the shiver of money disappear into the nothingness of time passing.

They rode in taxis to restaurants all over the city where they ate duck pasta, bruschetta with tomato and basil and nibbled at flaming desserts made of bananas and cherries before strolling along Michigan Avenue to gaze into the store windows. After a dizzy day in the city with Nick, she was already homesick for America without having left its borders.

He took her to see a building shaped like a glass spaceship, which he called the UFO building and he even showed her the office tower his firm designed. It was a monument of stacked windows, a concrete and glass arm reaching for the sky. As they stood together gazing at the skyward slant of windows, she sensed the reach, his desire for more. She remembered the SAT word. *Desire: longing for something that brings satisfaction or enjoyment.* Too bad, the sky was always sailing just out of reach from everyone.

* * *

The days were restless and secret and streaming by faster. Nick's voice whispered in her ear, *don't go, don't go, don't go*, it sounded bright and blue, the color of an American sky in late spring.

"Do you love her?" she asked, when he moved away from her and pulled up his trousers, buckled his belt. It was a question she had never asked anyone before.

“Who?” though she was certain he understood exactly who she was talking about.

“Your wife.”

“It’s different with her. It’s a practical arrangement. It makes sense for us to stay together,” he said and turned to look at the computer monitor.

“But do you love her?”

“She takes care of the kids, most everything else and I’m basically a paycheck—though I’m sure she’d see it differently.” He rolled his eyes. “I was tricked into this life. I was twenty-two. Diane got pregnant. Then her father was looking for someone to run his business. The rest is history.”

“You don’t love her.”

“I didn’t say that. Relationships can get complicated. You don’t know this yet. When you’re with someone for years, you naturally care for them—but it’s not love like you think. In fact, the relationship becomes something you don’t even think about anymore. It kind of exists on its own and before you know it, there you are.” He shrugged.

“She told me you’re going to build a house together.”

“Ah, the dream house.”

“She has pictures of how it’s supposed to look and the exact sizes of how big the rooms are going to be.”

“I’m sure she does.” He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her.

“What’s going to happen to us?” She looked him in the eye. He grinned back at her—he looked so much like a winner. Had he ever lost anything in his life?

“We have to leave that to fate.”

“Fate? But, it’s not good.” She hesitated. “With her?”

“It’s not great,” he was careful to answer. “Everything after college, I agreed to and did, but didn’t want. Sure, I have all this, whatever this is, but now that I have it, it doesn’t mean anything at all. Not really. It’s only stone and concrete and glass and so what if I’ve created spaces for people? Most people are so preoccupied they don’t even notice the space. They see a doorway, a wall, that’s it. I’m just a guy who knows how to combine a bunch of rooms into a decent structure. Maybe I was concerned with all the wrong matters and now so many years have gone by—this is what I am,” he hesitated a moment before he added, “and all that I’m not. The time for me to do or be anything different happened a long time ago. It vanished.” He snapped his fingers.

She knew what it felt like to disappear. “Was it ever like this with her?”

“This,” he said, pulling her close, “is special. This is a time in our lives we have right now and we shouldn’t ask for more.”

Later, she looked up ‘fate’ in the dictionary. *Fate: the inevitable events*

predestined by this force.

* * *

Paisley called her best friend Natalya in Russia and tried to explain Nick to her. She always knew what to do. Calling her instead of emailing her was like being home, hearing her familiar voice, speaking Russian.

“I don’t want to see him any more,” she said. “But then I do.”

She imagined Natalya sitting in her kitchen at the table, which is where she usually talked on the phone. She’d look out the window at the poplar tree they used to climb when they were children. She imagined the white curtains fluttering in the breeze.

“What about Vlad?”

“He thinks I’ll come home and be there anytime he wants me. He believes our lives haven’t changed at all.”

“Have they?”

When she didn’t answer, Natalya said simply, “He’s waiting for you. He hasn’t been with anyone while you’ve been gone.”

She closed her eyes. “I’ve found love here. He’s not happy. They fight all the time about money. But he can’t leave her.”

“Chicago sounds like Moscow. Is this what he says?”

“No,” she answered. “But it’s not like he can do anything. He’s a business man, an executive, a chairman of some board. He has a life.”

“And a wife, Taisiya,” she was quick to point out. But you’ll be home soon and he’ll just be a memory. At least Vlad doesn’t know. And if you’re smart, he’ll never find out.”

* * *

“You’re pensive today, Tulip,” Nick said to her one afternoon in the park after school. They were in Diane’s SUV.

Paisley still felt the wetness of him between her legs. “Pensive,” she repeated, remembering Haven’s stack of index cards. It was a SAT word.

“A thinker.” He placed a hand on her neck. “You bend your neck a little to the right whenever you’re thinking. Bet you didn’t even know that, did you?” When she shook her head, he said, “You’re a beautiful flower. A pensive little tulip.”

She remembered her grandmother always planted yellow tulips in the fall so they’d bloom in the spring. Unlike other flowers, she thought their delicate stems seemed quick to bend, away from the sunlight, the birds, the rain—almost as if it were all too much to bear. If anything, the tulip was a sad flower.

“Do you love me?” she asked.

“You’re amazing.” He was always careful to use words like intoxicating, lovely or captivating to describe his feelings for her. It was true. He had never uttered the word love and her name in the same breath.

But she couldn’t think of his omissions, her stupid mistakes. She’d be leaving on Wednesday, in two days. She knew she wouldn’t see him again.

He didn't have any reason—business or otherwise—to ever be in Russia.

“Tulip, you're pensive again.”

She pressed her ear to his chest and waited for the familiar tick of his heart, reminding her of a time when they would be apart. Later, on the drive home she felt a boundary separating her from him, something as clear and hard as glass. It was the wall between countries, lives. It couldn't be crossed. It made her feel old.

* * *

Sometimes at night when Nick wasn't home from work and the rest of the family was busy, she'd go for a walk through the neighborhood, always careful to remember the street names so she could find her way home. The one thing she learned by peering into people's lives was that everybody had a secret.

Look at hers: Nick.

Haven: her marijuana habit.

Diane: her trips to the shopping mall where she'd unload her SUV the following morning as soon as Nick's Bentley pulled out of the garage.

And even people she didn't know: She once watched a skinny woman a few houses down the street stuff a half dozen white frosted cupcakes into her mouth, one after another, after another. She had counted.

And at another house: she had seen a man with gray hair whip the little girl, her long blonde hair falling over his lap as he struck her with his thick belt. And a few days later, the bruised girl was skipping rope in front of her house.

Maybe this was America: it was pretty, but it had secrets just like Russia. She felt the bruise America had left in her life.

Maybe everyone in the world possessed something dark that drove them to act in ways that they wouldn't otherwise. Maybe the difference between good and bad was not some dramatic action, but rather a choice. A small and insignificant choice. A simple yes instead of a no. A simple nod of the head instead of a shake.

When she returned from her walk, she knew what she was going to do. No one was home yet. She took the photo album down from the bookshelf. There was a picture of Nick as a teenager that she had wanted the moment she saw it. She slipped it out along with another one of him standing near the wing of an airplane, mugging for the camera. Then she took the picture of herself out of her pocket, one that he had taken of her naked in his office and another one they had taken of themselves naked and placed the two carefully into the slots. She closed the book and placed it back where it belonged.

She knew the twins or Haven wouldn't ever open the photo album—children never sat around looking at old pictures of themselves. That was an adult pastime. It would be fate whether it was Diane or Nick who one day would turn to the page and see them together, naked and happy.

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Sean Patrick Lyons / **Two Poems**

Digging Posts

Moving to the country after we married
was my wife's big idea. She wanted a home
where she could finally keep the horse
she'd boarded since sixth grade. Built a barn,
cleared a pasture, dug a fence—which was
the hardest part. Our land was full of rocks,
and each of the 40 posts needed a hole
four feet deep or else the earth would
spit them out during freeze-and-thaw.
My wife wondered about my two-and-a-
half-a-day pace. I told her *it's a goddamned*
160-foot tunnel I'm digging here. I'm like that
guy escaping Alcatraz with a fucking spoon.

Each morning began with a shovel
and the hope of hitting only clay and sand.
Then I'd hear that dull clang of a stone
too big for my spade. I'd play with it a while,
grunt, pick up the post hole digger,
absolutely worthless, then curse for having
to get the five-foot steel spike—
No, not the spike! Anything but the spike!—
which I'd thrust into the ground,
over and over, the bones in my hands rattling
together, until the rock broke.

After jimmying the pieces out with the shovel
I'd try to keep going with it, thinking
maybe I could sneak it past the rock gods,

whatever is up their ass, but soon enough—
Clang! So again: grunt, digger, curse, spike.
God, sometimes after a day of that,
my hands cramped so tightly I couldn't open
my fists, and I'd stand at the kitchen sink
for half an hour trying to loosen them
under hot water, looking out at the pile
of broken rocks I'd wrought. We used some
to mark the horse's grave when he died—
three weeks after I finished the fence
You have to be fucking kidding me.
I dug that hole with a backhoe
borrowed from the farmer next door.

What Sort of Life He Had

When my big brother was nine
my parents got him this St. Bernard
named Tiny. Sometimes he'd sit me up
on him, slip my hand under his collar
and have me ride him around like a horse.
But soon our parents said the dog
was too big for our five room ranch
so they gave him to some farmer
a few miles away in Bridgewater,
*Where he'll get all the space he needs
to run around and be happy.*
My brother stood in our driveway and cried
the day my father drove Tiny away in
his blue Ford Duster, but then I guess
that was it. At some point, we got a cat.

One night, a few years later,
not long before he died in a car wreck,
my brother was lying in his bunk
below me when suddenly he whispered,
You know, Tiny didn't go to any farm.

He said Dad probably took him
to the pound and they put him to sleep;
he just didn't want us to know. I asked
my brother how he knew, but all he said was
Shut up and go to sleep or I'll punch you.
We never talked about it again.

I stopped by my mother's for supper
last winter, and as we cleaned up we
got to talking about all our old family pets.
I mentioned what my brother said
about Tiny. She stopped, her face tightened
and she sank into a chair at the kitchen table.
No, no. There was a farmer. Out on old Route 28.
Her eyes searched the floor. *Why would he've
thought that? Why do you think he thought that?*
Sometimes now I think about Tiny
living just the next town over,
all the while my brother, in those last years of his life,
thinking he was dead, and I wonder
what sort of life he had out there on that farm.

YASSER EL-SAYED was born in Alexandria, Egypt, and grew up in North Africa, Europe and the United States. He is a physician on the faculty of Stanford University, and his specialty is high-risk obstetrics. His work has been published in *The Threshold*, *Beginnings* and *The Marlboro Review*. This is his second appearance in *The New Orphic Review*.

Dismembered

Yasser El-Sayed

IN EACH HAND Sef held a plastic bag with the body parts wrapped in formaldehyde-soaked cloth. The acrid smell burned his eyes and irritated his throat. Despite his best efforts at nonchalance, his gait was stiff and self-conscious. The car was just a few yards away, and as he approached it from the rear, he could see the back of his cousin Omar's head.

Sef had arrived from Glasgow, absent his luggage, a day earlier, and was still dressed in the navy blue Scottish public school blazer and gray pants he had chosen for the flight to Alexandria. He had seen other boys in the boarding school do the same thing on their way to Pakistan or India; as if the uniform offered a certain air of distinction on their arrival back home.

Omar caught sight of Sef in the rear-view mirror, jumped out the car and opened the trunk. "You gave her the money?" he asked. Sef nodded.

"No problems?"

"None," said Sef.

As planned, the cleaning lady was waiting for him at the back entrance of the dissection lab. He gave her the wad of bills and she handed him the bags. She was barefoot, dressed in a soiled cotton dress with a faded flower pattern and a scarf partially covering her hair. She seemed vaguely amused by the young man standing in front of her, although she said nothing.

Omar took the bags from Sef, and placed them in the trunk. They drove out of the university campus and onto Abou Eir Street.

"Again, I'm sorry to get you involved in this. I couldn't take the risk

of being seen. If there weren't so many students..." He paused for a moment. "It's the only way to get any time on the cadavers. I'm sure it's different in Glasgow," he added.

Sef took his cousin's comments to mean that not everyone had the privilege of a European education. Sef shrugged. "Maybe. I wouldn't know about medical school."

* * *

Sef had been eager to spend the summer break in Egypt. He remembered the time before his brother's death, before they all left Egypt. How different that time seemed in comparison; each memory distilled to a golden essence by the sheen of Mediterranean sunlight. The thought of splitting his time between his father's small apartment off the Great Western Road, and their old home on Mitre Road where his mother still resided after the separation, depressed him. He was sixteen and had become his parents' last faltering connection to each other. But he had not been back to Egypt since leaving six years earlier. His Arabic had faded, and he worried whether he could meaningfully reestablish the ties to the relatives he'd left behind. As a child he'd been closest to his older cousin Omar, and when they moved to Glasgow, he and Omar had maintained a correspondence. So when Omar's mother offered to have him stay with them in Alexandria for the summer, he accepted.

* * *

Once home in his parents' apartment, Omar spread out the body parts on an improvised workbench in the glass-enclosed balcony. The smell of formaldehyde saturated the air, and Sef pushed open a windowpane and inhaled the sea breeze. He could see the Mediterranean, frothy against an overcast sky. He turned back to where his cousin was working. The head was at the far end of the table. On one side, the face had been previously dissected, and shreds of leathery flesh dangled from a white cheekbone. The upper jaw was exposed through a gaping wound with a bright row of teeth flashing through. The other side of the face was shriveled like a raisin, intact except for an eyeball bleating out of its socket like something about to be born. In the middle of the table was the torso, still wrapped in cloth, and below that an arm and leg lay over each other in the shape of a cross. He couldn't tell whether the body parts belonged to a man or a woman, one individual or several.

Sef watched his cousin put on rubber gloves and, with pick-ups and a small retractor, start to identify the myriad muscles, vessels and tendons, matching his dissection to an open atlas at his side. After a few minutes, Sef had seen enough and went back into the apartment.

The apartment belonged to his father's sister. It was on the fourth floor of a hundred year old building two blocks in from the sea, and overlooked a busy commercial road of small, cavernous stores. The traffic started in the early morning, and the hum of cars didn't subside until

well past midnight. In the evening in bed, it felt as if he was suspended over the middle of the road.

His aunt raised the state of his parents' marriage almost immediately. When pressed he had replied that he didn't know. How could he know? He was in boarding school, and his parents lived apart. Nonetheless, a divorce would be unthinkable whatever the living arrangements, he was assured. "My brother would never allow it," his aunt declared. But what about his mother; what did she want? He couldn't answer. Her love had been Tarek, and he was gone.

One evening, a few days after he arrived, Sef and Omar drove to the western coast, an hour outside of Alexandria.

"You sure you want to do this?" said Omar.

Sef nodded.

Omar pulled the car off the road near a cluster of dilapidated limestone buildings that at one time had been British army barracks. The parked car's headlights reflected onto the murky black stretch of beach. Sef got out, and Omar watched him walk to the shoreline.

"It was right here," he called back to Omar who had climbed out of the car, and was peering at him over the car door. "This is where it happened."

* * *

When the diver carried Tarek's body out of the water, the wetsuit made him look like something only part human erupting from the sea, black like the death harbinger he had become. In his arms, Tarek's body was limp and crumpled, strangely pale. A bluish tinge on the feet and hands, and when Sef ran up to him, blue around the lips and jaw. For a moment, his father seemed frozen in place. Then his knees gave way beneath him, and he was face down on the ground, moaning and beating the hot sand with his fists. He was oblivious to anyone around him, to his youngest son crying next to him. He beat the ground as if to pound the undertow that had dragged his son down, as if to pound out of memory the world he had once constructed. And when he finally looked up at Sef, his face was distorted, caked with sand, almost unrecognizable.

* * *

Omar called to Sef. He had turned the headlights off, and in the moonlight all Sef could decipher was a vague outline of his cousin.

"One moment," he shouted back. A few minutes later he made his way back to the car.

"How much of this do you need?" Omar said.

"I'm done."

They drove back to Alexandria in silence. That night, Sef called his mother in Glasgow. It was late in the evening and Sef thought she sounded sleepy or perhaps she'd been drinking.

"Honey," she said. "How are you? How's auntie?"

"I'm alright. Everyone's fine."

"Are you having a nice time? How is Alexandria?"

"Mom, I went back to the beach."

"Yes. That's nice. Was it fun?"

"Mom, I went to *that* beach. Omar took me there."

"Why, Sef?"

"I asked him to."

She was silent for a moment. "Honey, you should call your father, he'd love to hear from you, too," she said before hanging up.

* * *

His mother wasn't there when Tarek drowned. She didn't like the beach. It was just the three of them, and they had fallen asleep under the hot sun. At some point Tarek must have decided to swim alone. Sef remembered waking up suddenly, his father asleep next to him, and Tarek nowhere to be seen. The beach was deserted. He looked out at the surf, and saw nothing but the glassy reflection of water. What had awakened him? Years later he would wonder whether he'd heard something; had Tarek called out to him? Screamed his name before being dragged down for the last time? "The sea here can be deceptively calm," the district police chief had told his father, just before the diver pulled Tarek's body out of the water.

* * *

His mother would rarely speak with Sef about that afternoon. Once she compared losing Tarek to having a chunk of flesh carved slowly off with a dull knife. In Glasgow, after his father moved out, for a while Sef slept next to her. Once he reached out and with his fingertips distractedly brushed her bare back where her nightgown dipped. She was asleep but instinctively moved away from his touch.

She brought home other men. Men she met at work or in the book club she had joined. She veered away from the ethnic types, with their olive skin like hers, and black eyes that failed to conceal the scorched light of their desperation. Once thinking she was crying, he knocked on her bedroom door, and the man who emerged was wrapped in a bed sheet, pink belly exposed, a small tuft of reddish blond hair at the breastbone. "It's alright kid," he said. "Sef," said his mother, sitting up on the bed, her shoulders bare, a blanket covering her breasts. "Everything's fine. Go to bed."

* * *

In the inflamed days of summer, the Corniche avenue snaking along Alexandria's coastline dominated his hours. To walk its length from Camp Caesar to San Stefano was to breathe in air with a stench of sulfur, salt saturated, and from somewhere else the smell of corn roasting on a grill. He was taken aback by the impression of foreignness ascribed to him. He looked no different than any number of teenagers he saw every day in

jeans and a t-shirt. But the question of his being from somewhere else kept being raised. At the Greco-Roman museum with Omar, the lady behind the booth wanted to charge him an additional tourist fee, until Omar intervened on his behalf. The roadside merchants along the Corniche would approach him in broken English trying to make a sale. When he responded in Arabic he saw a flicker of confusion cross their faces, but he took no pleasure in sabotaging their attempts at price gouging. Even Omar, in the midst of conversation, would sometimes pause and ask, “You are following what I’m saying, right?”

Sef would nod.

“You’ve been away for a while,” Omar said by way of explanation. “Somehow people sense that. Maybe it’s just something in the way you hold yourself. I’ve felt it, too. It’s nothing personal. It’s not like you look weird or anything.”

Mostly he was afflicted with a nagging anxiety, especially when it came to interacting with strangers. He would remind himself that he was born here, as were generations of his family before him. This was his city with a neighborhood that still carried his family name. But no matter how hard he tried, all that history seemed to have nothing to do with him. He would have preferred a less ambiguous place; either native son or tourist. This space in between left him with a nebulous longing. And with it came a hardening resentment towards his mother and father, and the dislocated moment they each separately inhabited.

There was a small café on the first floor of the San Stefano Hotel, situated on a rocky ledge overlooking the beach, its broad windows offering a view of a narrow strip of sand and two tiers of dilapidated cabins that had known better days. The café was air-conditioned and he and Omar would sit by the big windows and have coffee, cigarettes and a sampling of pastries.

“As far as I’m concerned, the biggest mistake was leaving at all,” said Omar, pulling on his cigarette. “Why live abroad, alone, away from family? Plus, they hate Arabs in England. I mean if they were so desperate to move, why not America?”

“Sure. Great idea. Especially now.”

“Fine. But why that drab, damp country? That’s not the place to start over.”

Later they went to the beach below the café for a swim. Omar swam ahead of him. It was overcast and in the distance the white-tipped crests of waves rolled into a thin spindle of sky. The sense of a low-hanging sky, collapsing, reminded Sef of a picture taken years before when he was a child, soon after arriving in Glasgow. It was winter, and he was in an empty field. At his side was his mother. They were both wrapped in heavy coats, and in the weak sunlight they stared into the camera with hollow-faced expressions. It must have been his father on the other side

of that camera, taking their picture. "Smile," he would have said to his two stunned fellow travelers, a trace of desperation in his voice, the once familiar now drifting out of focus.

Sef pushed out against a sudden shift in the current. He called out to Omar who turned and waved at him. For a moment he saw himself, a solitary figure, bobbing in the open swirl of sea. Water churned around him like small whirlpools drawing him into their own separate galaxies. A wave of panic seized him, and he started swimming back, cleaving the gray spaces, reaching for the shore.

* * *

On his first evening in Alexandria, his aunt had thrown a party in his honor. The entire family had been there. People he hadn't seen since childhood, faces he only vaguely remembered, names he'd forgotten. It became a joke, this lack of memory. "What's my name?" the random uncle would ask. "You have to remember me! I used to carry you on my shoulders in the sea. We'd go so deep you'd start to cry!" His aunt had prepared a feast, ceremoniously laid out on the dining table, and in the center a cake with the misspelled words, *Wellcom Home*.

"She never made him happy," his aunt had said of his mother during one of their late night conversations soon after Sef's arrival. She served him cucumber and cheese sandwiches and strong tea brought to a simmer over a gas burner. They sat eating at a stained kitchen table in her small kitchen.

"I was against the marriage from the beginning. She was a selfish woman. She was an only child. It made her that way. Nothing was ever good enough. After your brother died we all came forward, came together as a family should. But all she could talk about was leaving Egypt. She hated it. Couldn't stand living here another moment, she said. She harangued your father day and night. He needed his family at a time like that. She didn't have any family to speak of, so what did she care. But your father needed to be around his family, not lost in some foreign country, alone. And now look at them. Anyway, you should stay here. You don't need to go back. Stay here at least until the two of them work it out. You can share Omar's room. I'll talk to your father."

"Omar thinks we should have gone to America," he said to his aunt. "I'm thinking, why not? Maybe for college. I know someone at the boarding school who ended up at a university in Arizona."

"Arizona!" his aunt exclaimed. "I've never heard of the place. For God's sake, why not the moon?"

* * *

In Glasgow, before his father moved out, he remembered hearing a commotion in the living room and, climbing out of bed, saw his father standing in his pajamas, his hands over his ears. "I can't hear," his father said, speaking loudly. "I can't hear a thing." It must have been two in the morn-

ing, the look on his father's face disoriented. His mother was there, too, in her nightgown. She was speaking quietly, trying to pull his father's hands down. "It's not your fault," she said, gently prying his fingers away from his ears.

"I heard nothing," he said. "I never heard him. I swear it."

"I know, honey. I know," she said. She touched his face and something in her voice or her touch seemed to sap the energy out of him. He started to sob and she held onto him, stroking his back, whispering to him. She saw Sef then and tried to smile. "Your father's had a bad dream. That's all," she said.

* * *

The cleaning lady who had handed him the dismembered cadaver was waiting for him in the same place when he returned the bags. She looked at him quizzically, "You speak Arabic?"

Sef hesitated for a moment. "Sure," he replied.

"Tell your friend he's five pounds short," she said.

Sef nodded.

"You're not Egyptian, are you?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," said Sef, trying not to sound defensive. The shredded body parts felt heavy in his hands. They weighed him down. He wanted urgently to be rid of them.

"I don't know?" she said doubtfully. "You look like a Khawagga. Maybe Greek or Italian. I used to work for one of those families, you know." She took the bags from Sef. "Five pounds more," she said, before closing the door of the lab.

"I gave her what we agreed on," said Omar after Sef told him of the cleaning lady's demand. "I'll deal with her. Did she say anything else?"

"She said I looked foreign."

"You didn't start talking, did you?" asked Omar. "I don't need her knowing more about me than absolutely necessary."

"No," said Sef. "I just handed her the bags."

"She should mind her own business," said Omar. "Well, you're leaving soon, anyway. It doesn't matter. They'll never track us down."

"Not a chance."

"You'll disappear into that wide open America. Our very own nomad," said Omar.

"Without a trace," said Sef, and saw before him a fractured journey under the long shadow of arrival.

MICHAEL BULLOCK is the author of more than fifty volumes of verse and prose, and has translated at least 200 books from the German, French and Italian. His work is the subject of a 340-page critical study by Jack Stewart, *The Incandescent Word: the Poetic Vision of Michael Bullock*. In April 2008, he celebrated his 90th birthday with the publication of *Seasons: Poems of the Turning Year* (Rainbird Press, Vancouver). He now lives in the UK.

Michael Bullock / **Four Poems**

Dream Idol

for Wenting Liao

Dream idol flexes her wing
and descends to earth
a cloud of birds rise
and hover overhead
in mingled fear and fascination
when I approach she vanishes
leaving the garden filled with emptiness

Enchanted Garden

In this green womb
the world is far away
a distant whisper
to which I close my ears
In this enchanted space
I am invulnerable

Ringdove

The ringdove is playing a cello on the roof
its pale mauve notes
fill the garden
with sweet sorrow
Poems come fluttering down from above
exotic birds I capture
and imprison
in a paper cage

Moonlight

The moon festoons the trees
with strips of white silk
stripes the paths with light
and sets the flowers on fire
The moon has taken possession of the garden

JANE COVERNTON is a Vancouver writer. This piece is excerpted from her new novel, *Cutlass Time*, which is available from www.lulu.com or by writing janeco@vcn.bc.ca. Her book, *a body of poems*, is available at the same sites, as is her novel about the sixties, *Raindrops and Smoke*. Her piece, “A Handmade Life,” was published in the Fall 1999 issue of *The New Orphic Review*.

Hunger (War)

Jane Covernton

THE WIND is up. The shutters creak. It’s early.

Peter’s up, pulling on his pants with his back to her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Soon come.”

“Where’re you going?”

“Down by seaside.” And he’s gone.

The palm leaves crash together in the wind. She dresses and makes instant coffee, thinking she’ll use the early morning to work—since she’s up. But the wind rattles her paper and flaps her shirt. She stands on the porch, holding down the paper, watching the churning sea. Something’s wrong. She goes down to the beach.

Peter’s there, standing with a group—men, women, children—looking out to sea. The waves are crashing against the bamboo hut and breaking over the wood floor. She stands beside Peter.

“Henry not back.”

“Oh.” She feels herself lifted by the waves and the wind, crashed down against the beach.

She stands with them, shading her eyes, looking east into the early morning light across the water, trying to see a speck of boat in the tossing sea.

“Storm come up fast, was like glass when dey went.” Peter smooths his hand through the air.

A bank of clouds gathers over the horizon. Ten people on the beach watch the rain falling out to sea. They rise and fall with the waves, trying to see. They wait. The light changes to stormy yellow as clouds cross the sun. They wait.

One of the men moves up the beach. He turns to the man beside him and says something. They both look out. Lizbeth tries to see where they're looking. The small crowd shifts with the waves, up the beach. Suddenly one of the women shouts and points, "There, there."

Lizbeth looks and looks. Finally she sees it, the tiny boat sliding down the trough of a wave. Then it's gone for a long time. Then, suddenly again, the boat's in full view, heaving up and down through the waves.

The men on the beach wade out into the sea, wetting their pants to the waist. The boat slides down a wave towards them. Henry leaps out of the pointed bow into waist-deep water and guides the wooden boat into the men's hands. Their muscles cord as they heave it up on the beach. One of the fishermen, short, broad and strong, lifts the motor off the boat onto his shoulder and the rest of them haul the boat into the long grass and cover it with palm leaves. The three fishermen laugh and stand quiet for a moment looking out to stormy sea, then carry their gear off through the path along the shore.

When it starts raining on the shore, she's on the porch with the children. They scramble to get the cushions in off the wicker couches and then stand there watching together. Rain, rain, a tropical storm. She's exhilarated by the strong weather. And chilled.

Suddenly Peter leaps out of the rain. He takes off his wet shirt and goes into the house. A moment later, he's back with the towel she tried to get him to take home, a symbol of her battle to stay independent. He says they can smoke on the porch cuz the rain will carry the smell down into the ground. They smoke and smoke while the rain falls straight down.

At noon, Peter says, "Eat now." A command.

"Damn it. You."

But the children are still there too. Dorothy's sick, not coming today. With bad grace, Lizbeth makes thin soup on the gas stove and they sit, a sour pretend family: man, woman, and three kids, eating at the polished oak table while the rain falls.

"More," says Peter.

"That's all there is." She gets up and starts clearing away the bowls. She's already told him she can't carry him, she won't. Why do men always move in on her?

They go back on the verandah and watch the rain all afternoon, smoking and smoking and smoking. The children go home.

Night is falling. The electricity's off. He's lying across the couch, looking grey. His eyes are dulled and red from smoking so much. His voice is a moan: "Gi' me two dollars."

Jesus, she thinks, "What for?"

"To eat."

"Why don't you go to your house and eat?" Why do we have to play this game? she wonders.

“Food gone.”

“When?”

“Today. All gone. Money gone.”

And he’s lying on the couch. Thunder rolls in off the sea. He can barely open his eyes. He’s twitching and groaning.

Suddenly Lizbeth realizes: the reason he’s asking for food is that he’s hungry.

Lightning flashes. Money flies back and forth. Then they’re in the dark kitchen, their faces lit by the blue flame as she cooks eggs hard. He will only eat one.

They go to bed. The darkness is solid, the thunder still rolling.

“Gi’ me two hundred dollars, Lissy.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Why should I?”

He wants to buy a boat, be a fisherman. Like Henry.

“No. I can’t give you two hundred dollars.” Thunder rolls.

“You stingy, Lissy. Stingy stingy woman.”

“The money I have has to last me.”

And he’s begging and crying, darkness all around them. She can’t see his dark face in the dark night. He’s thrashing on the bed next to her, hurting, can’t lie still. Extortion, she thinks, angry. Thunder rolling.

“Jesus Christ, Peter. Don’t come to bed hungry and demand two hundred dollars. Eat something first. I’m not going to talk about it. I don’t do business in bed.”

“Make war in bed.”

The shock: the man is starving, he is crying, he is begging, he is angry. Thunder and lightning.

She’s never been so lost, so at sea.

Finally just to stop this, stop it now, she says, “Oh, all right. You can have two hundred dollars.”

But he doesn’t stop. He doesn’t believe her. He harasses her, presses her.

“Stop,” she shouts. “Stop. You frighten me. You can have two hundred dollars. Okay?”

He sleeps. She lies awake beside him. He grinds his teeth. Grinding and grinding. “Peter, Peter,” she whispers into the dark. “Stop grinding your teeth.” Grinding and grinding. She puts her hand against his jaw. She can’t stop him.

He wants to eat me.

She gets up into the most complete darkness she has ever known. She tries the light switch. Electricity still off. Then feels her way along the walls to the kitchen. Blindly, she feels for the hard-boiled eggs, the bread. Blindly, she makes a sandwich. She carefully cuts it in the dark, pours a

glass of fresh lime juice Peter squeezed for her, and carefully feels her way back to the bedroom.

“Peter.” She shakes him. “You must eat.” Shakes him awake, takes his hand and guides it to the sandwich.

He rolls away from her, mumbles, “I’m not hungry. You eat it.” She can’t go all the way back to the kitchen. She feels her way to the cupboard where she keeps her flute and hopes the rats don’t know how to get in. She locks the sandwich in the cupboard and sits on the chair by the bed, stroking his forehead.

Egg sandwich. Egg sandwich. Thunder rolling rolling rolling all the day the night dark no electricity teeth grinding he wants to eat me crying crying.

The next day is Jamaican Independence Day, hot and sunny, the beach washed clean, all emotions clear. The Pope died sometime during the storm. Peter’s normal. Lizbeth’s ashamed she could let a man starve in her bed when she has three thousand dollars. There’s a man on the beach, a friend of Peter’s, up from Kingston for the holiday, raising up his kids himself. Lizbeth thinks she understands his soft patois, talking about how people should share. She thinks he’s said something incredibly profound but when she tries to bring it back, it’s like a memory of the storm.

She goes into town to the cold bank and gets two hundred dollars for Peter. She gives him forty dollars more and tells him to buy food. He goes in and comes back with a carton of canned food including canned fruit. Lizbeth can’t believe he’d buy canned fruit when there’s fruit falling off the trees everywhere. They fight again. Dorothy comes in and laughs, “Well, we doan get to taste peaches much, Lissy.” And Lizbeth has to learn again the lesson: when you give money away, you can’t control how people will spend it.

The storm brings a storm of sickness down on Dorothy and she goes to bed. Peter takes over cooking for Lizbeth. He makes her fish tea from fish he buys on the beach in the morning. It’s hot and spicy, and shared with the guys who hang out on the steps with them.

They go up into the hills to pick gully beans, up into deep green spicy woods with the sun hot in dappled patches on the men’s glistening backs, with strange birds screeching and goats neighing loudly in the afternoon air. Peter makes rundown, boiling the gully beans all afternoon in coconut juice from coconuts cut with his cutlass from the tree in the yard. He shares out eight spicy plates down to seaside. Everyone gets fed with Peter’s sure hand.

Five of them sit down to eat on the shady side porch in the late afternoon. Mother Higgins is speaking in tongues through the trees. Peter shares out the food bought by Lizbeth, cooked by him. A plate’s gone up the road to Paula. Later Henry will do the dishes. Peter says about the boys they eat with, “They doan eat, Lissy, save once a day with us.”

Lizbeth says grace.

Now, Lizbeth remembers:

I can't feed you. I can't feed you.

Resistance, then sweet release. The hills, long green branches looping down, bananas, gully beans, red berries, spices, wild faces, wild faces.

Let the thunder roll. The man remains composed, head bowed, silently praying, sitting in the long dew grass. The sun it keepa shinin' the rain it keepa fallin'. Canned food. Canned food.

* * *

Lizbeth remembers as night falls on the city at the edge of the continent. She can just see the edge of grey ocean across the city and under the mountains misted with grey and startling pink evening light. Lizbeth remembers and sends him a message through the air as she leans out the window:

I wish I hadn't lost you. I wish you'd answer. Remember you wanted me to be your wife, raising pigs and coffee-coloured children? Then your letters: hard to hear your voice. You spent the money I left. It was meant to buy a boat so you could be a fisherman like Henry. You fixed up the dance hall for your sister's wedding. I thought: oh well, if you'd been a fisherman, dancing out each morning before first light, selling the dappled pink and green catch on the dreaming beach and eating fish tea in the noon almond shade each day, you might have drowned in one of the sudden storms or had your toe or finger bitten off by a writhing strong, ridiculous conger eel.

Then, Peter, the night reeled around your hunger. Then, the next day on the sunny beach again, I thought I held understanding for a moment in my mind, and grace.

Now Peter, the memories are rolling over me and I'm looking again for that understanding, that grace. And this time I don't want to let it slip away.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. On occasion, his reviews appear in *Books in Canada*.

Cutlass Time: A Review

Ernest Hekkanen

Cutlass Time

by Jane Covernton

Calendula Farms

266 pages, \$23.00

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On the surface, *Cutlass Time* by Jane Covernton might fit into the category called ‘mid-life female literature’. Lizbeth Hawkins loses her lawyer husband when they plummet in their car over a cliff after failing to negotiate a turn on an icy mountain road. The loss of her husband Max disorients her; she is set adrift, like flotsam, at the mercy of emotional currents that carry her here and then there.

The novel opens with Lizbeth going to see a lawyer to find out what is in her husband’s will. She trips on a pothole in the gray pavement of a downtown Vancouver street and falls on her hands and knees. This ‘fall’ is symbolic of how *Cutlass Time* will unfold, for she immediately falls into reveries about the past. Indeed, one of the many strengths of this novel has to do with Covernton’s ability to travel back and forth through time without losing the reader; indeed, Lizbeth’s past, which begins to catch up with her shortly after her initial fall, could be seen as a parallel narrative.

On a walk along the seawall around Stanley Park, she thinks: “His skin was as my skin. Now I have no skin. His skin has been torn from me.” In many ways, *Cutlass Time* is about Lizbeth acquiring a new skin, one she will feel comfortable in, one that will allow her to endure the abrasions of life.

Although a successful music therapist and teacher, one who is on bereavement leave, she no longer knows what to do with her life. Her

uncertainty becomes acutely palpable after discovering that her husband's will has set her up for life, which magnifies her sense of guilt. Much of her grief-and-guilt work takes place while tending to her backyard garden where she tries to put things in order, as it were, although people and events constantly impinge on her. While recovering from her recent loss, as well as further losses soon to come down the pike, she mentally returns to Jamaica where, in the 1970s, she spent several idyllic months after ending her career with a semi-successful rock band.

Jamaica, despite its wrenching poverty, is paradise to her. In a myriad flashbacks that occur during the novel, we are filled in on an intimate relationship she had with Peter, a native to that island. She thinks of him often, "cutlass in hand, chopping coconuts, cutting grass, working hard at living," while she composes music on the terrace of a rented house. The cutlass is both a weapon and a tool, a dangerous implement that cuts both ways—through past and present, through delusions and realities, and this is the work being done by our protagonist.

Over the course of the novel, Lizbeth's desire to reunite with Peter and the past he now represents to her—when life, on the surface, seemed so much simpler—she fires off several letters in hopes of picking up her life where she has put it down over a decade before, all in a frantic attempt to acquire some purchase on life.

Without giving away the ending, or the many wrong turns she takes in order to find intimacy and a path through life, it's fair to say that she finally decides upon a course of action.

I'm amazed *Cutlass Time* wasn't picked up by a large publisher here in Canada. Had it been written by Alice Munro, it would be hailed as a masterpiece.

LOU VOLPENTESTA was born in Italy in 1950, migrated to Canada in 1953, and currently resides in Toronto. He has been writing fiction since 1985. Before that he spent eight years with a Canadian trade magazine, including five as editor. His short fiction has appeared in several magazines in Canada and the U.S. His other passions include travel, photography and opera.

A Walk in the Park

Lou Volpentesta

IT WAS NOT the best of days to be strolling through High Park. The air was cold and penetratingly damp, the sky rat-gray and oppressive, and a blanket of soggy, grime-speckled snow covered the ground. But I had just been jerked out of a fitful sleep by an overwhelming dread and the park seemed to offer refuge. I also felt the need for companionship, so I called on my good friend, Mike, to join me.

As we ambled through the woods, unnaturally silent except for the occasional chirping of hungry starlings, neither of us spoke, for fear of disturbing the mood. In truth, there was no need for conversation; it was as if our brains had melded into one. Even our route seemed predestined.

Soon I became aware that my senses were heightened to an almost frightening degree. Nothing escaped my attention. This was especially true of my olfactory powers; my nostrils were assailed by a myriad smells, many of them strange and unrecognizable.

We hurried through the grim, deserted playground, avoiding the ghosts of children who never got to grow up, and soon arrived at the base of a steep hill. We stopped for a cigarette and then began to clamber up the slippery embankment. On reaching the summit, we found our way barred by an eight-foot-high wire-mesh fence.

There was no question of altering our route to find a gap or a gate; Mike and I were feeling too lethargic and unidirectional to consider a detour. There had to be another way. We turned and gaped at each other, our brows knit in concentration.

The solution obviously struck us at the same instant because we both grinned. Facing the fence, we closed our eyes and used the power of our

combined wills to loosen the binds of our corporeality. Bit by bit, our bodies began to disassemble, breaking down into their constituent molecules.

A few seconds later, we were standing on the opposite side of the fence, whole again. Taking deep, satisfied breaths, we continued on our way.

I soon began to fixate on the steam issuing in great puffs from my nostrils, and on the sound of the snow crunching beneath my feet. I happened to glance down at my fur-covered boots, then at my smooth suede gloves. For some reason, these impressions triggered an intense yet inexplicable yearning. I stopped, closed my eyes, and surrendered to the emotion. When I opened them again, I discovered that I had undergone a startling metamorphosis. I had turned into a rabbit.

A surge of joy rushed through my lithe, muscular body. My God, I thought, brimming with vigor, what it is to be wild and free! To be motivated solely by instinct! I jumped and ran and gamboled through the snow with complete abandon, darting expertly around shrubs and tree trunks, my ears pricked and my eyes scanning the terrain, ever alert to the presence of food or danger. I had never felt such exhilaration.

Unfortunately, a loud roar brought my reverie to a shuddering end. I looked up and saw a silver cross gliding through the heavens. Then it stopped, directly above us, and the woods were once again enveloped in silence.

Puzzled, yet strangely indifferent, Mike and I resumed walking.

A few minutes later, I glanced up again. The silver cross was still there, transfixed in the sky like a desiccated butterfly in a specimen box.

“Mike?”

Startled by the sound of my voice, he stopped and turned toward me.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing.

He looked up and squinted. “A plane, I would imagine.”

“Why isn’t it moving?”

“It is, but only when we’re not looking.”

“Do you think it’s following us?”

“Could be, but I wouldn’t worry about it. There’s nowhere to land.”

True enough, I thought, nodding.

We soon came to a road. After glancing in both directions, we decided to head north, toward the park’s tiny zoo. As we drew nearer, a vague uneasiness caused me to hesitate, but Mike didn’t seem to be affected so I followed him to the yak compound. Most of the beasts stood huddled together in a corner, their fur wet, dirty and matted. The smell of urine and faeces was overpowering.

We moved on to the bighorn sheep. One of the creatures stood near the fence, absently chewing on a clump of weeds. On hearing our approach, it raised its head and gazed at us with large, accusing eyes. I

knew it had something to say, so I tuned in to its wavelength.

What the hell are you looking at? It's bad enough that we're forced to live in this squalid prison without also having to endure being stared at by the likes of you. God, you humans are so arrogant. Evolution provides you with opposable thumbs and the power of speech and right away you proclaim yourselves stewards of all living things. Well, I hate to pop your balloon, but the last time I looked you were doing a crappy job. Too bad that large brain of yours didn't endow you with more self-awareness. Then perhaps you'd realize that until your kind came along, nature was in balance. All living things took what they needed and moved on. Now we're at the mercy of beings who consume or destroy everything in their path and whose greatest accomplishment is making it through another day without slaughtering each other.

The animal bolted away with a snort and joined the rest of the flock on a rocky knoll at the rear of the compound. As I mulled over its bitter words, an alarm went off in my head, warning me that if I delved too deeply into the moral issues the creature had raised I would eventually begin to think about God and “The Meaning of Life.” But since God—presuming such an entity exists—is unknowable and life appears to have no discernible meaning, except continuation of the species, such thoughts would only lead me into a dialectical maze from which there is no escape.

Shuddering, I looked at Mike, who signaled his understanding with a reassuring wink. We turned and went back the way we had come.

We exited the park about 15 minutes later. The transition from bucolic calm to frenzied urban chaos was staggering. It was like looking at hell through a kaleidoscope. Buildings loomed threateningly and everything moved at twice its normal speed, including the people, an odd mixture of zombies, Vikings, and hooded Druid priests, their bodies distorted like reflections in a funhouse mirror.

As I stood there, stunned, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. I looked up at the web-like tangle of telephone, hydro, and street-car cables and thought I saw something huge, black, and bristly dart behind a rooftop billboard. Was that a pair of feelers wiggling in the air?

Not wanting to pursue that particular line of reasoning, my mind began to tune out the external world and burrow inward, seeking a more tranquil plane.

Mike nudged me in the ribs with his elbow, giving me a start. I had forgotten about him. It seemed our psychic link was not as effective amid all the noise and confusion. Patting him on the arm, I lowered my head, strode across the intersection, and headed east along Queen Street.

A short while later, we stopped in front of a travel agency to gaze at the colorful posters taped to the front window. One in particular caught my eye. It depicted two sarong-clad Tahitian beauties standing under a

palm tree on a deserted, white sand beach.

As I stared longingly at the image, I began to hear the gentle lapping of the waves and felt the warmth of the sun and the fresh ocean breeze caressing my skin. Just then, one of the girls, conscious of being stared at, placed her delicate hand over her mouth and giggled. Her companion smiled and beckoned me to join them. I yearned to do so, but I knew the distance between us was too great. Sighing, I waved and walked away. Mike lingered a moment, then followed.

By the time we got to Roncesvalles Avenue, where we stopped to wait for the light to change, my mind was comfortably wrapped in a warm insular cocoon. Moments later, I was startled back to the external world by a metallic scraping sound. I glanced over my shoulder and watched as a Red Rocket rumbled to a stop and disgorged a group of passengers. Without the slightest hesitation, and not knowing why, I climbed on board.

As the doors swung shut, I knew I had forgotten something. I turned around. Mike stood on the sidewalk, gaping up at me in confusion. I recognized his face, but couldn't place him in any meaningful context. Yet I sensed he represented an important link and that it was imperative I get back to him.

Striding past the pilot, who started jabbering at me, I hurried down the aisle to the center doors and waited for them to open. But it was too late; we were moving. I gazed at Mike until he had disappeared from view, then I walked to the back and slumped down onto a seat. Evidently, it was my destiny to ride the Red Rocket to heaven or hell, or wherever else it was bound.

The pilot had other ideas. Mumbling under his breath, he levitated off his seat and floated down the aisle toward me.

"Didn't you forget something, buddy?"

I gaped at him, uncomprehending.

"Your fare."

"I try to be."

"Oh, a wise guy, eh? Let's see how smart—"

A middle-aged black woman who was sitting across from me nudged the pilot aside and touched my arm. "Do you need some money, son?"

Money, I understood. Sticking my hand in my pocket, I pulled out a bunch of coins and cupped them in my palm. The pilot growled, picked out the necessary amount, and returned to the cockpit.

I smiled at the black woman—who had deep emerald green eyes and the smoothest, most beautiful skin I'd ever seen—and she smiled right back, revealing a row of perfect white teeth.

But as I held her gaze, I noticed a wearied sadness behind the smile; a sadness that spoke of hardship and intolerance. I began to feel an overpowering empathy for this woman. She became an amalgam of everyone

I had ever loved and everyone who had ever suffered.

My god, I thought, forgetting my previous warning about attempts at existential profundity, why are human beings so obsessed with superficialities? Instead of spending our lives striving to maximize our individual potential, we waste our time raging about nonsense like race, color, creed, and nationality. As if any of those things changed the fact that we're all created from the same genetic blueprint.

Waves of emotion began to wash over me, building upon each other until the pressure became unbearable. In a broken voice, I began to pour out a stream of homilies, about love, tolerance, equality, and all the other ideals we aspire to during our saner moments.

While most of my fellow passengers turned to gape at me in alarm, the black woman hurried to my side and stroked my face. I leaned my head on her shoulder and began to sob, uncontrollably.

The pilot, a practical man who had a schedule to maintain, must've concluded that anyone blubbering about love to complete strangers had to be a dangerous psychopath. He landed the rocket and hurried off to seek assistance.

When he finally returned—I had no idea how long he'd been gone since time had lost all meaning—he was followed by two burly men dressed in matching blue uniforms. The newcomers gently took hold of my arms, lifted me to my feet, and led me toward the exit, cooing encouragement. I turned for a final look at my friend. She smiled, waved, and advised me not to worry.

My new companions led me onto the sidewalk, where we were met by another two men in blue. I was then escorted through a steel gate, down a winding, tree-lined path, and into the lobby of a massive red brick building.

Two men in white joined the four men in blue. Together, they maneuvered me into a tiny room and plunked me onto a chair. I looked around in confusion. My six escorts were all talking at the same time, to me and to each other. It sounded like Chinese.

They stopped when another man in a slightly different white uniform entered the room. After peering at me over the rim of his glasses, the newcomer held up a long, pointed object and muttered something to his colleagues, who immediately pulled me out of my chair and began to fumble with my belt buckle.

Br-r-ringgg!

My internal alarm again. Not knowing what my captors had in mind, I resisted, violently. And the more I resisted, the rougher they got.

A stinging blow to the bridge of my nose filled my eyes with stars, then with tears. Bleeding profusely over all and sundry, I was picked up and slammed face down onto a flat surface. My captors were still yapping at me in that same incomprehensible tongue.

Something—it felt like a mosquito bite—pinched my right buttock. Slowly, gratefully, I drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

I blinked several times but the cobwebs that covered my eyes wouldn't budge. There was a thumping in my skull and a pressure behind my eyes that had me teetering on the brink of nausea. I'd never liked roller coasters, and this one was all steep drops and hairpin curves. I wanted to scream at someone, anyone, to stop the ride, but the words wouldn't come.

Eventually, the cobwebs dissipated and my equilibrium returned. After waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dark—mitigated somewhat by a sliver of light under the door—I looked around and saw that I was lying in a cramped, high-ceilinged, windowless room. I turned my head. There was another bed, unoccupied, propped up against the opposite wall.

I took a deep breath and concentrated. I recalled being in High Park with Mike. Then what? We started walking along Queen Street. That's when I left Mike and got on a streetcar. I started to cry and was comforted by a black woman. What the devil was I crying about? No idea. The police arrived and hauled me off the streetcar. After that, oblivion. Not that it mattered. I had more immediate concerns. Like where the hell was I, for instance.

I tried to sit up but couldn't. I raised my head and was discomfited to see that my arms were clamped to the bed. Further attempts at movement made me realize my entire body was strapped down. As the first icy fingers of fear crept up my spine, I began to strain against my bonds.

"You'll only hurt yourself."

My heart leapt into my throat. "What the—" I muttered, craning my head backward toward the corner where the speaker's voice had originated. I could barely make out a pair of wide, staring eyes.

"It's okay," said the voice. "Nobody's gonna hurt ya."

"Where am I?"

"Hospital."

"Turn the light on, will ya."

I heard footsteps pad across the room. There was a click, then a burst of fluorescent light. I had to shut my eyes.

When I opened them again, I saw a 13- or 14-year-old kid standing near the door, his eyes downcast and his arms hanging limply by his sides.

"Why am I strapped down?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Get the damn things off me, will ya."

"Can't."

"Then get someone who can!"

He didn't budge.

"Please? I hate being tied up like this."

He rocked on his heels a couple of times, then finally pulled open the door and left.

He returned a few minutes later, followed by a male orderly.

“How you feelin’?” asked the orderly.

“Like shit. Now please undo these bloody straps.”

After he did so, I sat up, groggily, and took a deep breath.

“What hospital is this?” I asked.

“Queen Street Psychiatric.”

“You’re kidding.”

The orderly shook his head. “The streetcar you were on when the police were called was stopped right out front.”

How convenient, I thought. I became aware of a hard crust in my right nostril and gingerly probed it with my index finger.

“That was an accident,” said the orderly. “We were trying to get your pants down to administer a sedative, but you went ballistic. It took six of us to finally get you onto a gurney.”

I looked away, embarrassed. “What time is it?”

The orderly looked at his watch. “Eleven o’clock.”

“Shit, it’s late! I gotta get home.”

“In the *morning*.”

“Aw, man. What day?”

“Sunday.”

I stood up with a groan. “How do I get outta this place?”

“You can’t leave until a doctor checks you out.”

“I’m fine, really. I just kinda lost control for a while. It happens sometimes, when I’m overwhelmed by . . . possibilities.”

The orderly arched an eyebrow, and then shrugged. “Those are the rules.”

I gritted my teeth. “When can I see this doctor?”

“I’ll let him know you’re awake. It shouldn’t take too long.”

Feeling a sudden urge for a cigarette, I looked around the room for my coat. But I couldn’t find it, or my boots. “Where’s my stuff?” I asked.

The orderly pointed to a drawer under the bed.

I pulled it open and took my cigarettes out of my coat pocket. I placed one in my mouth and reached into my pants for my lighter.

“If you want to smoke,” said the orderly, “you’ll have to go to the common room.”

“Where the hell is that?”

“Peter will take you while I go talk to the doctor.”

I turned to my enigmatic roommate and frowned. After putting on my boots, the three of us walked out into the corridor. The orderly turned left while Peter and I turned right.

After five minutes of zigging and zagging, we arrived at the entrance to the common room, which turned out to be over-lit and cavernous. It

contained a few dozen randomly placed card tables and folding chairs, as well as a number of couches lining the walls. There were also a couple of TV sets.

I lit my cigarette and nervously eyed the inmates of this strange and disquieting place. I spotted a teenage girl leaning against the right wall, grinding her teeth so fiercely I thought they were going to shatter. Nearby, a grizzled old man sat alone on a couch, methodically rocking back and forth while spewing gibberish. Across the room, a middle-aged woman with haunted eyes was silently walking in tight circles.

Someone touched my arm, causing me to almost jump out of my pants. Turning around, I found myself gazing up at a tall scarecrow of a man who was grinning at me with a chapped, gap-toothed mouth.

“Gimme a smoke,” he demanded.

“Sure,” I replied, nervously taking one out of the package.

Within seconds, a swarm of grasping, gibbering creatures, all clamoring for a cigarette, engulfed me. I hurled the package into their midst and jumped back. I looked for Peter, but he was gone. Panic-stricken, I turned and hurried to my room.

Peter was sitting on the floor in the corner.

I frowned and stretched out on my bed. “Man,” I said, after my heart rate had turned to normal, “this place gives me the willies.”

Peter’s eyes remained lowered.

I shifted onto my side and studied his face. He was a good-looking kid, with long auburn hair, parted in the middle, and wide brown eyes. Poor little guy, I thought, curious about the nature of his affliction. He didn’t appear to be suffering from the kind of motor anxiety exhibited by the others.

“Hey, Peter.”

He blinked, but kept his eyes averted.

“What are you in here for?”

“I’m sick.”

“I know, but what’s the problem *exactly*?”

“I’m sick.”

I decided to try a different tack. “How long have you been in here?”

He shrugged.

“Any idea when you’re getting out?”

“Don’t wanna go.”

Just then, the orderly returned and told me the doctor was ready to see me. Grabbing my coat, I looked at Peter one last time, sighed, and shuffled off.

After a grueling half hour of trying to prove I was ‘normal’—a task that is exceedingly more difficult than it sounds—I was once again an inhabitant of the ‘real’ world. True, it’s rife with poverty, violence, greed, and corruption, but other than self-extinction, or taking up permanent

residence in the state of madness, where else is there to go?

COURTNEY WALSH is a retired high school teacher who, having tried for thirty years to get adolescents to think and imagine, is now trying to do the same for himself. He looks forward to the time when he will have written enough good stories for a collection, perhaps even including one or two stories that are teen-free. Meanwhile he bides his time as a villager in the foothills of the Adirondack Mts in upstate New York.

Get the Picture

Courtney Walsh

A FEW MINUTES ago, my wife Audrey stopped yelling long enough to get in her car. This was the first time she had seen our home since the propane tank exploded Saturday. Her car window came down. “Just look at you,” she said in a tone that was anything but sympathetic. At the hospital, they had told me I had been lucky to get out of the house alive. Our living room and dining room were blackened, the furniture destroyed, the kitchen and even part of the upstairs damaged by smoke. Since the accident, my family had gone into hate mode. My 16-year old, Zoe, wouldn’t even talk to me.

“I’m going for a walk,” I told my wife, but she was already halfway down the driveway. I left my Toyota parked outside the garage and headed for the canal.

Over the weekend, 90 mile-an-hour wind gusts had scoured the village and knocked out power for half of Washington County, leaving fractured tree limbs strewn over the canal path. The sun was out now, but it was very cold and a thin layer of snow covered everything like powdered sugar. Pulling my hat down over my ears and feeling through my gloves the familiar shape of the digital camera in my jacket pocket, I skirted around a fallen locust tree and got back on the cinder path. I smelled wood smoke, probably coming from River Street, across the icy canal. If the crews didn’t get power back soon, people would be over here with their chainsaws.

Tomorrow I’d have to miss work. My boss wasn’t very happy about it, but I needed to be home when the insurance adjuster came to assess the damage from the fire. At least by then, we might have electricity.

What was left of my beard itched fiercely, and I kept scratching at it.

Could you capture stress in pixels, I wondered? Out came the camera. Holding it at arm's length and trying to look as calm as I wished I were, I snapped a photo of myself and then zoomed in on my image in the viewfinder. The creature I saw had a sunburned and blistered skin. Looking at myself made my face hurt all over again, almost as much as when the pain killers had worn off. The eyebrows were singed away, and a purple burn, smeared with antibacterial ointment, splotted my cheek. Now I knew why Zoe wouldn't look at me, why Audrey couldn't look without grimacing.

I walked to the first bend in the canal as it heads toward Glen Falls. In a narrow channel of water between the ice and the bank of the canal, two ducks swam.

Poich, poich, I quacked. The pair turned slowly in the dark water like ballerinas, climbed onto the ice and began to waddle toward me. In the past, the ducks had either ignored my call or paddled away. But now others were arriving, landing in the open water with a swoosh or skidding across the ice on their rumps. Soon, a dozen or more had gathered on the edge of the embankment.

"They're hungry," came a voice from behind me.

I spun around to see a short woman holding a paper bag. "You shouldn't scare people like that," I told her.

"You sounded like one of the ducks," she said. She was bundled up in a navy pea coat. Wisps of reddish hair showed under her ski cap. Her face was oddly pretty: round, pale, her eyes the color of malachite. When I told her that I was a duck in my former life, she smiled wryly and said she didn't believe that. "What happened to your face?" she said. An accident, I said. One of those little propane burners had taken out my living room. Her eyes flickered, widened. "You're Phil Conway."

"How did you know that?"

"Your family goes to St. Rose," she told me, and I informed her I had gone there myself when I was young. For years and years, Catholic kids had attended classes taught by nuns in the brick building adjacent to the old stone church on Lafayette Street.

She had been three years behind me, she said, but she knew me by reputation. Everyone said I was artistic. My reputation wasn't what it used to be, I said. I willed my hands not to scratch my face, but my restless feet shuffled, making scraping sounds on the icy cinder path.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"A nun," she said.

A nun! What had my family been saying about me at St. Rose? As if she'd read my mind, she said that they loved Zoe, that she was an extremely bright and capable young woman. She reached into the paper bag and pulled out a fistful of breadcrumbs.

I held out my hands in exasperation and told her I felt like Audrey

and Zoe were blaming me personally. They had gone to Troy Saturday for Zoe's track meet. Jesus, it was 35 degrees in the house, even with the fire going, I told her. The propane burner wasn't working, so I took it over by the fire to see it better. Turned out the damned thing was leaking. I didn't mean leaking, exactly—it was spraying. *Ssspsssh*, like that. "Did you ever squirt lighter fluid on a fire?" No, she said. I looked into her eyes. "Well, don't ever try it, Sister."

"I'd rather you call me Beth."

All right, Beth, I said. Apparently, I had annoyed her. What happened then? she said. "I tossed the burner and dove behind a chair. You wouldn't believe the sound. I've never heard anything like it. And the heat! Somehow, I got out of the room and out the back door." I held up my camera and pointed to the cell phone buttons. Thank God the fire department got there quick, I said, raising my voice. I paused, watching the little cloud of breath I had shouted into the cold sunlight. I began quacking in duck-song. *Poichpoich poich poichpoichpoich poiiich poich poich*. I translated for her: "You're nobody till somebody loves you."

She kept a straight face. Wasn't she going to feed the ducks? I asked. She tossed a handful of crumbs onto the ice. She said she hadn't talked to Audrey yet, but my daughter was quite unsettled. "Homeless" was the word Zoe had used to describe our situation. I found myself telling her about all the toxic gunk burnt into the walls and the ceiling, the thick layer of black soot covering everything on the first floor, the mahogany dining room table that Audrey's mother had given us because it was too big for her apartment—charred beyond recognition. I mentioned the smoke damage upstairs, but what stuck in my mind was the framed portrait of my father and mother that had been on the fireplace mantle. The explosion had fused the glass into the photograph. You couldn't see my mother at all, only the top half of my father's face: the cowlick, the receding hairline, the probing eyes. The nun nodded sympathetically and told me Zoe had said we were staying at her grandmother's in Granville. I didn't need to be reminded that, for an indefinite period of time, it would be not just two, but three women against me.

"Is there anything we can do to—?"

I cut her off. "No thanks." The explosion had come back to me in a rush when I was telling her about it, but now reality took its place—acid, cold, spiritless.

The nun tossed more breadcrumbs, bringing more ducks. For some reason, I had the urge to toy with this diminutive representative of a faith I had long ago abandoned. You can't look at flying creatures the same way today, I told her. One of those cute ducks could be carrying the very strain of flu that would mutate and spread to people. All you'd have to do is breathe. Think about it, I said, the pandemic begins right here in Parkersville. There was an edge to my laugh. "Then you'd have some

souls to save.”

Incapable of resisting a photo-op, I began snapping pictures of all the ducks, and of the red-headed woman seeding the ice. She looked more like a bag lady than a nun. I zoomed in on a mallard. “Do ducks have souls, I wonder?”

“You haven’t completely lost your faith, you know.”

“Yeah, but I’m working on it.” The clicks of my camera lingered in the air.

“Perhaps there’s some residual—”

“Residual what?” I stopped taking pictures and looked crossly at her. “You’re worse than my wife. That’s your main job, isn’t it, laying guilt trips on people?” She winced, and I thought maybe I had gone too far. So I changed the subject: What were those things the sisters used to wear over their habits? The nuns of my childhood wore long black robes with white starched headgear that framed and pinched their faces, making them doll-like. Wimples, she said. That’s it, I said, smiling till I got a nod out of her. Had she had Sister Anne Marie at school? Everybody had Sister Anne Marie, she said. I went into a falsetto. “‘Good *morning*, boys and girls.’” She smiled too, and we answered in chorus, the way we were required to back then, “Good morning, Sister Anne Marie.”

Sweeps of crumbs lay on the ice, as if someone had flicked them with a broom. Ducks scuttled after them, pecking incessantly, the iridescent necks of the mallards bright green in the March light. I snapped a few pictures, then turned the camera so she could see what I’d taken. They’re beautiful, she said. She sounded like she meant it. I told her photography was a hobby of mine and that last year I had sold some pictures to *National Geographic*. Good for you, she said. “Artistic?” I said. “Hah. Tell that one to my boss.” I turned up the collar of my jacket to stop the shivers. “You know, the first thing that popped into my head when I got out the back door was *I’ve got to get my camera*.” I stopped, wondering why I was telling this to a stranger. I thought of the times my father and I stood in his basement dark room, watching a picture form on the blank white sheet in the developing tray. “Is that bizarre or what?” I said.

One thing she wasn’t quite getting, she said: “You *tossed* the propane burner.”

“Of course I did, it was going to explode!”

“Okay, okay,” she said, holding her hands open to placate me. “I’m just trying to get the picture.”

I took a deep breath, but it didn’t calm me much. “Yes, I tossed it, all right. Pitched it, heaved it, take your pick.”

Suddenly, the scene came back to me: Logs collapsing in the fireplace while I was holding the burner. Sparks. Bittersweet odor. A barely audible hiss. A little line of gas droplets misting from the open seam in the burner.

“But where did you throw it?” she said.

“My camera? I would never—”

“No, the burner,” she insisted.

“Oh.” But a curtain had been drawn on the scene. “It happened so fast, I . . . I don’t remember.”

* * *

That wasn’t the first time I had flirted with danger, as Audrey had been quick to point out when she saw me in the hospital. There was the car accident, of course, when I got side-swiped, trying to gun it through a yellow light. And last year, hacking away at ice on the dormer, I had slipped off the roof and broken my ankle. Two summers ago, a Russian Olive tree I was trying to take down with my chainsaw fell—not in the middle of the yard as I had planned, but smack through the roof into our upstairs bedroom.

The morning after my encounter with Sister Beth by the canal, Audrey was on my case again, this time about insurance. Not even Lloyd’s of London would touch me now, she shouted, making sure her mother, Edna, could hear her. We were sitting in the kitchenette in Edna’s second-floor apartment, trying to eat waffles Edna had scorched on the waffle iron. Sappy watercolor landscapes hung on the dark pine walls, along with a portrait of Jesus that looked like it had come right from China to the local Wal-Mart. I was as depressed as I thought I would be. My daughter, fresh with theories from her Advanced Placement Psychology course, pronounced me borderline psychotic. “Borderline nothing,” my wife quipped. “He’s over the edge.” Over what? said Edna. “The edge, Mom. You know, like . . .” She cocked her head and circled her finger around her ear. Her mother nodded, smiled grimly.

“We’re all a little crazy, don’t you think?” I said, trying to smile through my mother-in-law’s reproach.

“I think it all began when he stopped going to church,” Edna said. I detected some sympathy, for my lost soul probably, in the look she directed at me. But inwardly, I was shaking because her comment had an element of truth in it. The day I lost my faith was the same day years ago I totaled the Oldsmobile dad left me. How could she have known that?

Phillip! Father Caffrey had hissed at me that Sunday when I couldn’t hold the brass taper steady enough to light the altar candle. I set the taper down, walked out of church, and never went back. That same year, a .22 round I fired at a frog perched on a rock in a stream ricocheted off the rock and nicked my ear. There were other incidents, though I didn’t remember if I’d told my wife about them. Of course, everyone knew that my father had shot himself.

It began the day he was born, said my wife. To Zoe, she said, Eat, you need energy, so eat. Zoe covered her half-eaten waffle with her napkin, saying she wasn’t hungry. You want to go to Princeton, don’t you? insist-

ed Audrey. What's Princeton got to do with breakfast? Zoe said. Lathering my waffle with honey, I said, Princeton, huh?

"I already told you that, Dad," she said, rolling her eyes at her mother.

"They have scholarships for runners?" I said. Last spring, Zoe had taken second place in the 400 meters at the state meet. Before that, she won a gold medal in the Summer Junior Olympics in Colorado. When she didn't answer, I said, well she had a year to shop around. To get some eye contact at least, I asked if she was ready to go to school. "I'm driving," she said. To her mother, she said, "He's too dangerous."

"Oh Lord," I sighed, sitting back in my chair, my eyes focusing on a glassed-in cabinet, overpopulated with plastic saints.

"Do you believe in the Lord?" Audrey's mother asked me. It was disconcerting how she could hear things when it suited her purpose. What is this, I said, putting on my jacket, Dump on Phil Week? "Don't scratch your face like that," Edna said. "It'll get infected."

I pulled out my camera. The other side of stress, I thought—from the eye of the stressed beholder. I began snapping away at my new life.

"You need help," Audrey said.

"He needs a priest," her mother said.

I put the camera back in my jacket pocket. My scalp felt sweaty and there was a twinge of pain from my burnt cheek. When would they get off my back? All right, already, I blurted: I'd go to church Sunday. Zoe was staring at me with those skeptical sharp eyes, probably trying to refine her diagnosis. I held my hands out. "Will that raise anyone's spirits?"

"Hold still," my mother-in-law said. She dipped her finger in the honey pot, reached across the table and gently spread honey on my cheek burn. An old home remedy, she told me. All my lovely wife said was, "Don't do us any favors."

* * *

"Wasn't that our turn?" I asked my daughter 20 minutes later. She had just passed the sign for Parkersville High. Her thoughts from breakfast seemed to be percolating in the one eye visible to me. "What are you doing, kiddo?"

Now she looked at me and asked me if I knew what day it was. Wednesday, I said, watch the road, will you? "Of course," she smirked, then informed me that the track coach from Princeton had called her. I wondered out loud if she had any idea how much an Ivy League school costs these days. "Oh, you'll find a way," she said bequeathing on me an ironic smile. "Cause you're my *Dad*."

She made a right onto Lafayette. "Where are you taking me?"

"To church."

The lump of gray stone at the end of the street grew larger and larger. I hadn't been here in 30 years. What's the deal? I asked her. Behavior

mod, she said; she intended to use me in her Psych. term paper. But not to worry, I would be in the paper anonymously. Cars were lined up on both sides of the street in front of the church, so she drove into the parking lot in back.

How the past comes back, I thought. My daughter had inherited my perverse sense of humor and was using it to mess with my head. It's difficult to describe what I felt just then, pride perhaps, but a pride that was both shameful and reckless. There's a space, I said, after we had circled the lot and gone back onto the street. Zoe slammed on the brakes, and I had to straight-arm the dashboard. "Who's dangerous?"

"Who didn't put on his seat belt? Shit, I can't fit in there." She lurched back and braked, perilously close to the car behind us.

"Didn't they teach you how to parallel park?"

"Why don't you get a freaking normal car?"

"All right, already. Give me the keys."

She looked in the rear-view mirror. Behind us, a car honked. "That's a cop, and I don't have a license."

"What are you talking about? You told us you passed the test."

She shrugged. "Well, I didn't. Now you know." I stared at her in disbelief. She did get a 99 on the calculus mid-term, though, she said. Princeton would like that. Her eyes went back to the mirror. "Dad?" A white sheriff's cruiser was behind us.

"We'll discuss this later. Now I want you to do exactly as I say. Put the car in reverse. Okay, now let up on the clutch. Let up *easy*. That's it. Now turn the wheel . . . Good." Though I was still upset that she had lied, I felt a surge of parental satisfaction too. The sheriff slowed as he passed us, giving Zoe a dirty look. She held on tight to the wheel and, taking a deep breath, checked to make sure I was still there. "Come on," she said after she had composed herself. "We're late."

It felt like things were happening *to* me again, like the fire had happened to me, only this time much more slowly. Why were we here? Did she think I needed practice for Sunday? Reluctant, but at the same time curious to see how things would play out, I walked up the front steps of the church with her. Instinctively, my hand went to the camera in my jacket pocket.

Inside, the mass had already begun. I tiptoed up the aisle behind Zoe, genuflecting by reflex before I entered a pew, sat down, and looked around.

The place was so much smaller than I remembered it.

I pictured myself at fourteen, in altar boy robes, sitting beside Father Caffrey. While the choir sang from the loft, I would gaze in wonder at the stained-glass window I sat next to now. But now, I was merely trying to think of the name for that shade of blue annealed into the glassy sky above Daniel and the Lions. The Biblical figures on the windows seemed to have lost their power over me. I tried to connect what I saw as a boy

with what I was seeing this moment. But the connections were fragmentary: the tall brass candlesticks reflecting the light, wisps of smoke above the candles. I sniffed. Where was the incense? As a child, I felt the mystery of the service without having to think about it. Now, all I could feel was its absence.

There were other things I hadn't seen here before. I nudged my daughter: What's with the girl in the altar boy's robe? I said. They're called servers, she whispered. And that's the *priest*? I said. "Sssshh," she said. "He's Father Tom."

Father Tom began to speak. "We take a short time out this morning from our work, from our schooling, just as the disciples did long ago." With his upstate twang and his self-satisfied smile, he reminded me more of a furniture salesman than a priest. He chuckled. "Of course, it wasn't this cold where Jesus lived."

No shit, Padre. Besides, the proper verb was "dwelt" not "lived." What had become of those words that made you close your eyes and breathe them in, the cadences that made your head slowly rock like a rowboat in rising waves. *And the word of the Lord spread like wildfire*, I remember Father Caffrey intoning in his deep voice, like one of the prophets of old.

A nun rose to read the Epistle. It was the same woman I had met along the canal. She wore a plain gray dress and white cuffs and a little cap that sat like a pup tent on her fox-orange hair. She spoke with more resonant authority than Father Tom, but even her voice couldn't lend the text—some politically correct translation, probably made by committee—the authority it didn't have. *That* was what the service was lacking: spiritual authority.

"Dad, what the hell are you doing?"

The camera seemed to have come out of my jacket pocket of its own volition. The lady directly in front of me with a boa of furs around her shoulders turned when she heard the lens pinging, then gaped as I targeted the new priest, gravely absorbed in his thoughts, till the flash startled him. And then quickly, I shot the Daniel window and the one ahead of it, on which a shepherd stood guard over his flock. For some reason, I thought of the ducks in the canal and laughed.

Sister Beth had stopped reading, I realized. She was staring at me. Everyone in the church was staring at me, except my daughter, who had covered her face with her hands. "Sorry," I mumbled, sliding the camera back in my pocket, wishing I could sprout wings and fly out the door.

I thought Beth would denounce me for Satan, but she started reading again, as if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place.

When it was time for Holy Communion, I let Zoe go by herself. Part of me had wanted to go up and kneel at the rail—I remembered the way the wine used to spread warmth through my torso after I had taken a sip

from the silver cup. But the larger part of me felt undeserving—and now, disgraced. I looked at my watch and thought in a few minutes the fresh air might lift my spirits.

But I couldn't stop thinking of my frantic life since the accident.

"Fifty thou, minimum, pal." Those were Harry Laughlin's words when I told him over the phone what had happened to the house. I checked my watch again. Harry would be there in half an hour. The Hazmat people were probably there already. And at 9:30, I would have to deal with the insurance investigator.

When Zoe returned and the Communion was finished, Father Tom told the congregation, "We are all dust and will return to dust." Were they going to begin the recessional hymn now? But then Zoe and everyone else began chanting, "Come to the Lord with all your heart; leave the past in ashes." *Ashes?* It suddenly came to me what day it was: Ash Wednesday. People were standing up again, but not to leave.

"After you," Zoe said, pointing to the new line that was forming.

I looked at my daughter. Was this why she brought me here, so I could walk around all day with a black smudge on my forehead? No way, I told her, had her mother put her up to this? She dangled the car keys in front of me, then put them back in her pocket. Her grandmother? I persisted. For an answer, she took my hand, then guided me by the elbow up the aisle. "You don't give me enough credit," she said.

People queued up behind us. My half-beard itched. I whispered in Zoe's ear that this was not going to help me look sane for the insurance man. "You know you're sane." She gave me a knowing look. "Don't you?"

As we got closer to the altar, I could see the new priest dipping his thumb into a small brass bowl and marking each parishioner's forehead with a black cross. Just now, it was frighteningly like what it had been a long time ago. I even remembered where they got the ashes from: the burnt palm branches from the previous year's service.

"Take it easy, Dad."

There was only the woman in the fur wrap between me and the priest. He had *become* Father Caffrey, his blackened thumb looming over me. "I can't do this," I whispered, turned and walked out of church.

* * *

It was snowing outside and Zoe had locked the car. I leaned against the hood, facing away from the people coming out of church. The camera felt icy in my pocket. Where was she, damn it?

I took out the camera and pressed replay. There was Daniel, surrounded by cartoonish lions under a blue, stained-glass sky. The name of the color came to me all of a sudden: cerulean. My father's old Nikon F-3 would have captured the exact hue in a way that the digital camera couldn't, but a film camera would have had to be mounted on a tripod.

My digital allowed more spontaneity. I clicked it again. There was the new priest deep in thought. *Click*. There was my mother-in-law, behind her the dreary walls of her second-floor flat. Then my lovely wife with a mouthful of waffle. Christ, I'd go insane if I had to go back there again. *Click, click*. Now I was on yesterday's pictures: the nun casting an archipelago of breadcrumbs in the frozen air over the canal. Then the ducks, 25 of them I counted. *Click*. Now I was back to the devastation that was my house, the ruined furniture, all the soot burnt into the walls and ceiling. *Click, click, click*. I didn't remember taking so many pictures of the accident. *Click*. Another one of the living room, the earliest on the memory chip. I was holding the burner in front of—

Someone bumped me from behind and I dropped the camera. It was Zoe. "You copped out," she said.

"I went to church, didn't I?"

"You didn't get your ashes."

"Jesus, Zoe, haven't I got enough scars?" How like her mother she looked with those accusing eyes. How could she believe in that mumbo-jumbo anyway? I said, bending down to get my camera. Then she moved in close and put her hands on my shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Her clasping me like that took me back suddenly to when I was a freshman at St. Rose, a few weeks after my father had put a 12 gauge in his mouth and pulled the trigger. That day in school, some bullying upperclassman made a snide remark about my father, and I lost it. I headbutted him. There was blood all over his face.

"Hold still," Zoe said, and then she *pushed* her forehead into mine—a slow, searing branding worse than any headbutt, worse than the hurt I had felt yesterday when the pain killers wore off. She let me go and stood back and regarded me as if I were a clay statue she had just molded with her bare hands.

"Zoe?" I stared at her. Flesh and blood. You never know people, especially the ones closest to you. Under the spell of those persistent, enigmatic eyes, I couldn't speak.

Zoe spoke, but not to me. "Hi, Beth."

"The shutterbug," the nun said. "That was a first, I must say."

I slipped my camera back into my jacket pocket and said I hadn't meant to disrupt the mass. I just wasn't myself today, I added, rather lamely. I expected a stern reprimand, but she simply asked if there was anything she could do. Could she perform miracles? I asked, and then regretted it. She hadn't put on an overcoat. She looked cold, and I felt sorry for her again. Looking confused, she pointed at my forehead. She had seen me in the line, then I wasn't there.

"I know," I said. My knuckles came away from my forehead black.

"Shit," Zoe said. "You wrecked it."

I thought Beth would take Zoe to task for swearing, but she didn't.

She just kept looking at me with an empathy my daughter didn't seem to have anymore. When she asked if they would see me in church again, I told her I'd been sentenced to Sunday.

"I'll make sure he leaves the camera at home," Zoe said, and before I could react she snatched it out of my pocket. Hey! I said, but she wouldn't give it back.

Beth handed me a little paper sack. What was it, I asked, more ashes? "Breadcrumbs." She nodded to us and walked quickly back to the church.

I asked Zoe for the camera. Instead, she handed me the car keys.

We had barely got to the end of Lafayette Street when Zoe announced that we were going to have to make a stop at the house. What for? I said. She needed her calculus text. Couldn't it wait? We didn't have a lot of time. No way, she said, she'd left her homework in the book.

A white EnCon van sat in the driveway, its back doors open. Someone had lugged our burnt couch out to the back deck. Suddenly I didn't want to be here, didn't want Zoe to be here. She hadn't been home since the accident. It was pretty bad, I said. Why didn't she tell me where she'd left the book and I'd But before I could finish my sentence, she was out of the car. I jumped out after her, not even bothering to close the car door.

"Looks like a crime scene," she said, ducking under the yellow tape stapled across our back door.

Inside, it was almost as cold as out. Snow had drifted in onto the kitchen floor. Despite the draft, that horrible acrid smell was still everywhere. A loud rumble came from upstairs, as if someone were sanding the floors. Zoe got by the charred table in the dining room, but in the living room, a strange man held his gloved hand up to stop her. He wore a white Hazmat space suit with a hooded face mask.

"You're in a toxic zone," he said, shouting above the noise through the breathing tube which had been duct-taped to the mask.

"We *live* here, dude," Zoe said and skirted around him. When she got halfway up the stairs to the landing, she stopped and turned to survey the living room. Her mouth opened but she didn't say anything.

"Go on," I told her. "Get your book." The last time she was here, there would have been white walls and wide strips of white ceiling between the cathedral ceiling beams. Now, there was only a dirty white square on the wall where a framed print had hung. The walls near the fireplace were completely black. The screened fireplace grate rested on a pile of burnt junk in the corner. The blast had shattered most of the bay windows, and the recliner chair—the one that had saved my life when I dove behind it—was burnt beyond repair. In the center of the room, where the couch had been, was a large plastic barrel into which the Hazmat crew had stuffed shards of burnt Sheetrock. Through the door-sized hole

they had made in the wall, you could see the original planking, diagonal rows of it, nails and all.

Someone turned the machine off upstairs, and another space-suit person appeared on the landing next to Zoe, a woman this time. She introduced herself as Harriet, the project manager. Was I Phil Kennedy? she said. Yes, I said, did *all* the Sheetrocking have to be replaced? Her job was removal. She pointed to those areas which would have to be removed, about half the living room, it seemed to me. My friend had been here and left, she said. "Harry McLaughlin?" I asked.

"He took a lot of notes," she said and then turned her attention to Zoe who had tried to get to her room. The woman wouldn't let Zoe by her until she put on a white carpenter's mask.

"You too," she said, tossing me another mask. "Sorry. State regs."

I needed to sit but there was nothing to sit on. The draft from the broken window made me zip my jacket. Blackened bricks lay across the hearth, as if the chimney had regurgitated them.

"Frigging gross!" My daughter's voice came from upstairs. Why did she have to witness this? I should have taken her right to school. Today was worse than Saturday. Now, it was as if I suffered double vision, my own and Zoe's.

"Your chimney's shot," the man said. And what else? I said. Why didn't they just tear down the house?

The woman tried to be sympathetic, telling me that my home's structural integrity remained sound. The fireplace would be pressure-cleaned. Actually, they would do that as part of their project. In three weeks I could begin rebuilding.

"Three weeks!"

As long as it took to remove all the toxins, the man said, adding he knew a thing or two about replacement. He counted the steps on his fingers as he told me what had to be done: The hardwood floor around the hearth would have to be replaced, perhaps the chimney itself. There was a lot of rewiring in the electrical system, and oh, the water wasn't running, which meant the pipes were frozen. I'd need a plumber too. When I asked about the ceiling beams, he said my handyman would have to put in a lot of time to restore them.

"I'm ready," Zoe whispered. I hadn't heard her come downstairs. She had her calculus book and a bag full of clothes.

When we got in the car, she tossed the bag in the back seat and stuck her mask on the gear shifter. She coughed.

"Are you all right?" I said.

"Just go." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her studying me as I backed out onto the street.

"How did you live through that?" she finally said.

I had no answer.

* * *

“Watch the speed bumps,” my daughter warned me minutes later, when I was tooling into the drive of the high school. The electronic bleep of the camera distracted me, and I hit one of those bumps before I could brake. No one had tried to take my picture in years. “At least wait till I get a shave,” I said.

“How do you work this?” She was still fussing with the viewfinder when I pulled up in front of the main entrance. Then she found the replay button. “God, you look awful . . . like one of those wanted posters.”

“Come on.” I held out my hand for the camera. “If we don’t get that insurance, you’ll be going to community college.”

But she turned from me, hunched over the camera, clicking through my life. There are no secrets when you have a family. “Look at all the ducks. . . Hey, what’s Beth doing here?”

“I went for a walk yesterday, all right?”

“You used to take me to see the ducks when I was little. I remember you trying to make the quack sound. How did you do it?” My fingers twitched impatiently. “The ducks thought you were some kind of mental.” Great, I said, now the ducks are on my case too. Then there was a change in her tone of voice: “When did you take these?” The other day, I told her. I could see she was on the house shots now. “That’s the last of them, give it to me.”

“Wait, there’s one more.” She held the viewfinder so I could see the shot I should have erased. “What is that?”

“Just camping stuff.” Too late, I snatched the camera from her.

“It was the *propane* burner.”

I looked out the window and at the sky for the ducks that weren’t there.

“Why were you holding it in front of the fireplace?” She scrunched up her face in that look of concentration she gets when she’s figuring something out. “You must have taken that shot just before you blew everything up.” She looked at me wide-eyed. “Dad, what did you do?”

“I threw it, okay? Frigging heaved it.” What I had forgotten came back as quickly as I could tell it. “It was cold and I was tired. And you were on my case and your mother was on my case and I couldn’t stand my frigging job and everything was just a frigging mess.”

“You threw it in the fire?”

“Shit, what does it matter now? I’m alive, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, till the next time you try to kill yourself.”

A shiver went through me as I remembered the seconds just before the explosion. I had glanced at the portrait of my father and mother on the mantle. My father’s eyes locked into mine. *What the hell, you’ve got life insurance. Just do it.* His voice rang through my head. *That’ll teach them.*

My daughter began to cry. “That time you fell off the roof. That tree. The car accident.”

“So I’ve had some close calls. God, Zoe, you can doctor up the facts any way you want to. . . .”

Her eyes, frightened and accusing and hurt, made me shut up. “That’s a great example you’ve been setting, Dad.”

I took a deep breath, met her eyes, laid my shaking hand on her shoulder. She was three again, and we were standing by the canal, and I was going *poich poich poich*, and the grandparents of the ducks I had fed the other day were fleeing from me. And she was laughing and running after them, tossing chunks of bread which didn’t quite make it to the water. “I love you, kiddo,” I told her. I held out the camera. “Our secret, okay?”

She took the camera from me, looked at it for a minute, and pulled out the memory chip, as small as a Communion wafer. She held it to the sunlight, as if she could see through all its images, not back to the past, but into the future. “Secrets suck,” she said.

“All right.” I held out my hand. When she placed the chip there, I looked at it for a second, then stuck it in my mouth and bit down hard.

“Dad?”

“I’m trying.” It was tougher to crack than a frozen Brazil nut, but at last I got through it.

As she stared at me, that spark of understanding flashed in her eyes. “Do you have a life insurance policy?” I didn’t know, I lied. Bullshit, she said. Mom and Grandma would have hated me if I had done it.

“What about you?”

She looked hard at me.

“Would you have hated me too?” It was too much to ask from a 16-year old. “Forget it,” I said. I pulled the pieces of memory chip from my mouth. “This tastes worse than your grandmother’s waffles.”

I felt something fall into my lap. She was shaking the breadcrumbs out of the sack. “*Poich poich*,” she said. And just like that she left.

I sat back, putting my arm around the seat where Zoe had been, ignoring the mess in my lap. My forehead burned as if I had a fever, but the spot on my cheek Audrey’s mother had dabbed with honey felt surprisingly cool. A picture came into my head, not a sudden digital image but the old kind of picture whose outlines became slowly clear through the liquid solution in the developing tray, in the dim red light of my father’s dark room. It was our living room—Audrey and Zoe’s and my living room—that appeared on the shimmering photographic paper. Our walls were white again. Above the star on the Christmas tree, you could see again the knotholes in the pine ceiling beams. And Zoe was there, and Audrey too, and I was between them. Audrey had her arm around me and smiled like she meant it for a change. And my daughter was smiling too, in that ironic way of hers, as if I had just consented to go to Christmas

Eve service.

I looked more closely at myself—had my beard grown back? I couldn't tell. My face was still emerging.

JILL MANDRAKE began publishing memoirs in 1988, in Canlit journals. So far, about three dozen minuscule remembrances have seen print, and Jill hasn't yet enough published material to gather and put into book-length form. What a microscopic amount, these past twenty years! Happily, editors-in-chief who like her material do continue to publish it. She ought to write more frequently, for an average of two pages per year hasn't reached her desired standard of authorship.

Two Prose Pieces

Jill Mandrake

The Scrambler

IT WAS INTO October and still pretty hot.

I was at the Fall Fair, in the Safeway parking lot. There were several tents with games and food, but only four rides: The Ferris Wheel, the Salt'n'Pepper Shakers, the Merry Mixer, and the Scrambler.

My big brother Ronny was on the Scrambler. I was peering at him through the makeshift fence that surrounded it. Ronny looked as though he couldn't make up his mind whether he was enjoying himself or not.

Then an unexpected thing happened: A low voice behind me said, "Do you want to ride that Scrambler?"

I turned around to see a grey-haired man with a brush cut, wearing a baggy pullover. A stranger.

"I'm just watching my brother on it," I replied, politely.

"Which one is your brother?"

"He's the kid in the seat all by himself. See? The other cars all have two kids in them."

"Well, here," said the stranger, lifting me up about level with his shoulders, "you can ride with him."

He paused a second or two as Ronny's car swung closer towards us, and then he threw me into the seat. I landed with a thud which, surprisingly, didn't really hurt.

"How did *you* get here?" Ronny whirled in the seat, startled.

"A man threw me." I shrugged, as much as anyone can shrug when the Scrambler is whipping around.

When the ride slowed to a halt and we all filed out, I was afraid the

ride-operator would give me heck for getting a free ride. He didn't even notice, though.

"Where is this man who threw you?" Ronny looked around as we both wandered into the crowd.

"I don't know. I can't see him. He's gone."

Ronny stopped and pulled some coins out of one of his pockets. "If I have enough for cotton candy, I'll share some with you."

We would have had the blue cotton candy, not the pink, because Ronny didn't like anything pink.

This is the memory that came to me inexplicably, out of the blue, as I watched the shovels full of dirt and grass cover the little box of ashes.

Attendance, Attitude, Relations with Others

MRS. WILSON kept giving me the evil eye on the last day of school.

Earlier, before the bell rang, I was in the schoolyard with Gloria, Joyce and a few other girls from my Grade Four class. We were in a patch of grass behind the covered play area. Gloria found a four leaf clover and was showing it around.

When it was my turn to see, I plucked off the fourth leaf so the little clover would look like all the others. I just wanted it to fit in.

"Why the heck did you do that?" said Gloria, as the other girls surrounded me.

"You'd better have an explanation," said Joyce, sounding an awful lot like Mrs. Wilson. Then Joyce pulled me about by my ponytail. "Are you crying yet?" she asked.

I replied, "What if I can find another four leaf clover?"

"Find one," said Gloria.

I could find only three leaf clovers, so when nobody was looking I plucked a leaf from one and put it on another to make a four leaf clover. "There you are," I said, presenting it to Gloria. It lasted only about five seconds.

"Now you're really gonna get it," said Joyce. A bit of foam came out the corner of her mouth.

"Ah rats, the bell rang," said Gloria. Everyone ran ahead of me and must have ratted to Mrs. Wilson. It was a bright morning with a mild breeze; the kind of weather we always had at the end of June.

In just a few hours, I could escape these people all summer.

The following poems hail from a work-in-progress entitled *Wintering Over*. Hekkanen's novel, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, was one of three finalists for the George Ryga Award for Social Awareness, 2008.

Ernest Hekkanen / **Three Poems**

Gas Bill Reflections

Got the gas bill today and suddenly
it made me feel as though I should become
one of those ghastly Eskimo Pies
I vaguely recall from my childhood.

Cold has been creeping around my neck
all morning. No snow on the Elephant yet,
but the grey heavens are surely packing
plenty of the white stuff. The wife said,

and I am quoting now, "I can't live
at seventeen degrees Celsius. I demand
at least twenty degrees or I'll move out."
The gas bill arrived today and suddenly

mortality began to close in around me
like an ice-cold noose in the hands
of a hangman. Oh, well, there are only
four months of freezing weather left to go.

Frigid Eloquence

The cold is eloquently sharp this afternoon,
a tempered steel blade hastily cutting features
from granite: lips, two cheeks and a brow
below which eyes tear from all the whittling.

One would expect to see at least some ice
today; but, no, the water is placidly grey
below the bridge that arches mantis-like
over Kootenay Lake. I imagine the frigid depths

absorbing my body with one large swallow,
then the surprise of the freezing embrace
as it forces from my lungs an effervescent trail
that mutely surfaces like a stray constellation

composed of tiny, barely noticeable whirlpools.
Why is it that I only write poems
when depression comes calling at my door,
not ferociously but more like a weary guest

full of lost possibilities? Would I flail my arms
at the decisive moment, or would I let the weight
of my winter despair take me like an anchor
to the bottom of the lake? Only time knows,

I guess.

Wrestling with Demons

Last night I dreamed I was wrestling
one of many personal demons.
His limbs were as slippery as eels,
his grip as tight as a Burmese boa,
and definitely there were no rules.

During the hours we engaged in battle
I was thrown this way and that way in bed,
unable to glimpse for the briefest moment
the face of my leviathan opponent,

although from time to time I distinctly heard
words spill like angry venom from his lips,
something to do with his total innocence
in the face of overwhelming odds.

“Overwhelming odds,” I wheezed,
when his arm squeezed me like a bellows,
perhaps ‘accordion’ would be more accurate,
for I did produce a sudden gush
of feeble polka-dancing noises.

Only toward dawn when I was pinned
helplessly on my exhausted back,
unable to breathe even one last breath,
did I glimpse the face of my triumphant foe.

It was that of Radovan Karadzic,
poet, psychologist and dispenser of death;
then I understood with blinding insight
the nature of my defeat.

**Flesh and Spirit:
The Rasputin Meditations**



Ernest Hekkanen



Talons of God

I stole. I wandered the world, drunk, a man useful
only to his appetites. Fork in the road, impassable
muddy mire of a man, debauch. I served the desire
in my bowels, coiled there like a snake on warm rocks,
its eyes perfect metaphors for waiting,
ready to strike, ready to rattle its molten tail
stuck and tickling up my ass.

I took your fence rails and your daughters. Your horses
cantered with me from fields, to music playing in my head.
I saw through you like isinglass. I saw your guilt,
your desire, your earthiness, your thoughts like wind chimes;
but I was a beast of the meadow and I would have
grazed there till my dying day, on the stiff Siberian grass,
so like love it was, so natural to my heart.

But God swooped down with His talons extended,
and took me cartwheeling across the wide expanse.
“Let me teach you about currents that shape the flesh
in lofty flight,” he said. “Let me teach you to defy
the gravity bestowed on you before your birth.
Come, chase with me across latitudes. Etch deep and lasting
furrows in slopes of the transparent field.
Don plumage that will make you foreign to the ones
you sleep beside among the heavy treaders.”

So I went. I left Pokrovskoe for the monastery
of Verkhoturys, and I returned a singing man,
one who urged others to hear the song in their flesh.



Worship Below Ground

I heard them say it: either his eyes are flying,
or they are as still as those of a snake
about to catch a bird in flight.
They laughed at me, the Goat-*Starets*,
and my shadow they spat upon in passing.
Wife, children, they did not melt the unrest.
I carried water and hewed wood. My sickle was never still;
then one day, raising eyes that stung from sweat,
I saw the Black Virgin, gliding across the field

on a sleigh of golden light. I suffered her blessing
in my flesh, then she told me: "Come, follow,
I shall provided you with the Way."

I stayed on her scent for a day.
It was raining, I remember. The darkening forest
bathed me in notes from a gypsy guitar.
"Dance with me, Goat-*Starets*; dance with me."
There were times when I lost sight of her hips
pressing through leafy underbrush which clung
then let go, as though offering Nature's praise,
Nature's benediction, so how could I refuse to dance?

She led me to an Ark below ground,
and such a sight I had never seen.
Candles wagged luminescent tails,
tongues wagged, worshippers writhed,
the spirit moving them in clockwise darkness.
"We are chained here to this existence,
Goat-*Starets*. But in us there is
an awkward fledgling craving flight."

Such fervent praying we did in that earthen Ark.
God spoke to me through my pores. He said,
"Unburden yourself of your chains, Rasputin.
Find wholeness in rapture,
kneel before the Vessel of the Everlasting,
make with thy hands a sign of devotion.
You will know Me through Her needing caresses."

From that time on I sought the Spirit in women,
the continuity to be reckoned with in their flesh.
"Lie down with me, let yourself be tempered
by the snake. Let God speak through your needing;
let Him sing His Song of Ecstatic Praise."

Is it my fault that they wanted to find Him?
Should I have said, no? Should I have refused?
Should I have allowed God's face
to turn away from them?
Should I have hoarded His Divine Grace?



Mortifications of the Flesh

I wandered the width and breadth of Mother Russia,
in chains, the stamp of man upon me,
trappings of God screwed tightly to my head.
Rain, heat, freezing cold, dust. I suffered
the mortification of elements. Seasons took me
on journeys past villages mired in dark distrust.
Children threw dung, faces sneered
from doorways, at the shaggy Goat-*Starets*,
that reeking prophet who sang word into flesh.

“I am the man festooned with chains,
the one who migrates daily with the sun.
Come, take the road that unwinds forever.
Follow me along the *trakt*. Join hands.
Let flies inscribe messages on your skin.
Please, do not pull back. It is an omen
I bear on my rounds across the steppes,
lying fathoms deep in a harvest of pain.”

A *khlysty* took me in in this village,
an Ark took me in in that.
Women bathed and purified my flesh,
unlocked the chains that chaffed,
unburdened my heart of excessive rapture,
lay down with me beneath the sky.

My talents as a Healer preceded me.
I was on my way to destiny.
I was called by a moment in time,
to that City of Onion Domes,
where thighs were a plentiful as avarice
and hysteria ruled the marriage bed.



Flesh and Spirit

A void of lovers dwelt in St. Petersburg
and I, The Goat, the Shaggy *Starets*, filled that vacuum.
I frequented the best salons,
where ladies flocked like jabbering jays,
wanting to stroke my beard,
which they taught me to perfume.
“Father Grigorii,” they called me;
and the Orthodox robes would pale,
“Your boots look so heavy. How far
have they traveled in order to get here?
Would you care to rest them at the foot of my bed?”

At Mama and Papa’s feet I laid
the icon of St. Simeon of Verkhoturye.
The little ones climbed upon my knee.
Many made use of my healing powers,
which I was generous with to a fault.
I induced calm in the hysterical,
dampened fevers, cured stomach ache,
brought several back from the doorway of death.

“Open yourself to me,” I said;
“I am but a conduit that pours
the seed of God into earthen vessels.”

I laid my hand on the tsarevich,
spat, and instantly the bleeding stopped.
I whispered my way into confidences,
bore all of Russia upon my back.
My detractors said my eyes were those
of a snake, and they were right.
Only a snake finds it comfortable
in skin such as mine. I would slough it
whenever the Spirit took an inkling,
which was often.



Tempering a Disciple's Flesh

I enjoyed flowers and large baskets full of fruit,
and women were not unlike these.

I wanted them around my table at mealtimes,
especially the ones that God spoke through
loud enough for me to hear.

They adored me, and why not? They made a meal
more lively. They were like good fish soup,
black bread, cabbage and eggs, eaten with

considerable relish. I begged the ladies
to dispense with forks and knives.
“Grip the bread in your hands.
Break it, like this, tear it asunder.
Your manners are wanting in vitality.”

The ones that God spoke through loudest
got mountains of sugar in their tea.
I would bite off a portion of pickle
and pass it around the table, saying:
“Here, eat, nourish yourself on food
from my mouth. Humble yourself.
Suck jam from my fingers.
Make them good and clean.
There is salvation in this.”

Then I said: “Rejoice in simplicity.
Woe to the rebellious and the wicked,
for the sun warms them not.”
The ladies suffered from pride.
I could see it in their gestures,
in the way they preened and posed.
“Pride keeps you out of the Kingdom of Heaven.
Relinquish it like a soiled garment.
Come, dance, offer me your scarves.
Surrender to ecstasy. One also prays by dancing.”

I lay down with them for their own good.
Divested of clothes, of fine gestures,
of bottled perfumes, they tossed themselves
upon their mount, squealing in foreign tongues,
pride melting in the fire of pleasure.

Then back to table we would go.
Now they felt free to spill fish soup
from their mouths down over their breasts.
They tore at bread and threw napkins aside,
saying: “Of what use are these? Rasputin
will lick us clean, he has no pride.”

Ah, but they were lovely
arranged like flowers and baskets full of fruit.



Healing

I healed women, children and animals,
but I could do nothing for Mother Russia.
She was ill to the marrow.
Sicklings on every side were propping her up,
while stealing from her pockets.
Traitors, unfaithful civil servants,
Bolsheviks; they tore at her like wolves.

A hunting pack tried to bring me down
as I cantered from my flat on Gorokhavaya Street,
a stone's throw from police headquarters,
where officers monitored my every move.
I suffered the wound for several months,
the germ of treason was so great.

“Beware of men who herd together.
They are little men, weaklings;
they find strength in malicious plots,”
I told Aleksey, the Little Emperor,
so strong of will, yet betrayed by blood.

She was in a hopeless state, Mother Russia.
I sought to stop a hemorrhage
which could not be staunched.
Despite the Tsarina's enormous faith,
my miracles came undone.
The wound closed over festering flesh.
The dance became a dance with death.



Public Mortifications

I make no bones: the Goat-*Starets* bleated,
butted with horns when enemies provoked,
reeked of lascivious adventure;
but he did much good, too, especially with animals
that felt like salve his calming touch.

I could not calm the turbulence around me.
It grew with war on every front,
as Mother Russia's arteries clogged with discontent.
I was treating Felix Yusupov for unnatural desires.
He would lie like a maiden upon my couch,
hands protective of unformed breasts,
a glimmer in his eye of eyes
as he waited for history to flatter him.

Friday, December 16th, 1916. There were portents:
fresh snow on ground, an elderly woman
among well-to-do ladies in my waiting room,
and the fact that I could not hold her gaze.
I was warned of the plot against my life, twice;
but still I went willy-nilly to my destiny,
dressed in velvet trousers, new boots,
a silken blouse embroidered with flowers.

Yes, I saw it coming, but don't forget:
I was the Goat-*Starets*, and a goat
never goes willingly to sacrifice.
He is partly dragged, partly enticed,
and between the two he finds the courage
to perform the proper ritual steps.

Yusupov was sadly lacking as a magician
whose sleight of hand could bring me death.
All evening he avoided my eyes. He fed me
biscuits and cakes and supplied me with wine,
and great weariness settled in my limbs.

“Madeira. Make me well with Madeira and music.

Let me dance one last gypsy dance, arms held high
in rejoicing." As I bent to admire his crucifix,
Yusupov shot me point-blank. Ah, but I was sly;
I rose like Lazarus and chased him from the room,
out into the courtyard where I was shot again,
in the back, by a conspirator hiding in shadows.

Felix tore my penis from my humped and hairy mound,
drove daggers into my silken chest,
and beat my face beyond description,
as I regarded him with rueful eyes.

They drove me in silence to the frozen river.
Virgin snow whispered against tires,
which unrolled imprints of accusation
to the bridge where they failed
their first attempt to chuck me in.
I remember Lazovert leaning over the rail
like a ghoul, chains dangling from his hands,
shrieking like the wind
that they had forgotten to weigh me down.
But already I was plummeting like an omen
into the waste of the waking day.

I floated to where I was caught by roots,
and there I was found, staring through ice,
water in my lungs, voicing my innocence
as Holy Mother Russia came undone.

Don't pretend I didn't tell you.
Don't pretend you didn't see my ghost,
restless and tormented, dancing darkly,
with arms held high. I warned you many times
that my death would augur a revolution.

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 that has been serialized in the *NOR* for five years. 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 2006.

To Travel the Distance

(The Serialized Saga of Ulyssa Segantini)

Margrith Schraner

PART TWO

Chapter 10

FOR DAYS NOW, the weather had been sweltering. Ulyssa would wake repeatedly during the night, listless and lethargic, her chest drenched with sweat. She would run her fingers through her hair, the roots of which were unusually tender. Her ears felt hot, as if they might burst into flames. If only the guest room had a shower, she thought. Three days and nights already of wretched, unrelenting heat pumped into the corners of the guest room, amassed under the roof of the *Chesa Trais Fluors*, where it hung solidly, bunched in the space beneath the low ceiling, packed densely into every available inch around her bed.

This morning, before dawn, she had inched her body out of bed and had tiptoed to the window, thinking she heard the twitter of larks. She had peered out at the darkness, disappointed somehow that the faint glow beyond the wooden slats revealed nothing, only the moon, nearly full, lighting up a field of tall grass.

"Larks, did you say?" Tomas had been awake at once. He was talking to her from the bed, the tone of his voice striking her as oddly invigorated, as if he had just returned from an excursion. "I saw three bald eagles in my dream," he reported. "They were magnificent," he added, stretching his arms back over his head, grunting, his hands groping for the lowest rung on the rustic headboard. He loved giving his shoulders a slow stretch. "They had white tail feathers, and they were swooping down in narrowing circles, trying to pluck a duck out of the water, but they didn't have any luck. Each time the duck would disappear under the water."

"It's a sign," Ulyssa told him, still lingering at the window.

“A sign—of what?”

“Of good fortune,” Ulyssa said. “It means you’ll be lucky. You might be famous; who knows. *Every Mountain Has Its Shadow* is a novel with a lot of promise; it would make a great movie. Your dream has even supplied you with the title, *The Eagles’ Breakfast*.”

Tomas grinned. “I’m glad you’re in my cheering section,” he told her. He yawned while languorously stretching his shoulders for a second time, one hand accidentally bumping into one of the wooden bedposts, forgetting he was not in his brass bed, back in Canada.

It was almost dawn when he beckoned her to come back to bed. “Today is Thursday, isn’t it? I’m planning to call my agent in Toronto later on this afternoon. But first, I’ll have to finish checking the galley proofs of *Arctic Summer*.”

“No rest for the wicked,” Ulyssa said, coming to lie down next to him. “Fortunately, Europe is eight or nine hours ahead of Canada. You’ll have lots of time.”

She had been awake for what seemed hours, unable to sleep, giddy at the thought of Tomas’s success. There was a hush in the room that made her think of impending rain. She fell asleep eventually and awoke at dawn with a slight headache, feeling far from refreshed. She recoiled from the brightness of the room, the shutters having been opened and Tomas standing at the window, fully dressed. “There’s hardly a trace of mist to be seen anywhere on these mountains,” he said. “What a splendid panorama of bumpy ridges and peaks—*Piz Ela*, *Piz Mitgel*, and—I forget, what’s the third one—*Piz Tinizong*? There are mountains upon mountains, the entire, hulking mass arranged majestically, like on a post card.”

She had stepped out of the conversation into a cloudless morning. Tomas had handed her the straw hat, ruffled her hair in his customary manner, urging her to do some exploring on her own. They agreed to meet in Savognin, later on, at the Cresta Palace for dinner. “Oh, and let’s not forget our Old Friends from Afar.” He burrowed in his pocket and pulled out a fifty-franc bill. “An old Chinese proverb; look after your friends. Bring back a large hunk of cheese from the village dairy.” He smiled. “Maria Teresa and Walter are bound to be hungry.”

Ulyssa was on a mission now, hurrying toward the village. It was mid-morning when she crossed the small, Roman bridge over the Julia River. She stopped to gaze at the shallow water glinting in the riverbed, its course singularly lethargic. Her feet were gritty with dust from the day before; she had gone to bed without washing them. She thought back to her life in Canada, to the summers she had spent camping on the banks of the Similkameen River with Tomas upon first meeting him. Every evening they would wade out together to a large boulder that divided the current and would crouch there, in the lee of the breeze, watching the sun slip down behind the mountain.

She missed the rambunctious flow, the swishing of the Similkameen River. The Julia River looked tame by comparison. Had her cousin, Maria Teresa, been with her, she would have insisted on Ulyssa climbing down the riverbank to wash her aching feet.

Maria Teresa's phone call had come rather late the previous night, after Ulyssa had already gone to sleep. Ulyssa recalled scuffing along the edge of the bed toward the door, barely awake, her bare feet bumping into a large suitcase that was blocking her way, annoyed at Tomas for having been so careless as to leave it lying there, on the floor, next to a pile of books and dictionaries at the foot of the bed.

Ulyssa had barely registered the sight of Titiziana, the owner of the guesthouse, who stood waiting for her at the door, a red shawl draped over her shoulders. Ulyssa had trailed along behind her, half asleep, down a dimly lit hallway and up a small set of stairs, unable to free herself of the image she had seen in her dream. It was an insignia, cryptic and rune-like, etched into the stone basin of a pool—or perhaps it was a fountain; she was no longer quite sure—its shape aglow inside her skull, like the afterimage of fireworks, refusing to be extinguished.

The air on the top floor, under the steeply pitched portion of the roof, was stifling. She was in a daze when she lifted the receiver of the black extension phone, mounted on the wall, next to an imposing mirror in a gilded frame. A wave of raucous laughter met her ears.

"Maria Teresa?" She recognized her cousin's voice at once, although years had passed since they had last spoken together on the phone.

"You were asleep when I called an hour ago," her cousin said, matter-of-fact. "I spoke with Tomas. He tells me you have a sun burn on the back of your knees." She clicked her tongue. "You haven't changed a bit. Still lying on your stomach in the full sun; reading those racy books—were you?"

"No, nothing of the sort," Ulyssa protested, rubbing at the sweat burning at her temples. A spot of tension was beginning to form above her right eyebrow. "Tomas and I were out all day, yesterday, doing research."

"Research?" Maria Teresa echoed.

"And earlier, in St. Moritz, I spent the afternoon in the hot sun, peering up at old engravings on house façades and copying Rhaeto-Romansh adages into my notebook."

"How scholarly of you. Ever since you were a kid, you were obsessed with wanting to know, with wanting to find answers to all sorts of questions—"

"What questions?"

"Questions about life's little mysteries," Maria Teresa began, "about the birds and the bees. You had questions: How does the rooster get inside the eggs to fertilize them without breaking their shells, for instance?"

“And did I ever come up with an answer?”

“God forbid,” Maria Teresa giggled, “we’ll have to talk about that later on, in person. I suggest you catch up on your sleep, first.”

“How can anyone get any sleep in this sweltering heat?” Ulyssa complained. “Our guest room is like a pizza oven. The weather has been insufferable. I’ve been burning up—ever since the day we arrived here, in the Grisons.”

“The days will get cooler,” Maria Teresa said. “I promise, after the full moon—after this Sunday, the Farmer’s Almanac tells us, which will be the feast day of St. Laurentius. But before I forget, have you heard the joke about St. Laurentius, our saint and martyr?”

Ulyssa had been about to mention the festivities planned in his honor. After all, wasn’t he the protector and patron saint of the small Baroque church of Riom, over in the village square? But there was no stopping Maria Teresa now; she was breaking into the tale. “St. Laurentius, you see,” she began—pausing briefly to give Ulyssa a chance, perhaps, to cross herself—“our saint and martyr, he has been lying on the griddle for quite some time. They’ve been busy grilling him, you see, and now he’s quite cooked, right through, on one side, and it’s time for him to turn over. But our saint, he’s so lazy. He’s so lethargic from all the heat, he just can’t move. He refuses to turn over of his own accord, much to the chagrin of his tormentors, who are obliged to do it for him.”

Ulyssa waited for the punch line—in vain. Maria Teresa was already busy supplying the much-needed, canned laughter; Ulyssa merely needed to join in with a small laugh of her own. “Saints and sinners,” she muttered, yawning into the phone, unabashed. She had every reason to feel exhausted, she told herself. After all, hadn’t she been forced to meet all her translation deadlines prior to flying to Europe with Tomas? Their trip so far had consisted of a whirlwind tour of the Engadine valley, giving her hardly a chance to rest anywhere for more than a couple of hours, a series of days needlessly protracted and nights affording her no respite. The ongoing heat wave had left her stripped of her reserves.

She sighed, bone-weary. A wave of perspiration was starting to spread along her collarbones. “St. Laurentius isn’t the only one slowed down by the heat,” she said. She felt faint all of a sudden, frantic from having attempted to get some air by prying open the small rectangle of a window beside the staircase, only to discover that the double-paned glass through which she could see a dusky piece of sky was fixed solidly in place.

She had completely forgotten it was night. There was a strange commotion at the other end of the line now, followed by a click. Had the line gone dead? Ulyssa worried about the loss of connection; she had, after all, been on the verge of saying something succinct, of commenting on the humor of Catholics, which had always struck her as somewhat inconsistent. “Saints and sinners,” she said out loud, half hoping her words

would fall on deaf ears. “The journey to Riom has certainly been more than I had bartered for.”

“*Mamma mia.*” It was Maria Teresa, her words echoing, plaintive and far away. “It’s been like Grand Central Station around here.” She now spoke loudly, much too close to the mouthpiece. “Katarina—all she does is cry, cry, cry. And Walter—would you believe it—he stubbed his toe on the fridge last week. He’s been underfoot ever since, cluttering up the living room.”

“Katarina,” Ulyssa exclaimed. “You didn’t by chance name your granddaughter after Katarina Valente?”

“She’s the one.” Maria Teresa sounded pleased. “She was our idol, remember? You and I, we were teenagers, then. We envied Katarina. She was born into a circus family. She grew up in Paris. We wanted to be just like her, perform on stage, glamorous in our glitzy, lion-taming circus wear. . . .”

The river of time had reversed its course. They were traveling backward, it seemed, catching up to some distant happiness. Ulyssa recalled a pop song; it had made Katarina Valente famous. The words to the song were already tumbling toward her. *Quando, quando, tell me, when*, she sang, the black receiver in her hand a microphone, amplifying her voice.

Maria Teresa cut in on cue. *Tell me, quando, tell me when, cha-cha-cha.*” They were now singing it together, *Tell me when—I’ll be seeing you again.* Maria Teresa sounded breathless. “We were so young,” she said, giving a little cough.

“Very young—still in Grade One, I believe it was, the summer our mothers took us to Riom. And Goat Peter—remember him?—he was your first love.”

“He was *not.*” Maria Teresa was adamant.

“He was, *too,*” Ulyssa said insistently. “You had one taste of the milk from his goats and—*presto*—you fell in love.”

Maria Teresa giggled.

The encounter with Goat Peter had been a simple affair, a meeting of children, all purity and innocence. Ulyssa recalled the time at the fountain, the sun, already oblique in the sky, and soap suds. There had been mountains of suds, she recalled, because she and Maria Teresa had been washing their dolls’ clothes. Whose idea had it been to empty the sudsy water into the fountain? They were all wearing soap suds—wigs at first, and then towering hats. And later, they wore masks; she remembered Goat Peter and Maria Teresa, their laughing eyes gazing out at each other through holes poked in the foam. Then, suddenly, a ball of suds thrown up into the air was carried off, magically, by a breeze from down the street.

Ulyssa felt as though the peals of laughter that had accompanied their

play had never stopped ringing in her ears. The enormous pail with the red, wooden handles had been full of sudsy water, sloshing all over their bare feet. Goats and sheep had lingered nearby, waiting to be herded back to their stalls. Maria Teresa's giggle had filled the air—

Her giggle hadn't changed a bit.

"I wonder, sometimes, whether Goat Peter might not still be waiting for me," she presently said.

"Well, you missed your chance," Ulyssa said, not at all compassionate. "Need I remind you? You've been a blushing bride more than once—first with Franz, then with Walter."

"Third time lucky—maybe," Maria Teresa said, nonchalant. She cleared her throat. "You need to know, I took pity on Goat Peter, that time. After all, he was an orphan. Wasn't it Miss Janutin who had adopted him?"

"It's the first I've heard of that."

"Miss Janutin—how is she, by the way?"

Everything was becoming too much for Ulyssa. The phone conversation no longer made much sense; it ranged too far, it covered too much ground. It reminded Ulyssa of a vast blanket, square upon square added on, then stitched together—Franz, then Katarina, then Walter, and now Goat Peter. The question about Miss Janutin hung in the air. The blanket was losing its shape, almost elliptical—

"Tomas and I looked for her all day, yesterday," Ulyssa said, trying to be patient. "No one could tell us of her whereabouts."

"I'll help you find Miss Janutin, provided you promise to help me find Goat Peter," Maria Teresa offered. "Getting to her place will be easy as pie. From the fountain in the village square, close to the postal bus stop, you turn down a side street—actually, it's more like a goat path. Right across from the church, next to the *Bar & Grill*, you'll see an oleander bush. Not far away, you'll notice a giant blue spruce—"

Maria Teresa was being interrupted, it seemed; the baby had started crying again. "There must be some reason in God's world why the Gripe Water isn't working," she said, barely concealing her frustration. She cooed some endearments in Italian. "Walter needs me," she said abruptly. "We're going to bed extra early. *Domani*—we'll be seeing you tomorrow. Walter wants to take us on a hike—*Ciao, bella*."

"*Ciao*." Ulyssa had stood in the hallway, receiver in hand. She was shocked by the abruptness with which her cousin had hung up, by the forty years that had passed in a flash. Maria Teresa was a grandmother now. How had it happened? The passage of time was unfathomable. She had roused herself only with difficulty from her stupor, had stood squinting at the numbers on the telephone dial which were looking blurred, wondering about her face in the mirror with the gilded frame, her sallow complexion, the color of her hair, unnaturally ashen. She had seen the

lines of deep fatigue around her eyes and turned away, divining a path back to the guest room, utterly disoriented, her body aching for sleep—

But the sun had risen. And now it was daylight. She glanced at the cluster of dwellings off in the distance, located further up, along the hillside. The sun had yet to reach its zenith, but it was much too bright, incandescent; it was hitting her eyes straight on, making her squint. Her headache was threatening to come back; she wished she had brought her sunglasses. The village looked remote. A tinge of lilac appeared to be clinging to the slate-blue roofs. The dwellings reminded her of an illusion conjured up by a magician, or else of a drawing, two-dimensional, outlined in charcoal.

The visit to the village with Tomas two days before had been an easy stroll, but today, with a weariness that dwelled deep inside her bones, the ascent was more laborious. She decided to take a shortcut up the hill, walking past cattle and sheep grazing behind electric fences, and then skirting a field of ripe wheat. Several women were gathering up the summer's hay with large, wooden rakes, a scene that struck her as bucolic. Ulyssa heard voices, laughing. The traditional burgundy and chestnut-brown color of their headscarves, together with the soft lilac and blue of their peasant dresses with full aprons, complemented the landscape as it had done for centuries.

Further up the hillside, before setting foot on the narrow, paved road that led to the village proper, she stopped to catch her breath in the shade of an apple tree. She stood breathing in the scent of freshly mown grass, before her a meadow that was alive with movement, the jumping of brown grasshoppers and the ceaseless swooping down of meadowlarks who plucked them from the grass.

By the time she reached the outskirts of the village, she was breathing rather heavily. She had been walking at a slower pace for some time when her gaze was arrested by a symbol engraved in the granite of a gate post. It reminded her of the cryptic, rune-like insignia she had seen in her dream, which appeared to have been carved into the stone basin of a fountain. Some time later, upon turning a corner at one of the narrow streets, she spotted yet another runic inscription, remarkably similar in shape, on a cast-iron plate affixed to a large, wooden door. Mystified by the angularity of what appeared to be characters in some foreign alphabet, she stopped to make a sketch of them in her notebook.

The village square was now opening out in front of her; the rust-colored shutters of the San Lorenzo Bar & Grill were closed, and the terrace looked deserted, except for a few pigeons that were strutting about under the tables, pecking at crumbs. The sun umbrellas had yet to be opened. Placed evenly, they resembled sentinels, guarding the place. She headed directly for the fountain, and filling her cupped hands with fresh water gushing from the spout, flung it at her face. The water—astonishing,

so cold—hit her face like a wet sheet. It took her breath away. She stood there, transfixed, as it dribbled down her neck, filled with inexplicable joy, like someone who has finally come home after a lengthy stay abroad.

Shielding her eyes against the glaring light, she noticed at the periphery of her vision a massive clay pot of geraniums, the glorious red of their blooms resembling precious silk, overflowing onto the stone steps below. She approached it, drawn there inexorably by the play of light, thinking she had heard the hum of bees around a trellis draped heavily with honeysuckle. Next to an eglantine were a number of pots filled to capacity with kitchen herbs—sweet basil and summer savory, rosemary and wild marjoram—set against a white-washed stucco wall. A wooden bench bearing the words *Fa ùna pausa* beckoned to her. *Come and Rest*, they proclaimed. But she resisted; the bench stood in the full sun and the glare gave her a sense of vertigo.

Spots of brightness were now dancing before her eyes. The heat was closing in on her again. She looked around, desperate for a place of refuge. Entering a shop, up three stone steps and across a doorsill worn smooth by the passage of feet, she woke as if from a dream, finding herself in a tenebrous domain, its cellar-like coolness enclosing her skin like a mantle.

“*Allegra*,” a kindly voice called out from somewhere near the back of the store. Ulyssa heard a bell tinkle; the door behind closed of its own accord. She removed her straw hat and looked around for something refreshing to consume—an iced cappuccino, perhaps—her mind thinking of a word that would be easy to pronounce, *gelato*, for instance.

A smell she had no name for greeted her nostrils, and an elderly gentleman came toward her, cradling a large round of cheese under one arm, as if it were a slender volume of poetry he had borrowed at the library. He made room for it on one of the shelves in the display case by pushing together a few of the smaller chunks.

“They’re all very good. Supremely good, especially the local ones,” he told her, straightening up. He cut a sliver from one of the larger chunks and presented it to her on the blade of a knife. “It’s made at our local *caschareia*, our very own cheese dairy, over in Savognin.”

The aroma hit her palate, pungent and unequivocal, evocative of barnyards, alpine meadows, and forest floors.

“They sell 250 tons of it each and every year,” he added. “I’ve been told they’re shipping it all over the world. But to tell you the truth, the Swiss probably eat most of it themselves.”

“I’ll have two-hundred grams, please—no, make that four-hundred grams,” she corrected herself, thinking ahead, to the picnic she and Tomas would soon be sharing with Maria Teresa and Walter.

“From the taste, you can tell how happy the cows are,” the storekeeper told her, his face crinkling into a friendly smile. “The cows are led up to the alpine pastures and there they graze on herbs and flowers all summer

long. If the milk is good, the cheese is even better. That's how we think around here, anyway."

He weighed the triangle of cheese on an old-fashioned scale.

"I once visited the alpine meadows of Radons, long ago," Ulyssa said. "There was a goatherd by the name of Peter. He was a few years older than me—"

"The cheese, she's a little overweight," he said, wiping his hands on the gray apron he wore over his short-sleeved shirt and tie. "I could shave some off, I guess."

"Not to worry—it will make the pleasure of eating it last longer."

He quickly wrapped the wedge of cheese in brown butcher's paper on which he marked the price with a stub of pencil tucked behind his right ear and wiped his hands on the apron. "Anything else I can get you?" He looked at her expectantly. In the small, round lenses of his old-fashioned spectacles, Ulyssa saw a pot of geraniums, reflected twice. Someone else she had known had worn spectacles like these. Who was it?

"I also need some bread," she told him.

"Of course—our peasant bread, it is the stuff of life." He directed her toward the back of the store, where a vast array of merchandise was stacked on shelves reaching up to a low ceiling constructed of dark, wooden beams. Bottles of wine lay next to cleaning supplies, dry and canned foods were stacked along with household items and farmer's supplies along with kitchen utensils. There was stationary. And there were socks and gloves. She fingered an antiquated pair of finely-knitted, woolen stockings and opened a tiny pot of chamomile salve, overcome with inexplicable nostalgia. Her shopping basket was soon filled with treasures—a dark, round loaf of bread and a *Turta da nuschs grischuna*, the walnut specialty of the region, among them.

Near the front of the store, tucked away in a nook that could have easily been overlooked, she came upon a revolving stand stocked with postcards. She was picking through them—views of Savognin and surrounding villages, for the most part—when she came upon a panoramic view of the area in black and white. The postcard had beveled edges and depicted the neighboring villages of Riom and Parsonz. The words *Rhaetia Ampla* were written in dainty, white script embellished with curlicues. She slipped the card into her shopping basket and headed toward the checkout counter.

"This is a very old picture of our castle," the storekeeper said, pausing in the middle of ringing up her purchases. "Surely you would like one that depicts a more recent view."

"No, this is the one I prefer, thank you. You see, that is how I remember the castle—without a roof."

"That was a very long time ago," he said thoughtfully. "Of course, you know what happened to the original roof, don't you?"

Ulyssa shook her head.

“In 1864, a great blaze consumed the village of Riom. It destroyed every building and barn. Only the castle was saved, because it was some distance from the village, on its own, little knoll.” He paused to stuff her grocery items into a bag. “Of course, with winter fast approaching, the villagers needed a roof over their heads, no? In the end, the castle relinquished all of its wood. It was a tragedy, of course.”

Ulyssa looked more closely at the postcard now lying beside the cash register.

“The trusses were removed first,” he continued. “After that, the beams supporting the floors were salvaged. The castle looked bald without a roof—more like a stately, old lady who has lost all her hair.”

Ulyssa stared at the cash register with its silver-embossed flower garlands. She imagined the plight of the villagers, the roof trusses, rafters, posts and struts that had to be sacrificed. She felt regret at the thought of so much beauty and stateliness disappearing, gone forever. The castle had been stripped of its magnificence after enduring for centuries.

“The stones that made up the ramparts were pulled down and became the walls of our houses,” he went on. “It must have saved the stonecutters a lot of work, I imagine.”

Ulyssa looked around, at the support beams and dark wood along the ceiling of the store. “What a great sacrifice,” she said, her throat closing up.

“Oh, please don’t cry,” the storekeeper begged her. “It is life. Nothing ever stays the same, ever. There are new generations, new people coming along. New memories are being created all the time. I really don’t know what to charge you for the postcard,” he said after a pause. “It is so very old, antiquated and obsolete, if you ask me. Please—a keepsake for you.”

“Thank you, I shall cherish it.” Tears began to well up in her eyes. “I live in Canada, now, but I’ve come back to refresh old memories. It’s regrettable to find how much things have changed.”

“Oh, please. Don’t cry again. You have noticed it, haven’t you? The castle, it is now fully restored.” He nodded at a large poster on the wall behind him, featuring a colored version of the present-day castle, along with a date, a time, and the words *Summer Concert Series*, written in red ink along the bottom.

Ulyssa glanced at her wristwatch. “I almost forgot,” she said. “The reason I came here in the first place was to buy two tickets to this Saturday’s show at the castle.”

“It’s a good thing you are buying them now,” he commended her, “because they are almost all sold out.”

“It must be a popular event.”

“It is summer, no?” He gave a shrug. “Everybody likes to work hard and play hard, especially the young.”

Ulyssa retrieved the wallet from her packsack and paid for her purchases with a fifty-franc bill.

The storekeeper pushed the change back across the counter.

“Before I forget,” Ulyssa said, pulling out her notebook and opening it at the page where she had sketched the rune-like marks. “May I ask you—I’ve seen them in the village—would you tell me what these mean?”

“Ah—wait here a moment.” He turned away. “I’ll call my wife, Tatta. She’ll be able to tell you.”

A rather stout woman with lanky, gray hair came out of the storage room. She put a pair of spectacles on her nose and looked closely at Ulyssa’s sketch. “In the past,” she began, breathing rather heavily, “the land around here was held in common by the people of Riom.”

Ulyssa discerned a faint shadow of a moustache on her upper lip. She found Tatta’s pronunciation oddly charming.

“With so many large, open fields, but many more smaller plots—steep ones, up along the hillside—they needed to decide.” She turned to her husband. “How would you put it, Duri?” Ulyssa was quite certain she heard vestiges of the old Rhaeto-Romansh dialect in her voice.

“It was a matter of assigning the plots,” her husband put in. “For instance, whose lot would it be to cultivate what plot?”

Tatta looked at Ulyssa. “Let fate decide, the people said.”

“Fate?” Ulyssa was puzzled.

“Every one of the householders was asked to put his mark on a piece of wood,” Duri added.

“To identify themselves, you know—like so,” Tatta said, wagging her chin at the drawing in Ulyssa’s notebook.

“Each year the householders assembled at the village square. The pieces of wood—they were drawn at random,” the storekeeper said.

“At random?” Ulyssa looked at him, aghast.

“Share and share alike,” Tatta said lightheartedly. “You know, every year, you cultivate a different plot.” She smiled, satisfied.

“Till a new field, each year—why not?” Duri chimed in. “Fate, it has a way of making everything simple.”

“Those markings in your notebook. They belong to a particular family,” Tatta said. “The family—their kith and their kin—”

“And the name of the family,” Ulyssa said, much too impatient now to let her finish, “what would it have been?”

“The family, it belongs to my aunt,” Tatta said, straightening up and removing her spectacles. “They have been living in Riom for a very long time.”

Ulyssa looked directly into a pair of hazel eyes.

“You really want to know?” Tatta hesitated. “My aunt’s name, it is Ida Janutin.”

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