

The New Orphic Review

Editor-in-Chief
Ernest Hekkanen

Copy & Associate Editor
Margrith Schraner

Managing Editor
Michael Connor



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Contents

Volume 11 Number 1 Spring 2008

Ernest Hekkanen	4	<i>Driven to Distraction</i>
Richard Coan	6	<i>Both of Me</i>
Steven Michael Berzensky	15	<i>Four Poems</i>
Priscilla Long	18	<i>Two Poems</i>
Michael Humfrey	20	<i>Off the Rails</i>
Frederick Davis	26	<i>Three Poems</i>
Thomas D. Drescher	31	<i>Lu's Laundry</i>
Daniel J. Langton	35	<i>Three Poems</i>
Greg Evason	37	<i>Five Graphic Poems</i>
Carol Hamilton	40	<i>Three Poems</i>

Featured Poet / 43 / Susan Andrews Grace ***Dialectic of the One and the Many***

Ernest Hekkanen	50	<i>Reviewing Susan Andrews Grace</i>
Gary Pedler	53	<i>Three Poems</i>
Irene Mock	58	<i>The Nightmare King</i>
M. A. Schaffner	70	<i>Five Poems</i>
Margrith Schraner	74	<i>To Travel the Distance</i>
Ernest Hekkanen	82	<i>The Tick</i>

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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.

Driven to Distraction

Ernest Hekkanen

I HAVE A CONFESSION to make. When I have finished writing a book, I am none too stable, mentally. I refer to this state as *writers' psychosis*. In large part it is due to mental exhaustion, which, for me, is the direct result of employing my imagination for extended periods of time, almost unceasingly.

This is the state I find myself in upon completing my latest novel, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, which will be launched in late April or early May of this year. I worked on it in an obsessive manner because of its timely contents. The events take place in Nelson, B.C., where an intrepid group of anti-war activists decides to erect a War Resisters Monument during a time of war. It depicts the resulting fear and paranoia felt by many townspeople, when right-wingers from across North America subject the local Chamber of Commerce to a barrage of hate mail.

Right now, as I write this editorial for the spring issue of *The New Orphic Review*, my frontal lobe feels heavy and clay-like. I find it difficult to articulate the simplest of notions. Prior to leaving the house, I check the kitchen range three or four times to make certain the burners have been turned off, for I don't seem to be quite of this world. On one occasion, even though I could picture myself having turned off the stove, I marched two blocks back to the house to make certain the burners were indeed off. Jarring noises make me jump. The prospect of having to relate to people fills me with anxiety. I prefer to be alone. The smallest task, even cooking dinner, is comparable to single-handedly raising a house. Long, solitary walks appeal to me more than anything else. Reading is an activity I try to avoid at all costs, for fear of pushing my mind over the edge.

Uncertainty about having turned off the burners of the kitchen range is

the first sign that my mental fabric has been stretched so thin it is in danger of being torn asunder. At this point in the game, I resort to brewing large pots of valerian and skullcap tea, which I drink to quiet my frayed nerves and exhausted mind. Usually it takes three to four days of steady administration of this concoction to create what I think of as a normal, everyday state of mind. During the transition, I am easily driven to distraction. Sounds are like static in my ears, I suffer from headaches and strange twitching sensations behind my eyes. My corpus callosum becomes a thoroughly congested thoroughfare, or so it seems. On one occasion, after I finished writing a book I had been contracted to write, I was unable to read for nearly three months, because I couldn't hold the words still on the page; they kept jumping around, as though they were performing acrobatic feats of their own free will. It was a condition accompanied by deep depression. I resorted to sitting in the alcove of our living room and staring out the window for hours at a time, contemplating the Brownian movement of dust motes.

I refer to this state as *strapping on my drool cup*.

For me, creating an ephemeral community of characters who will come to occupy the pages of a book is comparable to what I imagine the first lungfish (or similar creature) must have experienced upon crawling out of the primordial ooze onto dry land. What an exhausting experience it must have been for our long-ago ancestor to have drawn oxygen from the rarified atmosphere that enveloped the earth! I wonder what drove that creature to attempt the feat of becoming newly terrestrial. Furthermore, did that feat involve an act of imagination? Did our ancestor have to imagine—even in the most rudimentary, primordial fashion—something better awaiting it on the shore? And if so, did that ingredient of imagination prove to be so useful to its adaptation it was subsequently passed down to us in our genes?

I can picture the first lungfish lying prostrate from exhaustion on the shore, gasping for breath in its new-found terrestrial environment, and then, with a writhing flap of its body, rolling back into its normal watery environment, where, after a period of rest and rehabilitation, it was ready to venture forth onto dry land once more. That is how I feel upon completing a book and sending it off to the printer's. I experience the need to rest in the lolling waves of commonplace experience prior to hurling myself back onto the ephemeral shores of my imagination.

There is at least one story in this issue of the *NOR* that deals with the condition I have just finished describing.

RICHARD COAN is a Professor Emeritus of Psychology and resides in Tucson, Arizona. His books and articles in psychology deal with such topics as child personality, alternative views of the ideal person, the evolution of consciousness, and masculinity/femininity. He has published three novels: *A Princess for Larkin*, *Shaul of Tarsos*, and *Horatio*.

Both of Me

Richard Coan

THERE'S SUNLIGHT COMING through the window. I can see it without even opening my eyes. It must be time to get up, but I might as well lie here a little longer and try to make sense out of that godawful dream. Was it a dream? It seemed so real, and it scared the hell out of me. Oh, forget it! I can't deal with that. I don't want to go back through that stuff. I'd rather get up and go about my business and think about more pleasant things.

OK. My eyes are open now—but—hunh? What? Where—where am I? This isn't my room. How did I get here? Why am I lying on this bed with all my clothes on? OK, slowly now, let's think this through. Come on now—surely I can handle this. I'll figure it out. OK, I'm on my feet now, and I can peek through the blinds. I must be up on the second floor, and those things out there look familiar—the big trees, the uncut grass—just lots of weeds, and a dirt path running through it all. But I can't quite place it. Must be a part of town I don't know too well. I'd better get out of here.

All right, out the door. This hallway looks familiar too. Pretty sure I've been here before, but where the hell am I? I'd better find a stairway. Looks like a long table down there with something bulky on top of it. Oh no, that looks like a body. Maybe I'm not supposed to see this, but I'd better take a look. Jesus Christ! It can't be. This guy on the table looks like me, and there's a big gash on his head with blood oozing out. How is this possible? It sure looks like my body on the table, but I'm standing here. Look—same arms, same hands, same face, eyes, ears, nose, mouth—except that he has all those bruises. It can't be me. That guy's dead, and I'm standing here alive, looking at him.

Wait a minute—that dream. I was being chased by a bunch of soldiers

in some kind of brown uniforms, about six of them. My legs were getting tired, and I was out of breath. I could hardly stand up, and I ducked into a dark alley. I hoped they wouldn't see me there, but they did, and they followed me in. But it was a blind alley. I came to a high wall, and there was no way out. They just started hitting me with clubs—my arms, my neck, my head. Then I blanked out. I don't remember anything happening after that.

Well, it was just a dream. My body feels OK now. I don't have any bruises, but—but that guy on the table does, just where they hit me. I can see where the flesh and the skin on the neck are all messed up—the left arm too, and the head is bloody. So in the dream, I must have imagined that I was him, somebody who looks like me, and experienced the stuff that was happening to him just when it was happening.

Oh no! That's not the way it was. People have been whispering about some kind of weird cloning experiments the crazy government scientists have been doing. Cloning people, but not just starting from the egg—making the whole body somehow, a body just like the one they're copying. Oh hell, nobody could do that. How could they create the whole brain, with all those neurons in just the right places—all that kind of stuff? But—but—except for the bruises, this guy looks exactly like me. OK, so he has to be some sort of clone.

Oh, Holy Jesus! He is me! I'm the clone, and somehow they put his mind in me—or they put my mind in this clone body. Well, whoever the hell I am now, I'd better get out of here. And I'd better take it slow and easy, so it'll look like I'm supposed to be here and I know what I'm doing if somebody sees me.

So—down this stairway. And now the door right next to it here on the ground floor. Out we go. So far, so good, a nice easy stroll on this dirt path and I can get out of here. This weedy plot is surrounded by high buildings, but up ahead the path will take me between two of them and probably out to a road.

Oh, oh, this does not look so good. Four soldiers have just emerged from that space ahead, and they're coming toward me. Big beefy guys. They're all staring at me. The tall bozo with the mean look on his face and black, curly hair yells, "Hey you! Come with us. We have some work for you to do."

They surround me and lead me through the weeds to a corner where I see a shovel leaning against a tree. The guy says, "Now pick up that shovel and dig a big, deep hole here. Make it about six feet long and two or three feet wide. Come on, get to work now."

Well, what else can I do? I know I can't outrun these guys, and a shovel isn't much of a weapon when they've all got guns and clubs. I don't want a repeat of last night. So I start digging, while those four guys stand around in a big circle, all of them about twenty feet from where I'm

digging. At least the ground is pretty soft. Maybe I can give them what they want in an hour or two—or three—or four. Ugh! Anyway, I'll dig the hole. Then maybe I can get away from here.

I just focus on the digging, one shovelful after another. My arms ache—the muscles over my shoulders and down in my forearms. My hands feel red and sore. Ooh! Those muscles in my lower back! It's going to be hard to stand up straight again, but maybe it'll feel good when I can.

I keep digging, and the hole is getting pretty big. I notice there are only two soldiers standing by now—the one with black curly hair and another one. Now I see the other two soldiers returning. They're carrying something between them on a board. It looks like a body all chopped up into pieces.

Mean Curlyhead says, "Now bury this stuff. Dump it in the hole and cover it up!"

Oh God! Now I can see. It's my body! I hear an engine. A big truck has come in, rumbling along, past the building on the far side of the weed patch. Well, I notice the soldiers have all turned to look at it, and I grab my head and toss it into some thick bushes on the other side of the tree. I'll be damned if they'll make me bury my own head. Maybe I can sneak back when it's dark and retrieve it.

Well, I can't let them see the head is missing. I pile the rest of my body in the hole and start shoveling dirt over it. So—they haven't noticed a thing, but I have a rotten feeling in my stomach. My legs are down there in two separate pieces. And my arms. The rest is one big chunk. I just have to get it over with. It's a lot easier to shovel the dirt back in than it was to dig it out in the first place. So shovelful after shovelful, and it all goes in. I sorta scrape the dirt around on the top to level it out, and I lean the shovel back against the tree.

Now Curly Blackhead comes over and says, "Well, I guess that's it for today." He turns and walks away. Then all four soldiers head across the weed patch toward the truck. They all get in, and the driver turns the truck around and drives away.

OK. I guess I'm free for the time being to go anywhere I want to. There's nobody else in sight. I can just walk through the space where the truck came in here and hit the road. But I can't just leave my own body here, and it's all going to be rotten meat if I don't do something fast. I notice that someone left a shopping cart from the Shadeway supermarket over there to my right next to the trash can.

I don't have much of a plan, but I get the cart and grab a couple of daily papers that someone threw in the trash, and I pull the cart back over to my grave. Now I just have to dig frantically and hope those bozos don't come back before I'm through. First I get an arm, then a leg, and now I can hoist the trunk into the cart. After pulling out the other arm and leg, I retrieve my head from the bushes and add that to the pile. I spread

newspapers over the top and tuck them down around the sides.

I wheel the cart out to the road. I don't see any familiar streets or buildings, but I know I have to keep moving. It's funny that I still don't see any people out here. I'm just passing block after block of dark, unlit buildings. Ah, here's something interesting. I'm in front of a small grey stone building. There are no signs with words on them, but on a big pillar next to the door is a caduceus—an image of a staff with a couple of snakes intertwined around it. That's a medical symbol. I push the cart up to the door and ring the bell.

The door is opened by a short man with very dark piercing eyes who stares at me intently. "Can I help you?" he says.

"I hope so. Are you a doctor? My bother is in this cart, and he's badly hurt."

The little man doesn't respond immediately. He seems to be sizing me up. Then he says, "Yes, I'm Dr. Azuma. Daoud Azuma. Let's see what we have here." He lifts up the newspaper, takes a quick glance, and lays it back down. "Quick, quick, quick! Let's get him inside. Did anyone see you come here?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Good. Look, I've seen people cut up like this before. This is the work of the men in brown uniforms, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Is it too late to do anything for him?"

Again Dr. Azuma just stares at me for a moment. "OK, I just have to trust you not to talk to anyone about this. Look, I know about the cloning those thugs do, but I have some special equipment of my own. If you managed to bring me all the pieces, I think I can do something for your brother, provided he hasn't been dead for more than 24 hours."

"You can actually put him back together and bring him back to life?"

"Yes, I can. All I have to do is run each piece through the revivifier. Then I tape the parts together to hold them in place when I run the body through the reintegrator. The rays in there cause all the tissues to knit back together. Then I run the whole body back through the revivifier."

"Can I help you with any of this?"

"No, you'd better just leave your brother with me and get away from here. If those thugs have a record of your DNA code, they may be able to pinpoint you with their electronic spotter and come looking for you here. Just come back in a few hours."

That makes sense. I must have the same DNA as my original body, but if those thugs are going to spot either one of us, it's better if we're not in the same place. I just have to trust Dr. Azuma and hope he knows what he's doing. So I'm back on the street and walk on another mile or so. Now the scenery looks more familiar. This is on the edge of my own neighborhood. There's a bar I recognize. I've been in there before, and I can't think of anything I'd rather do right now than go in there, sit down,

and have a big swallow of hard liquor.

As I walk up to the bar, Chris the bartender sees me and grins. The way he heaves his bulk from side to side, he reminds me of a bouncy, animated version of John Goodman.

“Hey, Slick,” he says, “you look like a guy who’s been run over by a garbage truck, then dragged in by the cat. I bet you need a drink, and I’ve got just the thing. How about a shot of dragonweed nectar with a pinch of moon dust?”

“Sure. What the hell,” I say.

When he sets the drink down, I reach in my pocket and find a crumpled ten-dollar bill. As I start to set it out on the counter, he says, “No. Forget it. This one’s on me.”

“Thanks.” The shot glass contains a bluish green liquid. I take it to a little table in the corner and sit down. I take a tiny sip. The stuff has a strange, unearthly flavor. I’ve never tasted anything like this before, and I get a curious prickly feeling on my tongue. Well, old Chris must know what he’s doing, so I down the rest of it in one gulp. For a moment, as it slides down my gullet, I feel as if I’m floating up toward the ceiling, then settling back into the chair.

With one shot taken on an empty stomach, I would expect to feel a bit of a glow, not really drunk but a little bit high, but something different is happening. I’ve got this ripply feeling going up and down my belly and chest, and there’s something weird about the room—it’s breathing. The walls stretch out, then contract, and they do this over and over again in a steady rhythm. And the surfaces of the walls undulate and writhe like living flesh. This is too weird. I have to get out of this place.

I stumble out the door, but I find that everything out there has changed too. The street is pulsating, and trees are waving their branches as if they’re dancing to some exotic beat. Oh well, I’ve been having strange encounters with people of late. Trees are still likely to be a little more trustworthy. I head for a nearby park in hope of sorting things out.

Good! There are no people in the park. I take the path leading into the middle of the place and sit on a bench next to a big oak tree. I notice that tiny bubbles are now falling from the sky, but I’m not going to worry about them. Maybe some meteorologist could explain this odd event. Actually they feel good on my skin, and I try catching a few as they fall.

I’m startled to hear a deep voice. “You’ve really been through a lot in the last couple of days.” But there’s no one there. Oh yes, there is—the tree. It seems to be leaning a bit to the side and looking at me. “I’m glad you sat here,” it says. “It gives us a chance to talk. I don’t get around much myself.”

“Is there something you want to tell me?” I say.

“Of course. I can see that you’re really beside yourself today.”

“Yeah. Whatever that means.”

“It means exactly what I said. You are simply beside yourself, and the most important thing to remember is that what is is and what isn’t isn’t. Perhaps I can make it clearer by stating the converse proposition: yourself is beside you. There—I believe that pretty well covers it. Is there anything else you would like to know?”

“Yeah, what does this all mean?”

“Ah, yes. You would like to know the ultimate meaning of things. Well, it is important to consider the many ways of stating the question and attempt to seek an answer to each. For example, what is the sound of one hand clapping? What sort of person were you before you were conceived? What thoughts arise in a flower as a bee gathers its pollen? Do the flapping wings of a butterfly transmit the same melody as the leaves of a crocus? Now when you have answered all those questions, you are prepared to deal with the more fundamental issue: What is the ultimate meaning of life and all that is? And the answer is very simple: What is is and what isn’t isn’t.”

“But that’s just a truism—a tautology.”

“Very good,” says the tree. “I think you’ve finally grasped it. I taught you all that I know, and you learned it.”

I’ve had enough of this conversation. So I get up and start to walk toward my apartment. But the bubbles are getting bigger, and they’re falling faster and harder. Jesus! These aren’t bubbles anymore. They’re frogs. It’s raining frogs, and the walk is getting covered with little hopping green creatures. I start running, trying to avoid stepping on the lively amphibians that wiggle and bounce up and down in my path.

At last I reach my apartment and open the door. Everything inside is changed. The walls are painted bright yellow, orange, and green, and all my books and furniture are missing. I’m greeted by a smiling trio—three men who all look exactly like me. And they say in unison, “Hi! We’ve been waiting for you to show up. Our quartet is now complete. Which part would you like to sing?” They don’t wait for an answer. They start dancing around me, crooning some silly boppety-bop tune. Then they start dancing right up the walls and across the ceiling in Fred-Astaire fashion. I don’t want any part of this scene, and I step right out again and slam the door.

It’s the middle of the night now, and I have no idea how long I’ve been wandering around. I figure it might be time to head back to Dr. Azuma’s place, and I’m not eager to venture off anywhere else. It’s a long hike back, but I finally get there. The place is dark, but I ring the bell, and Dr. Azuma opens the door. “Good,” he says. “I was hoping it was you. Come in quickly.” He shuts the door behind me. “Your brother is doing very well. It all went even better than I expected. Come. He’ll want to see you.”

He leads me down the hall, opens a door, and motions for me to enter.

As I step into the small room, he shuts the door and leaves me there. I sit down on the one chair facing the solitary bed. My selfmate is now sitting up in bed. Seeing me, he looks puzzled for a few seconds. Then the quizzical expression slowly transforms into a smile.

“So,” I say to the patient, “how are you doing? Did they get you all back together the right way? How do you feel now?”

“It really felt like I was going through hell for a long time.” His words seem to tumble forth quite freely now. “Then there was sort of a dead space where I couldn’t do anything. But once I got in this clinic, things got better and better. The doctor must have found a way to glue me back together and oil my joints and hinges.” Oh Christ—what’s happening now? When I started talking, I was sitting in that chair listening to the words, and by the time we got to “joints and hinges,” I was the one talking. I mean—I *am* the one who’s talking, as I sit here leaning back against these pillows. And that guy who looks like me is sitting in the chair. How did I get from that ear to this mouth?

And what’s the matter with him? He isn’t moving. His right hand is up in the air, and it looks like it’s frozen in that odd position. He’s looking at me, but his eyes don’t move or blink, and his lips are slightly parted, but they don’t move either. Well, I must be in better shape than he is, even if I do have all these sore places and big scars where I got stitched back together. God—he looks like a wax dummy from Madame Tussaud’s museum sitting there like that, not a real flesh and blood human. Hell, he could be a robot or an android. Maybe that’s what they really make in those experiments where they’re supposed to be making clones.

Anyway, it seems I was in his body after they cut me up, and I thought I was burying my own body. And I had the good sense when I was inside him to dig myself up and get my body back together again. And now I’ve evidently popped back into this body. I’ve got the me in the it, body and soul together, or body and mind, whatever that’s all about.

Hey, those damned butchers must have actually killed me when they chopped me to pieces. But something in me didn’t die. It only slept. Ah yes, to die—to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream. Yeah, that’s what I’ve been doing in that other body—dreaming. Well, let’s not shuffle off this mortal coil again too soon. I don’t care for dreams like that.

Well, what do I do now? I should get out of here—I think I’m up to it. I can’t be sure I’m safe from those butchers if I stay here. But what about this other guy? He doesn’t look like he’s ready to go anywhere. I could just leave him here. No, that doesn’t seem right. I owe him a lot. He saved me—or maybe I saved me, using his body.

Would you look at him now? Just sitting there frozen on the spot. I’ll say this—he really is a handsome son of a bitch. There’s no getting around that, but he doesn’t look any stronger than me. Still the two of us working together could maybe keep either of us from getting chopped up again.

Yeah, him and me against the world. But that idea is going nowhere unless I can get him to start moving again.

Oh, oh! I hear voices outside this room. I thought there was nobody out there but the doctor. Loud, angry voices, and somebody screaming, “OK, Azuma. You’re coming with us, and we’re going to smash all your fancy equipment.” Christ! Those bozos are going to shut down this clinic and drag him away. I have to get out of here before they spot me—or us.

“Hey you! Clone, brother, whatever. Hey, hey, hey! Snap out of it! Stop staring at me like that!” Oh, it’s no use. He’s not going anywhere. OK, Old Buddy, I really have to get out of here, and I need those clothes you’re wearing more than you do. You’ve got my clothes on anyhow, and what you should be wearing is this nice big, fuzzy, sexy old nightgown tied in back. OK now. We hoist you up on this bed. Ugh—you really feel like too too solid flesh—but thank God you’re staying in one piece. Now the clothes—oh hell, I don’t have time for this. Those bozos’ll bust in here any second now. Well, Old Buddy, I gotta say goodbye. But I hope to see you again when you’re up and about—if we both survive.

There’s still a lot of noise down the hall, and I hear big feet clomping toward this room. I sure can’t go out that way. I douse the light. If I have to, I can hide under the bed, but if I can get the window open, I may be able to slip out of here before they open the door. Ah, the window slides right up, and I dive head first into the bushes outside. It’s almost pitch black out here, and I figure I may be able to get down the street without being spotted. So I creep along the side of the building. When I reach the front corner, I take a careful look. The street lights are pretty dim, but I don’t see any people out there. So I gingerly step out to the sidewalk and start walking down the street. Ooh, it feels weird to be out here on the street in this stupid gown. It’s open in back, and I can feel the cold breeze whipping between my legs, but this is no time to worry about that.

Jesus! There’s a bunch of soldiers a few doors down the street behind me, and they’re running toward me. It looks like the same thugs who chased me last night. I’m running as fast as I can, but I feel weak and my joints are still a bit stiff, and this gown is getting in my way. So, off it comes, and I fling it back over my shoulder. If there’s anyone right behind me, maybe that’ll slow him down. I turn into an alley. Oh, no! Not this again! It’s the same alley I ran into last night. I’m surrounded by high walls, and the alley ends in a wall up ahead. But hey! That thing in the wall. It looks like a coal chute. I lift the lid and dive in. I zip right down the chute into utter darkness, but I don’t hit anything hard. In fact, I seem to have landed on something soft and cushiony.

Ah, it feels so good just to stretch out and lie here on my back with my eyes closed. It’s a funny thing—I had the feeling just a moment ago that I was falling into a very dark place. And now it doesn’t seem quite so dark. There must be sunlight coming in here from somewhere. I open my

eyes a crack. Yeah! This is all right. I'm in my own bed in my own room. My neck feels a little sore and stiff. I must have been sleeping in an awkward position. Anyway, it must be time to get up and head for the bathroom. That's odd—that black stuff on my hands. Wonder where that came from. Didn't I wash my hands before I went to bed? Oh, now there's something really weird. In the mirror I can see a thin red line that goes all the way around my neck. It reminds me of that crazy dream I had, being chased by those guys and getting my head chopped off. But you can go nuts trying to make sense of your dreams. The line will go away, whatever it is, and I can see that this is going to be a beautiful day. Oh well, I'd better eat my breakfast and get ready for work.

STEVEN MICHAEL BERZENSKY (Mick Burrs) has published a half-dozen books of poetry. *Variations on the Birth of Jacob* received the 1998 Saskatchewan Poetry Award. His critically acclaimed *The Names Leave the Stones* was published in 2001. A former editor of *Grain* magazine, he has a half-dozen editing credits to his name; he and Allan Briesmaster recently edited *Crossing Lines: Poets Who Came to Canada in the Vietnam War Era* (Seraphim Editions, 2008). He was a previous Featured Poet in *The New Orphic Review*.

Steven Michael Berzensky / **Four Poems**

Soliloquy of a Hamlet Spider

Why am I so discontent, nearly suicidal?
Is it because I continue to divide
My simple hunger for any wayward fly
From the exquisite necessity of spinning silk?

Of what value is this temporary pageant
Making off-kilter webs that catch no prey,
Webs displaying too much open space, allowing
All those winged meals to sail straight through?

No more shall I be a Hamlet spider—

I, who scurry to the safety of shadows,
I, who shiver in a webless corner, contemplating

My hidden place in the unproductive darkness.

The empty air needs my most elaborate patterns
To give it shimmering shape, make it reverberate with light.

Watching Brodsky Walk Backwards

The poet has learned how to move in reverse.

We watch him luminous in his large navy-blue overcoat,
his body backing up along the sidewalk.

He enters a barred gate, keeping his back to it,
saunters retrograde along a leaf-strewn walkway,
sidles gingerly past the corner of a house
and backwards weaves his way through a patio,
passing four white lawn chairs and a white table.

Now he twists his body through the doorway
in the peeling white brick wall. The darkened door
with its glass panes shuts quietly in front of him.

Though the walking trick is an optical illusion,
this is his closing stanza. Imageless, he leaves us.
The man known as Brodsky disappears forever.

Dreams in a Jar

If only we could capture our dreams
And keep them capped inside a mason jar,
Each dream a small star flickering at our bedside:

They could light our way every day,
Return us to the warm rescuing hug of sleep—

Especially when the nights seem darkest
And our most ghostly memories leave us stuck
Inside an old long cave with its coal dust shadows—

Then these ephemeral fireflies, these minuscule angels,
These sparks of dream so vivid and mysterious
Could guide us below the clouds of heaven

Like paper lanterns swaying by the lakeside,
Leading us along our pebbled pathways,
In and out of the drowsy mist we know as twilight.

Theology of the Dislocated Body

Time washes over the body, eventually
wearing it down, breaking it up, turning it
back into clumps of air, into clots of dust,
into stray drops of memory, into many
clogged rivulets of blood and dream, unsung.

No matter how hard we try to defy,
there is no stopping this disintegration.

The body that once could lift a bag of rocks
ends up unable to pick up a pebble.
Its long shadow that once could climb a ladder
is now sprawled beside the bottom rung.

Do we simply leave this bewildered husk
to its inevitable fate? Or do we learn to fly
faster than sound into light's complete embrace?

PRISCILLA LONG was honored with a 2006 National Magazine Award for best feature writing for “Genome Tome,” which appeared in *The American Scholar*. Her work has appeared in numerous literary magazines, including *The Southern Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *The Seattle Review* and even *The New Orphic Review*. Other awards include *The Journal*’s Creative Nonfiction Prize, the Richard Hugo House Founder’s Award and the Mary Roberts Rinehart Fund poetry award. She is the author of *Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America’s Bloody Coal Industry* and serves as Senior Editor of www.historylink.org, the online encyclopedia of Washington state history.

Priscilla Long / **Two Poems**

Dutch Interiors

Seventeenth Century Dutch paintings, Seattle Art Museum, 1993

Oak beam, oak table,
pewter bowl, marble tile
scrubbed of sin and scum.
The caged bird sings
and Virtue is a woman
reading in window-seated,
diamond-leaded light.

Among peeled lemons
and pale wine, no Africans choke
in Dutch East India
shipholds, chained to shelves
of dung, phlegm, and blood.
Among lutes and books,
no dying groan
disturbs the varnished light.

Daughter

Far from childhood's cud-calm
evenings, far from great cow eyes,
I sleep my heavy breasts, the drag
and weight of age. My head droops.
I grow herd-proud horns,
dream cow-dung and dewlap,
cow shadows and udders,
my herd-mothers lowing.
In the madrigal
of *Ho Girl* and *Easy Girl*,
I am the girl, calf-licked,
cow-calm, and warm.
I breathe their bovine breath.
I curl to the milk-soft bag
and I am cuddled to the bone.

MICHAEL HUMFREY was born in the West Indies and retired early as a Police Commissioner in Jamaica in order to write. His novels and his works of non-fiction have been published both in England and in the United States. His short stories have appeared in literary magazines in England, the United States, Canada and Australia. He lives in England.

Off the Rails

Michael Humfrey

VINNIE FIRST SAW her late one afternoon in spring. He was on his way home and his train had been halted by a signal a mile outside the town where he worked. It was a place where a ruined barn stood just below the level of the raised track, with a green meadow beyond it. An untidy dirt road led around the margin of the meadow, constricted briefly where it passed between the barn and the track. A girl with fair hair caught up in a single braid on top of her head walked along the road with a dog at her heels.

The girl had looked up from the road towards the stationary train and, without thinking, Vinnie raised his arm and waved to her through the water-stained glass of the carriage window. The girl smiled and returned his wave. Then she walked on with the dog and they had passed behind the raddled brick wall of the old barn and disappeared from his view.

He quite often saw the girl walking her dog at the same spot after that. It was clear that her evening walk usually coincided with the passage of the commuter train taking him home. There was a cluster of cottages in the middle distance beyond the meadow and Vinnie thought she must live in one of them. He secured a window seat whenever he could, and he always waved to her. He did not mind that she failed to return his greeting after that first occasion: it was enough that she sometimes looked up from the dirt road as the train went by, and Vinnie was sure each time that she smiled at him. As the weeks passed, he began to feel that a curious, indefinable bond was being established between the two of them—a liaison no less real just because it was so fleetingly expressed. On those evenings when it rained and there was no sign of her and the dog beside the track, he arrived home restless and unfulfilled.

In time, the girl began to take her place in Vinnie's dreams at night. He would dream that he was walking with her in the evening light on the dirt road, the dog at their heels and the setting sun casting their shadows together on the embankment below the tracks. Together they would glance up as the evening train passed by, and once he caught sight of someone else waving from the window of the leading carriage and saw how he must have appeared to her before they met.

* * *

Vinnie had always been different from other people, and it was not just because of the way he looked. From as far back as he could remember, he had suffered from headaches: they arrived without warning, narrowed his field of vision and clouded his sight with violent patterns of black and orange. When he looked closely at an object, only half of it seemed to be there. For several hours after the pain had ebbed away his speech would still be slurred, the veins at his temples would stand out against his pale skin and he would not be in control of what he did. The headaches made him silent and self-conscious—and always fearful of their sudden, crippling onset.

At school, he had been an object of curiosity. One day in the barren playground, someone had referred to him as 'Skitso' and the name stuck. He was small and frail, played no games and always walked home on his own at the end of the day. His only gift was a talent for drawing. When he was sixteen years old, one of his pencil sketches was entered by his teacher in a regional schools art competition. It was a portrait of a girl with blonde, braided hair—suggested by a photograph he had seen in a magazine—and it won first prize. He was presented with a silver-plated palette knife in a white plastic case. The knife lay on a bed of white satin and his initials had been impressed in gold on the lid of the case. He kept his prize in a little cupboard above his bed and, from time to time, he would fetch it down from the cupboard and set it on the bedside table where he could see it before he fell asleep at night.

* * *

Vinnie left school shortly after winning his prize. His art teacher made an effort to persuade him to stay on: in another year there might be a scholarship available for art college. Vinnie could win it. But Vinnie wasn't interested: he just shook his head and turned away.

Later that month, he found a job with a firm of printers not far from the street where he lived alone with his mother. He was taken on at the beginning to help in the store room: he said little and did as he was told, and his employers were content with him. After a while, it became known that he could draw a bit and, when one of the firm's layout artists retired two years later, Vinnie was brought in from the store room on trial and given some of the man's duties. After that, he spent his time designing the covers of the pamphlets and brochures which were the printers' chief

concern. Occasionally, the firm would receive an order for a full-size book, and once Vinnie was asked to design the jacket. His work was well regarded and the firm were understanding when, from time to time, the headache caused him to miss a day at his desk.

Vinnie's mother died not long after his promotion at the printers and he did not care to live any longer in the old flat where he was born. He found a bed-sit in a village outside the town where he worked, and he traveled the short distance to his job each day by train. When he first arrived in the village he had been invited to a Christmas party in the village hall. He went but, as always, it seemed to him that no one took the trouble to greet him or to put him at his ease. The only girl he asked to dance looked at him for a long moment over the rim of her glass, shook her blonde head and turned away from him without a word. He did not go back to the village hall again.

At the beginning of the new year he bought himself a motorcycle and a braided leather jacket. Every Sunday, if the weather allowed, he would ride aimlessly into the countryside with a can of lager and a packet of sandwiches tucked into his saddle bag. When summer came, he would travel to the coast. There he would sit at the top of the beach with his beer and sandwiches to watch the girls in their swimsuits as they came out of the water, the thin material of their costumes plastered to their hips and riding up in the cleft between their buttocks. He bought himself a pair of second-hand binoculars and, from his place at the top of the sand, he pretended to watch the ships passing on the horizon.

* * *

It was during the third month after he first saw the girl by the ruined barn that he made a very important discovery. He found that if he drew in his sketch book a detailed picture of what he most wished the two of them could do together—and if he cleared his mind of all other thoughts and stared intently at the page—then it was possible for him to leave the drab confines of his room and to enter the world of his drawing. With nothing more than the sharpened point of his pencil, he found that he could create an alternative reality precisely of his own choosing.

At first, he drew just one desired occurrence at a time, beginning with a summer's evening when he imagined that he had taken his motorcycle out to the ruined barn and met her face to face. He drew her smiling shyly at him in the soft evening light, saying yes, she had often seen him at the window of the train; yes, she had always hoped that one day he would come to find her; no, there was no one else in her life either.

Then his drawings began to take on narrative form, like the strip cartoon stories in the Sunday papers that he read. Now they could go together to the beach or eat at some secluded country inn. Soon there was no limit to what they could do together. Before long, his life within the new world of his drawings became more real to him than the real life which lay beyond

the locked door of his room and to which, with growing reluctance, he returned each Monday morning.

In the pictures that he drew he appeared neither awkward nor hesitant. There were no headaches in this new world, no loss of self-control, no sudden stifled access of rage. It was clear that he was the kind of man other people admired. In whatever he chose to undertake, his touch was sure and confident. He was transformed.

It had been evident from the moment that his pencil engineered his first meeting with the girl that they shared the same interests, the same outlook on life. He drew them walking hand in hand by the ruined barn, looking up with amused expressions as the train passed by on its evening run. Once he drew a pale, familiar face at the window of the leading carriage: it was the image of his old, discarded self.

They went out together almost every evening now and always at weekends. They visited the seaside on his motorcycle, her arms locked tightly around his waist. Then the drawings began to show them together in his room: he was releasing her hair from its braid; he was kissing her beside his chair; he was slipping off her blouse; they were embracing on his bed. He drew these last pictures with all the erotic skill at his command. Her head was thrown back as she cried out in her need of him, and his hands were on her breasts. His own orgasm was real in both the separate worlds he occupied as he completed with his pencil the image of them coupled naked in the act of love.

* * *

Vinnie saw her most days that summer from the window of his train. He did not mind at all now if she failed to look up from her walk as he passed by: he knew that she would come later to the privacy of his room as swiftly as he chose to summon her with his pencil from the white surface of his paper. He was happy for the first time in his life.

Then, early in autumn, he saw her one evening in the usual place near the barn and he knew at once that his happiness had run its course: there was a man with her—a thickset man with close-cropped hair. The two of them were walking side by side, the man swinging a stick in his right hand and laughing at something she had said. Just as the train passed by, Vinnie saw the girl reach out and touch his cheek. Neither of them glanced up at the passing train. It was as if Vinnie no longer existed for her—as if all they had done together since their first meeting by the barn counted for nothing. He had been cast aside: she had made a fool of him.

Immediately Vinnie felt the blood gather at his temples. His field of vision narrowed and the jagged patterns of black and orange returned to cloud his sight. By the time the train had braked to stop at his station, the headache had taken him firmly in its grasp. He sensed then that this was going to be like no other headache he had suffered in his life before.

He ate nothing that night, neither did he sleep. His vision cleared, but

the pain built in the space behind his eyes. When daylight came, he selected a fresh page of his sketch book and began to draw.

The picture took him all morning and part of the afternoon, and the pain behind his eyes tightened its grip on him as he worked. What he drew this time was more than a sketch, and he made use of his pastel crayons to give the picture color and to sharpen its perspective. The completed drawing lacked the spontaneity of his pencil sketches: it was rigid, almost photographic in its representation. It was finished by three o'clock.

He looked intently at what he had done for a long time and struggled to banish all extraneous thoughts: but this time he found, no matter how hard he tried, that he could not force his way into the drawing he had constructed with such care. To make this scene come real, he knew he would have to go out and meet her in that other world beyond the confines of his room. There would be no need to keep her long.

He reached up to the cupboard on the wall and transferred the silver palette knife from its bed of white satin to the inside pocket of his braided jacket. Then he looked at his watch, put on the jacket and went outside to fetch his motorcycle from its garage.

Not long after he had gone, a shaft of sunlight entered through the uncurtained window of his room and lit up the two figures in the drawing on his table—the young woman prostrate in the mud of the dirt road with mud in her braided hair, and the man with one hand over her mouth and the other gripping the handle of the palette knife above her throat. The woman's face was partly hidden, but the face of the man was tilted upwards towards the slate-blue sky: it was not the confident, urbane face of the Vinnie of all the previous sketches, however. It was the face of that lesser, more familiar Vinnie, with all the pain showing and the rage, and with blood in his eyes.

* * *

As he waited patiently in the old barn for her to walk by, Vinnie's thoughts were concentrated on the picture he had drawn. He was pleased with what he had created, and with his balanced use of color: quite often in the past he had found it difficult to get the balance right.

Beyond the barn, he heard her dog bark. There were muffled footsteps on the dirt road. As the steps came closer, Vinnie reached into his jacket and gripped the handle of the knife. For a brief moment, he reminded himself again of the artful way in which he had arranged the two figures on the ground. It was, he thought, the most satisfying thing he had ever done. Then he raised the knife to the level of his shoulder and moved towards the doorway.

He had no opportunity to use the blade. The girl sprang backwards as he stepped out of the ruined building and the man walking just behind her brought his stick down across Vinnie's threatening arm. The palette

knife flew out of Vinnie's grasp and went spinning across the muddy surface of the road and into the grass at the edge of the meadow. Then the man kicked Vinnie twice in the pit of the stomach and he collapsed in the mud like a broken doll. The dog growled and sniffed his ankles; and, up on the embankment at that moment, the evening train rolled by.

* * *

At his trial, Vinnie denied nothing. When he was allowed his opportunity to speak he had only one thing to say. The pent-up words seemed to burst out of him in the dock: "He had no right to be there," he shouted, pointing accusingly at the man who had broken his arm. "He had no right. I only drew the two of us."

A few people in the gallery laughed loudly at this cryptic statement and were briskly rebuked by the judge—but Vinnie took no offense. By the time it was all over and they moved to lead him out, he was happy again. There had been a woman in the court with long fair hair worn in a pony tail which hung down to her waist. He was sure that she had smiled at him while evidence was being given. Already he could sense a special bond growing up between them. At the place where he was being sent, he knew that they would always allow him paper and pencils in his room. Tomorrow, when the doctors let him alone in the afternoon, he would sit down at his table and draw her into his life—and this time he would just never let her go.

FREDERICK DAVIS has been a practicing psychiatrist and psychotherapist for over 40 years in Seattle, Washington. He believes that “people have reserves of strength they often hide from themselves,” and his role is to acquaint them with that strength. He is also a poet.

Frederick Davis / **Three Poems**

Yesterday the Same

She sits at the table, smoking,
lights a cigarette while another burns,
called Camels because of the picture,
stares ahead, doesn't talk, breathes hard,

lights a cigarette while another burns,
stares ahead, doesn't talk, breathes hard,
called Camels because of the picture.
Yesterday the same, no one went home,

stares ahead, doesn't talk, breathes hard,
there were steps but no toilet and no time.
Yesterday the same, no one went home,
looking at something—nothing but the wall,

steps but no toilet and no time.
Someone said the moon has no corners,
nothing to see but the wall,
so bright need not be afraid of stars.

The moon has no corners,
sees the stains from leaking water,
so bright it's not afraid of stars.
If all were different we wouldn't be here,

only stains from leaking water—
no one runs fast enough to not feel fear.
If all were different we wouldn't be here,
shades are down, one has a big rip,

no one runs fast enough to not feel fear.
Babies aren't born till mothers let them out,

shades down, one a big rip,
through the rip dirty window, steady rain.

Babies aren't born, till mothers let them out,
no one runs fast enough to not feel fear,
shades down, one a big rip.
If all were different, we wouldn't be here,

no one runs fast enough to not feel fear,
see stains from leaking water.
Everything different, we wouldn't be here,
so bright, not afraid of stars,

see stains from leaking water.
The moon has no corners,
so bright it's not afraid of stars,
she's looking at something, the wall.

The moon has no corners,
steps but no toilet and no time,
nothing to see but the wall.
Yesterday the same, no one went home,

there was no toilet and no time,
stares ahead, doesn't talk, breathes hard.
Yesterday the same, no one went home,
because of the picture on the package,

at the table, smoking, no one went home,
lights a cigarette, no toilet and no time,
called Camels, moon with no corners,
stares straight ahead, not afraid nor alone.

Nice Bread

I'm hungry, Donnie's crying, she stares,
Joyce sucks her thumb, I wah mill,
funny smile, Bread, bread,
I hold my breath, soon the hitting.

Joyce sucks her thumb, I wuh mill,

I hold my breath, hitting soon,
funny smile, Bread, nice bread.
Angels whirl and dip, you fear they'll crash,

hold my breath till hitting starts,
they come when you're hungry and sad.
Angels whirl and dip, you fear they'll crash,
she opens the end of a loaf of bread

they come when you're hungry and sad,
but only when you hold your breath.
She opens the end of a loaf of bread,
hold it as long as you can

but only when you hold your breath.
She puts a piece in her mouth, another,
hold it as long as you can,
everything stops and nothing stops.

A piece, then another and another,
God brings food, five thousands smiles,
a piece, then another and another.
Bread's gone, smoothes the wrapper flat,

God brings food and five thousand smiles,
see them mostly when there's a moon.
She smoothes the wrapper flat,
stares more, No fucking angels!, leaves,

see them mostly when there's a moon.
God brings food, five thousand smiles,
bread gone, she smoothes the wrapper flat,
everything stops and nothing stops.

God brings food, five thousand smiles.
A piece in her mouth, then another,
everything stops and nothing stops,
hold it as long as you can.

A piece in her mouth, then another
when you hold your breath,
hold it as long as you can.
She opens a loaf of bread,

but only when you hold your breath,
they come when you're hungry and sad.
She opens a loaf of bread,
angels whirl and dip, you fear they'll crash,

they come when you're hungry and sad.
I hold my breath as long as I can,
angels whirl and dip, you fear they'll crash,
she has a funny smile. Bread, nice bread,

Donnie's crying, angels whirl and dip,
Joyce sucks her thumb, you're hungry and sad,
funny smile, only when you hold your breath
as long as you can—everything stops but death.

No One Knocked

Onto her chest, Suck, I pull back,
Suck!, I do, nipple stiff, she squirms,
pushed down, under covers, black,
want to shout, covers heavy, voice heavy,

Suck, I do, nipple stiff, squirms,
covers heavy, voice too heavy,
pushed down, under the covers, black.
Thunder last night, rain today,

voice heavy, covers heavy,
no one knocked on the door.
Thunder last night, rain today,
rubs my wrist where pee comes out,

no one knocked on the door.
Clocks only tick when hands have to move,
rubs my wrist where pee comes out,
stayed dark a long time.

Clocks only tick when hands have to move,
rough hair, between her legs, hurts,
stayed dark a long time.
Downtown there was a bridge,

wrist between her legs, rough hair,
she let us cross it twice.
Downtown there was a bridge,
lets go, crawl up her body, sweaty, hot,

she let us cross it twice.
The door wouldn't open, someone there,
lets go, crawl up her belly, sweaty, hot,
slip to the floor, cool, gone to sleep.

The door won't open, someone there,
she let us cross it twice,
lets go, crawl up her belly, sweaty, hot.
Downtown there was a bridge,

she let us cross it twice,
wrist rubbed between her legs.
Downtown there was a bridge,
stayed dark a long time,

wrist rubbed between her legs.
Clocks only tick when hands have to move,
stayed dark a long time,
rubs my wrist where the pee comes out.

Clocks only tick when hands have to move,
no one knocked on the door,
rubs my wrist where pee comes out.
Thunder last night, rain today,

no one knocked on the door,
covers heavy, voice too heavy.
Thunder last night, rain today,
hands on my shoulder, pushed down,

Suck, I pull back, thunder last night,
nipple stiff, no one knocked on the door,
under the covers, clocks only tick,
voice too heavy, never find the light.

TOM DRESCHER, whose family home is in Rossland, B.C., is currently working in San Francisco. “Lu’s Laundry” is one of a series of prose portraits of the San Francisco neighborhood known as Russian Hill, which, though it borders on Chinatown, North Beach and Nob Hill, maintains a character uniquely its own. His poetry has appeared in *The New Orphic Review*.

Lu’s Laundry

Thomas D. Drescher

*I came alone,
I sit alone,
Without regrets that people know me not.
Only the ghost of that old tree,
To the south of the city,
Happens to know that I am an Immortal,
Passing through.*

—Lu Tung-pin (ca. 618-906 Late Tang Dynasty)
in *The Taoist Body*, by Kristofer Schipper.

THE SUNNY LIKENESS of Doris Day on the VendoMatic detergent dispenser, a steel box firmly affixed to the wall of Lu’s Laundry, might just as well have started talking. Her sprightly bobbed hair, polka dot dress and cheerful smile said it all. It told Jim that Lu’s Laundry, which was just across the street and one block over from his apartment, was at least fifty years old. And now, it was going to be closed. Only for one month, Lu promised, but Jim had his doubts. It wasn’t as if Jim didn’t have an abundance of laundries to choose from when Lu’s closed down. These neighborhood Chinese laundries were scattered all about Russian Hill. In just the few blocks along Taylor between Jim’s apartment and Huntingdon Park, there were three laundries and a half-dozen others over on Pacific, Washington, Jackson and thereabouts. But, when Jim did his laundry at Lu’s, he knew that Lu and his dog would be looking out for him, and he couldn’t find that kind of assurance anywhere else.

If Jim didn’t show up when his washing was done, Lu would toss his stuff into the dryer, and he would shove eight five-minute quarters in the coin slot knowing that Jim would pay him back. If Jim had to run off somewhere, he knew that when he came back he would find his clothes

in one of the big cardboard boxes near the dryers. Who knows what might happen somewhere else? People might walk off with your stuff; he had known it to happen! And, that meant you had to hang around and wait for your clothes to be done, like the ghostly patrons who lingered about under the cold fluorescent lights in those more modern laundromats, places with lots of new machines, tidy, uncluttered places, places with clever names like *The Missing Sock*, but places that, for all their allure did not have Lu watching over your wash. No, Jim didn't want to lug his laundry bag an extra couple of blocks to any of those places, but he didn't know how he was going to hold out for an entire month.

The truth is, Jim wasn't being entirely honest; his attachment to Lu's went deeper than that. On the day he first set foot inside Lu's Laundry, now well over a year ago, long since forgotten memories came back to him. The moment Jim laid eyes on the *VendoMatic* he saw himself as a toddler looking up at his mother as she bent over the laundry in the basement of their World War II era home. From the throat of the big sink that reddened her face with steam and bubbled her hands in foam came gurgling sounds somehow connected to the noisy washing machine churning away beside it. He remembered a sprinkling of blue and white detergent powder and the clean smell of bleach. A litter of puppies, eight tiny balls of fur, frolicked and fought and rolled around on the smooth grey polished floor. She would reluctantly give them away, all but one, who for the next sixteen years became Jim's constant friend and companion. He could swear his mother had worn that very same *VendoMatic* polka dot dress as she emptied the washer, picked up the pail of clothespins and shooed him and the puppies outside where she hung the wash out to dry. She had passed away some years ago and for more than thirty years prior to her passing Jim had, for what appeared to him now as empty excuses, seen her only rarely.

"Hey, Lu," he had asked one day, "how old is that machine?"

Lu looked up from his newspaper. "Machine not working," he said proudly.

"Yes, but how old is it?"

"That machine here before me!"

"Really?"

Lu nodded.

"But you've been here a long time, haven't you?"

"Thirty years."

Thirty years. And before that, in the heyday of *VendoMatic*, why, who knows when this place was ever closed for as long as a month? Who knows, thought Jim, how long ago it first opened?

Jim's wardrobe was neither rich nor varied. He pretty much wore the same old outfit—khakis, t-shirts, sweat shirts, white socks and moccasins—on a daily basis. Once he had rotated through all the t-shirts,

underwear and socks, which usually took precisely one week, he would pay a visit to Lu's Laundry. In fact, he saw Lu almost every day. He couldn't help doing so, because the bay window of Jim's apartment faced out onto Broadway, and every morning at 7:30, as Jim sat at his desk looking out the window, he would see Lu's sleek, black dog straining against its collar to pull old Lu up Broadway to Taylor. Occasionally, the dog would spin around and hold at bay startled strangers who had made the mistake of trying to overtake Lu as he climbed haltingly up the steep hill. Then again, in the evening, on these dark December nights when the streets glistened with rain, Jim would see the two of them heading back home under Lu's black umbrella, his faithful companion, ever watchful, leading the way.

Lu spent much of his day in the laundry alone. Business, Lu often lamented, was not what it used to be, and he welcomed the opportunity to share his woes with his customers as they tossed their clothes into the washers, collected them from the dryer, or folded them on the long table that stood beneath the VendoMatic machine. Lu's mother was a constant source of concern, and today Jim, as usual, was not quick enough to escape before hearing the latest installment of her trials and tribulations.

"My mother fell down," began Lu, who had the habit of speaking slowly, one phrase at a time, and then pausing before going on. During the pauses, Lu would look you right in the eyes. Jim waited politely for Lu to continue, looking down into his tired face, noting the details of his graying moustache, his red cheeks, cheeks beginning to sag with age, his thinning black hair. Jim reckoned Lu's mother must be in her 80s.

Once Lu saw that Jim was with him, he continued: "She cracked a rib. Not broke it. Crack it. Very hurt." Lu paused. It was the type of pause one might take to draw on a cigarette, and Lu did smoke. He would spread the *Singtao Daily* across the white enamel top of a washer, pore over every single character of the Chinese language newspaper, and enjoy his cigarette. Lu was not, much to Jim's relief, smoking at the moment. "So, I take her to 'Merican doctor. He say, six, seven months heal. Take Tylenol, aspirin for pain. If not okay ten months, get wheel." Lu paused, closed his eyes wearily, and shook his head, while Jim wrestled with 'wheel.' Then he went on. "She lying down," he said, "cannot get up. She try get up but too much hurt."

Lu paused, but Jim noticed a sly look come over his face as he continued. "Now," he said, "I know which rib it is, because 'Merican doctor have X-ray." Lu smiled, waiting for the full import of this to sink in. "So, I tell my wife," 'Get this medicine from Chinatown.' This is medicine for rub on *outside* of rib. Then, I tell her, "Make this soup for the *inside*. This is chicken soup. You know the bad blood? The bad blood stay in the crack. Very hurt. The chicken soup make it go away. Clean it out. Let new blood come in. Fix it all up."

“Every morning I rub medicine on the outside,” said Lu, moving his hand in a circular motion, “give her the soup,” lifting an imaginary spoon to his mouth. “Every morning. Every night. I use my *hand*.” Lu looked at Jim significantly. He saw the last bit had not quite registered. “Every time I rub the medicine on, I use my hand. Feel it.” Lu held his hand out to Jim, palm up. Jim wasn’t quite sure what Lu wanted him to do, so he didn’t make a move. Seeing that, Lu placed his hand against Jim’s chest. He held it there for a few seconds. “You see? *Very hot*.”

“Whoa!” Jim didn’t actually find Lu’s hand all that hot, but he didn’t want to disappoint him.

Lu smiled. “I rubbing it with my hand. You see. Fourteen, fifteen years meditation. My hand very powerful. You know what?”

“What?”

“Seven days, she get up. No hurt! All fix up.”

“Really? You mean she’s just walking around. No problem?”

Lu nodded. “All fix up. Seven days.”

As he listened to Lu’s tale, Jim thought of all those times when he had walked by the laundry late at night to see Lu standing there alone beneath a cone of light, folding and stacking clothes with only his dog to keep him company. Now, as Jim finished folding the last of his clothes, shoved them into his laundry bag and hoisted it over his shoulder, he forgot his own predicament and found himself wondering what, after all these years, Lu would do with himself while waiting for that one month to come to an end, that one month during which there would be no Laundry to open up in the morning, no customers to talk to, no clothes to look after, to stand guard over, no tales to tell, and, if Lu *tai tai* had her way, no idle moments in which to read the paper, and almost certainly no cigarette to smoke.

That one month came and went and for many months that followed the doors of Lu’s Laundry remained locked. After a month or two, someone plastered yellowing pages of the *Singtao Daily* up against the large glass storefront window, and then one day a sign appeared saying there had been a management change. In the night the garish light from a naked bulb illuminated Lu’s and when Jim passed by on his evening walks he could see through the cracks in the crude newspaper screen that the place had been gutted. The old linoleum floor had been ripped out, squat rusty pipes reached up from the floor where their connection with the washing machines had once been, and, although he could not see that side of the wall, Jim had little doubt that the long since useless VendoMatic machine was gone.

DANIEL J. LANGTON lives and teaches in San Francisco. His work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The TLS*, *The Paris Review*, *The Nation*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *The American Scholar* and *Oxford Magazine*, among others. His *Querencia* won the Devins Award for Poetry. His most recent collection is *Life Forms* (Cheltenham Press).

Daniel J. Langton / **Three Poems**

Waiting

I feel mortal tonight. The dull room
is unassuming, the thick sheets are warm,
the closet door is closed. When the first sun
scales the ceiling I will be able to plot
the outlines of my life, and of my doom.
Doom is a fraught word, like a silent alarm
that seems too distant, till you start to run,
because the others left, and you did not.

I feel mortal tonight. Soon I will see
the books I want to read, or I have read,
standing as straight as toy soldiers, filled
with words left behind to torture me
with reassurance from the lively dead,
but helping me hoard what has not been killed.

Yesterday, Just Yesterday

Spring, and all the wobbly things of Spring
spring to life like children playing dead
in pliant grasses. Dogs know Spring, brand new
muscles beneath the skin like critters
in the ground. The trees get dressed, a ring
to wear, branches to boom, a warm bed
of wild demanding flowers, a few
groundhogs, to give the cold the jitters.

No dark side. No signs. No weighty words.
The sun, the water, the agile earth,
laughing at air, taking a slow walk
to listen to the echoing birds,
seeing why we call it giving birth,
brawny singing, an end of Winter talk.

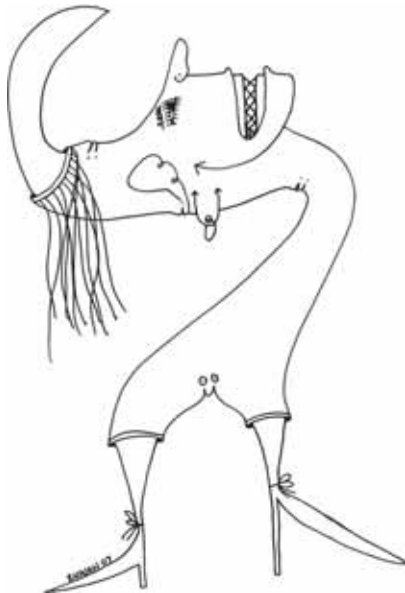
You Were Saying

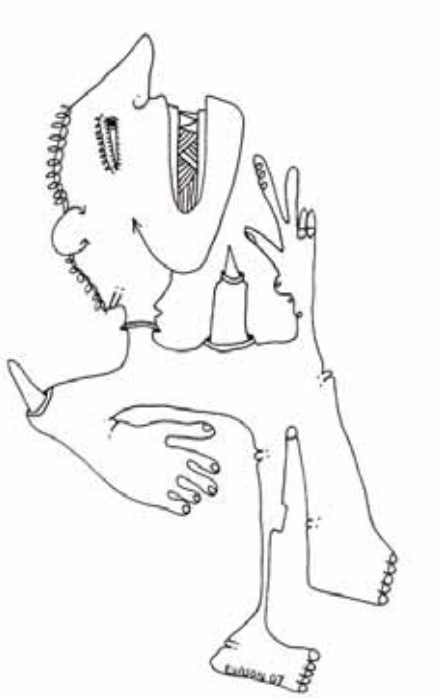
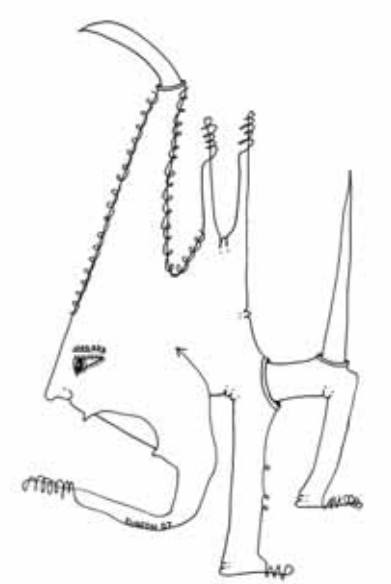
All I ever cared about.....a new phrase,
putting on the tartan sweater, trying
to hide your upper body to the wrists,
all I ever cared about.....and you sat,
looking for your stockings in vain, the day's
song part of the lament for the dying
going on around us, the sores we'd kissed,
the spidery caves of this and of that.

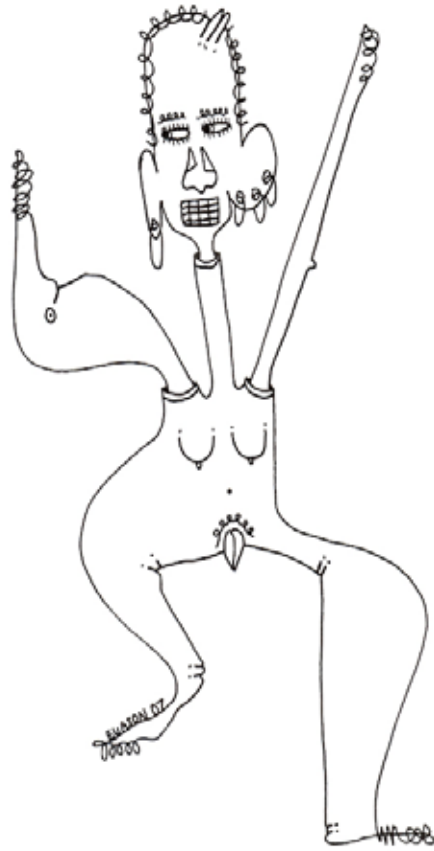
Months later I saw a tartan sweater
on a girl in the park. She was not blonde,
nor thin, nor tall, she did not flail her hands
with every step she took, she did not shout,
only a tartan, a coded letter,
the stiff pattern of which you were so fond,
and I was there again, on our island's
beach, wondering what it was you cared about.

GREG EVASON lives in Toronto, Ontario.

Greg Evason / **Five Graphic Poems**







CAROL HAMILTON, former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma, has recent publications in *Nimrod*, *Southwest American Literature*, *Midwest Quarterly Review*, *Karamu*, *Cider Press Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Baltimore Review* and *The New Orphic Review*. Her twelfth book, *Shots On*, will be published by Finishing Line Press. She has been nominated four times for a Pushcart Prize.

Carol Hamilton / **Three Poems**

Power of Instruction

6 a.m., and already I see
five kitchen cupboard doors agape,
close them all in a rare fit of guilt,
remember my mother's one-time remark
against such lack of order.
My father was a scientist,
even more organized. Neither
railed at me for my slap dash,
but now, an old lady, I wonder
why this stayed with me and why
I, on rare occasion, try to comply
with this standard of good conduct.
Yet I am like the nun
whose dark skirts swirl in the dust,
her starched and winged cap taking
white flight like seagulls in every breeze.
The human heart holds silly mysteries,
and mine are many. Why hold on
to trivia? And once remembered,
why so long ignored?
I walk past the buttoned-up neatness
now, pleased to see all things
as they should be in my house,
a slight, but surely fitting tribute
to such a long and little-understood past.

A Sprauchle of Balloon Men

(To Be Read Outdoors With a Big Dictionary at Hand)

Have you heard the blue sky
was heavenly? Or clear?
Or dotted with clouds?
I want it spalled with color,
full of sparked clusters that push
against gravity, spackled, in fact.
Such grape-bunched rainbows
dance daily in the plazas
along the Western Sierras,
await Sunday in Barcelona.
Here between the Rockies
and the Mississippi, I must await
fair or festival for polka dot skies.
Yet the work of these artisans
is good. It bedecks day with laughter
and lightning and promises
to turn the dullest drywall giddy.
Parallel and foliated crystals
twinkle, mica adance with light.
I should ask this effulgence
to live with me. He bought her one
filled with helium, and she waved to us
as she walked away, her steps levitating
into the blue sky of heavenly,
clear fame, where everything
was dotted with puffy white clouds.

No Magic

I cross the border
and edges become sharp,
every time a shock,
returning to the known life.
All the tribal lands, touched
by Spanish mysticism
and incense, are chock-full
of other dimensions,
perhaps the ones scientists seek.
A cloud surrounds my head there
at any instant, unexpected inhalations
full of them and them and them,
we an ocean so deep and wide
and my breath full of warm scent
from forever, never alone. I miss it.
Hard-edged, this re-entry,
but we are too busy to notice.
This is a clean place,
wiped well with antibacterial
substances, and we hurry alone
from one sterile place to the next,
scoffing all the while
at any silly superstitions.

Featured Poet

Susan Andrews Grace



Dialectic of the One and the Many

SUSAN ANDREWS GRACE lives in Nelson, British Columbia where she teaches creative writing and also maintains a visual art practice. Her latest books of poems are *Flesh, A Naked Dress* (Hagios Press, 2006) and *Love & Tribal Baseball* (BuschekBooks, 2007). *God Wears Bracelets* is an excerpt from a manuscript tentatively entitled *Selah*.

Taking Direction

Susan Andrews Grace

IMAGINING HOW THE philosopher imagines is one way to read and learn a philosophy and one which is especially suited to the practice of poetry. This excerpt is from a book-length manuscript of poetry, which is an imaginary intersection of eastern and western thought. It takes direction from *The Enneads* by Plotinus, innovator of Platonism, who was the last great philosopher of antiquity and who had tremendous influence upon both philosophy and mysticism in the west, with reverberations in the rest of the world. The writing has also taken direction from the *Tao te Ching* and the *I Ching* for an Eastern philosophy of the cosmos, which like Platonism came out of the fifth century BCE. The manuscript, in three books, is a serial poem and is a numbered cycle, mirroring organization of the ancient texts. This excerpt is from the third book.

The serial form, as I use it, is scaffolding for poetry, which comes out of a meditative discipline or ‘dictation,’ as both W. B. Yeats and Jack Spicer called it. The poem moves ahead in units that are related, and which are chronological. In this case there is a scaffolding of Plotinian thought, counterbalanced by an answer/echo from eastern texts. According to Spicer, the serial poet picks up ethereal, radio-like waves from outside the present time and place and perhaps beyond the poet’s ability to plan but not outside the poet’s ken.

To write this poetry I read as broadly as I could in Neo-Platonic and Chinese philosophies, attempting to get to ‘the open,’ the concept Rilke’s poetics used for something like greater consciousness. My intention was to enter ‘the open’ and to pull something new out of that greater consciousness, something that any woman might want for herself.

Plotinus's logic has new truth for a western woman in a world ravaged by the effects of doctrine, some of which comes directly out of philosophy as adapted for the church by Augustine. Sometimes poetry has the ability to be the reality when philosophy can only describe it.

God Wears Bracelets

28.

If you are lucky, Plotinus said,
Athena or some other goddess will pull you by the hair,
 turn you,
to face the sumptuous world. And
you will see inside everything, even
your face sewn in bloody stitches
in bone and cartilage order.

When we perceive that which connects all faces
we learn the nature of wisdom:
the world a vessel which determines its own capacity.

We cannot add or subtract holy containment
nor impose upon it
 without sorrow.

30.

A bit of fancy, this heaven, where Laozi and Plotinus
meet over tea to discuss the good. To keep peace
Laozi does not mention pacifism, Plotinus does not
mention stoicism. They agree on many things,
including tea's medicinal properties,
the relative condition of the sky's blueness
and the importance of pain as a teacher.

They agree they are both happy.

In their heaven
there is no aggression and no military—

just order, happiness and wealth.
Sages know history and so do Laozi
and Plotinus. Their collective wisdom
could rescue our world,
over tea.

31.

To access goodness, thought is the best instrument
and careful circumspection the best tool.

A bread-baking oven vastly superior to the semi-automatic rifle,
in securing happiness.

The society which goes to war, said Laozi
and glorifies its weapons is sorry—

to glorify killing

engages careless thought:

bold intellection best alternative to murder.

39.

Laozi leaves town, sure that everything carries yin
on its shoulder and yang in its arms. And this is the secret
harmony: dialectic of the one and the many.

Plotinus, if he were on the road with Laozi might point to the grassy
roadside, the cow in the field and to the venerable Laozi as well
to say *You are right and you are wrong*. There is no one and many
there is only one-many and so you Laozi are much bigger than you think:
you are more, just as the cow and the grass are more. There is only one
soul—

Laozi would beg his pardon and say *but that is what I said already*
flicking a fly from his shoulder with his long baby fingernail.

And they'd sit down in the dusty road to talk some more
or until forced off the road, whichever came first, Plotinus happy
at long last, to have met the east.

45.

Soul is integral to the organs which shut out death,
in their relentless work to keep soul part of the composite.

Plotinus thought transmigration of souls possible.

Laozi warned that matter may stop working, letting death
pierce flesh with its sword, gore the abdomen, claw organs.

Plotinus thought then the soul will return
to the march of being,
no longer burdened
with being everything.

48.

Eternity's budget simple: nothing has value
but soul's return like

an elephant on a freeway of death.
Self-consciousness not an option for an elephant.

She flaps her ears and screams in terror,
pleasures of the savanna behind her.

When she was young the elephant lolloped
under trees, enjoyed sunny skin.

Now she knows cost.

53.

Helpless to bring order to any state,
as a baby is to cook a fish,
Neoplatonism and Daoism were equally
inefficient, inelegant and lonesome.

Forces of greed and fear pay no attention
to the hush of cloud, the pink bleed
in a blue sky.

59.

The person suited to rule the world is the best boarder
in the most excellent boarding house. Such a boarder excels
at passing the butter before being asked, contributes to conversation,
elicits talk from the shyest, and when the house catches fire
organizes safe rescue and escape for every occupant,
including the gentleman whose cigarette started the fire
and whose loud snoring off the rum

The New Orphic Review

indicates he is still asleep.

The best boarder sleeps lightly, her vigilant lungs awakened
by gases filling the top third of air
and leaps quickly with compassion.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is the editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review*. The following review is reprinted from *Books in Canada*.

Reviewing Susan Andrews Grace

Ernest Hekkanen

Love & Tribal Baseball

by Susan Andrews Grace

BuschekBooks

81 pages, \$15.00

ISBN 978-1-894543-41-5

TO FULLY FATHOM what drives human beings to commit the most noble or ignoble acts, one has only to understand the dynamics inherent in ‘tribes’. For a good treatise on tribal behavior, I recommend Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, which examines human behavior in terms of a person’s ability to pass on genetic information; and for a poetic evocation, check out Susan Andrews Grace’s *Love & Tribal Baseball*. Grace, by the way, won the Saskatchewan Book of the Year award in 1998 for her poetry collection *Ferry Women’s History of the World*.

Tribal behavior is common to us all. We first become acquainted with the mores of our immediate tribe, that of the family; the second tribe that shapes our behavior is the extended family, consisting of relatives; the third is the larger tribe of our peer group and/or our community, and so on and so forth, until the ‘tribe’ becomes the size of a nation, and therefore, a more artificial construct. The first tribe exists in order to preserve and pass on genetic information, but this is done in the context of the larger tribes that encourage procreation.

Tribal propensities result in displays of in-group and out-group behavior, and everything that this entails. While reading Grace’s book, I was reminded of a neighborhood family from my youth, one with six brothers. The brothers fought like tomcats among themselves, oftentimes to the point of bloody violence, but if an outsider made the mistake of confronting one of them, he ended up taking on the entire tribe.

This is the territory that Grace’s *Love & Tribal Baseball* sets out to investigate in a series of meditations that comprise a Prologue followed

by nine innings of baseball, which bear subtitles like “Choosing a Team,” “Left Field,” and “Pinch Hitting.” This, in part, is familiar territory; anyone who has grown up in North America knows that “baseball is a metaphor for life.” That metaphor is used to promote, glorify and sell the game.

What is less familiar is the structure of support that undergirds the game of baseball—in realms having to do, primarily, with the first and second tribal units mentioned above, and this is the territory that Susan Andrews Grace explores in her book. She sets up the parameters rather succinctly in the first two stanzas of the Prologue:

They play until nightfall ° small
children bat until they find
tribal love, greater than any god,

original sin incomprehensible
and yet there is the fall:
all the world before them—

Here, I’m reminded of how I played baseball with the aforementioned brothers—until nightfall made it impossible for us to see the ball. Such details make *Love & Tribal Baseball* immediately accessible while at the same time suggesting that the metaphor will be further unfolded. The ‘fall’ that Grace hints at in the second stanza will take place off-diamond, away from the game where:

children play in scrub grass. Paradise;
beyond which looms:
Unforgiving futures [that]
hold their children’s fate.

Death comes slowly or inappropriately,
changes the game.

Here, again, I was prompted to recall the six brothers with whom I once played the game. The oldest of the brothers was drafted by the New York Yankees, and soon after that, by the U.S. Army. That particular boy had his legs shot out from under him while leaping from a helicopter into Vietcong-held territory, never to play baseball again.

In Susan Andrews Grace’s book, the “fall” takes place away from the game where life is un-stilled by the ritual of tribal baseball. In the fifth section, or inning, of *Love & Tribal Baseball*, entitled “The Star Player,” we discover that brides, who eventually become mothers, are responsible for maintaining the game; moreover, they are responsible for its sanctity, for they are married to the ceremony of preparation:

Brides knew without being told:

to prepare for supper, begin with tea

steeping on the hob: India tea
iron content so high
teeth set on edge: tea
nearly blue as the slough
slick in dusky October

as the wood resists

This crack of wood against ball could not take place without the support of the Star Player who resides, for the most part, off-diamond. However, for Grace, the diamond is a metaphor for the nurturing body: “genetic wishes/ like blood ova, quiescent lust, the best mother,” where “home is a baseball construct.” “The mother makes the tribe rich/ brings heaven to earth.” In other words, the brides who are married to this game, and who are responsible for its rituals, are brides to a kind of messiah. They make certain it is played with a modicum of grace, at least in this poet’s dominion.

Sadly, during the course of Grace’s ritual game of baseball, a child is swept to his death down a river not far from the diamond, and as we learn:

A boy can’t fall into that water
and out again
onto earth. He goes instead
to not earth [and that] changes the story.

Grace’s game of baseball absorbs the blow represented by the loss of the boy, but in a muted manner, with extreme decorum:

Birth kills time.
Ball hits the fence.

Grief has done this: a woman’s face
torn silk, a man’s heart unraveled

sons mourn
their brother,
phantom child

sentinel

In spite of this almost sacrificial loss, or perhaps because of it, we sense, in Susan Andrews Grace’s slow, meditative game of tribal baseball, that there will continue to be blissful moments of grace: “across the road” where there’s “a ball park in a clearing,” which brings down “necessary light.”

Love & Tribal Baseball left me with a sad but poignant feeling, the same way I feel upon turning away from a Van Gogh painting.

Raised in Napa Valley, educated at UC Santa Cruz, and a resident of San Francisco for over two decades, GARY PEDLER qualifies as a true Bay Area denizen. Yet after a recent escape from a white-collar job, he is making frequent forays to other parts of the globe. With his first novel behind him, Gary is working on a short story collection, and, to his surprise, a screenplay. He had a story published in the spring, 2007 issue of *The New Orphic Review*.

Gary Pedler / **Three Poems**

In Profunda

“Into the Depths”

Let's dive into the sea of love,
Down beneath the glittering surface,
Down beneath the flitting shoals,
The trafficked upper lanes.
Let's gird ourselves with weights
And delve down deeper,
Past the occasional shark and turtle
Our hands clutched tight.
Descend past sunlight, vision,
Past warmth and lightness,
Where the heavy water presses
On every inch of every limb.
Our arms and legs entwined now,
Our chests and cheeks inseparable,
Down amid the strange rare creatures,
On the ocean floor.

The World is Beautiful at Times

A warm summer's evening,
Rare in San Francisco,
The familiar walk home
Down a favorite block.
On the pavement, my eye catches
An arrangement of leaves,
Dun, russet, yellow, green,
Bougainvillea blossoms,
Magenta, tripartite,
One white feather, flawless,
Brought together by breezes
And by happenstance. I pause,
Puzzled by the central flourish.
Oh, I see now: a tuft of grass,
Punching upward through a crack
Has helped to gather flotsam
Like an islet in the sea.
Standing still, I hear the wind
Travel softly through the trees.
The world is beautiful at times,
Like an arrow through the heart,
Even now that I'm alone,
Uncoupled, the house I walk to
Empty but for furniture.
I'll add another clause, you think.
"Though it would seem much more so
With someone here to share it."
But I will not add another,
I will leave the thought at that:
The world is beautiful at times.

Samovar

“Meet me at Samovar.
Do you know where that is?
Eighteenth and Sanchez.
They serve tea and foodie things.”

While I’m talking with Date Seven,
Date Five passes by the window
Walking his minuscule white dog.
I hope I’ve not been spotted.

“Meeting someone in a bar
Is perfectly respectable these days.”
So says Mom, but I have news for her,
It’s all done now on something called the Web.

I meet a man from Argentina,
Thinking foreign might be better.
His English is quite good,
But my humor eludes him.

“Meet me at Samovar.
Have you been there before?
Eighteenth and Sanchez.
It has a nice atmosphere.”

Men somehow think it useful
For me to study photos
Showing how they looked
A very long long time ago.

“So many ways to connect!”
Match.com assures me.
“Search by type,” “Post a photo,”
“Remove members from view.”

I list the age I look, not am.
This seems a minor matter,
Yet time-line questions keep arising
And I must make some hasty calculations.

“Meet me at Samovar.
Unless you have a better idea,
Unless you want coffee or beer,
Or will risk a whole meal.”

Profiles make my mind move much too fast.
I travel with those who say they like this,
See films or plays, or dance the rumba,
Undaunted by our never having even met.

“Get new glasses, pronto,”
A hipster friend advises,
“A nice black leather jacket,
And, this is most important—a cell phone.”

The awkward moment when we leave.
“Nice meeting you,” we say,
But almost always one or both
Is failing to be truthful.

“Meet me at Samovar.
It’s very near my house.
We can make out there if we click.”
Something I think, but never say.

Back home, I always listen to the same duet.
“Nuit d’ivresse et d’extase infinie!”
The music wraps me in its arms,
Its pulse is like a human heart.

“You could lighten up your hair,”
My stylist proposes, scrutinizing.
The gray scattered on the temples
Will pass, I hope, for blond.

One hundred fifty view my profile
And several men have sent me “winks,”
Yet when I climb into my bed at night,
I don’t find anyone beside me.

“Meet me at Samovar.”
I always take the same table,
I always get there first.
My ex complained I wasn’t punctual.

“I’d never date a man not interested
In having kids,” says one. With another,
I ferret out that he is poz. Couldn’t they
Have let me know these things beforehand?

“I dreamed you said you’d met someone
And fallen passionately in love.”
May this woman friend turn out to be
As prophetic as Constantine before a battle.

If unimpressed, I order several dishes
To help me pass the time.
If enthusiastic, I offer guys a bite
And grab the check when it arrives.

“Meet me at Samovar.”
The waitress knows me now.
She either thinks I’ve many friends
Or understands the truth quite well.

“Could you meet me at Samovar?”
“Why don’t you meet me at Samovar?”
“How about—Samovar?”

IRENE MOCK is the author of *Inappropriate Behaviour*. Her fiction has appeared in *Queen's Quarterly*, *The New Quarterly*, *Descant*, *Grain*, *Fiddlehead* and *Canadian Forum*, among others. She has taught literature and creative writing at Selkirk College, David Thompson University Centre, Kootenay School of Arts, and Nelson Fine Arts Centre. She co-edited *Journey to the Interior: An Anthology of Kootenay Women Writers*, with Paulette Jiles and Luanne Armstrong. She currently works as a hypnotherapist in Nelson, B.C.

The Nightmare King

Irene Mock

"HE NEEDS TO TELL someone else."

That's what Frances, their new social worker, says, looking up from the files on her desk. The files Lorraine knows to be hers. Reports she's never seen. Reports about her and her son.

"I'm sorry, Lorraine," she says, "I wish I had something better to tell you. I understand how frustrated you must feel. But in these cases people will sometimes distort the truth. They can make false accusations. We have to be very careful."

* * *

How many more people? Who *else* must her son tell now? Sometimes Lorraine wonders if she ever should have started this. Nine interviews already. What good will another one do?

Picking him up after school, she says, "They want you to tell someone else, Jesse."

Of course he wants to know why. Why does he have to tell again?

"No! No! No!" He stamps his feet. "I won't say anything more to anybody!" His voices rises and he pulls away.

"It's just one more time," she says.

"He'll get mad if I tell."

Lorraine turns so he won't see her face. She would like to trust this new social worker, but like Jesse she has her doubts.

Month after month. Taking him to doctors. Play therapists. Social workers. Police officers. Psychologists.

Yes, Mrs. Williams, we've received your records.

Yes, yes, a custody case? Hmm, so difficult.

Please, if you could just bear with us, we have to look at all sides.

Sitting in the waiting rooms, cradling his small body, smaller than other kids his age. Reading to him. Frog and Toad, two best friends. The Velveteen Rabbit loved so much it comes to life.

Wrapping the boy in her arms, trying to reason with him.

It's important not to give up.

You've got to tell the person they want you to tell.

She remembers, again, the night that started it all. A year ago. A night just after his fourth birthday party. The boy was dropped off for the weekend, his weekend with her. She was impatient when he wouldn't sit down.

"Jesse, what is the matter with you?" She forced him to sit, then realized he was in pain. "Do you hurt? Where?"

"My bum, Mommy." He held his pants tightly so she couldn't pull them down and see.

"No, Jesse, don't run away. Show me." She gave him his teddy bear to hold, thinking it was a rash. The boy turned the bear upside down and poked him with a pencil.

"Jesse, what are you doing?" she said.

"He's a bad bear. I'm gonna put this in his bum! Now Teddy can't sit down."

* * *

It's a night that plays over in her mind. In Emergency, the boy fighting her, screaming. Her lips pressed against his cheek. Feeling sick and foolish. What if he was lying? What if he wasn't? She told him to be brave. You can trust doctors. Doctors are your friends, they want to help you.

Waiting on a hard plastic chair. Hoping how she looked wouldn't matter, but she knew it did, they always judged you by appearance. And she'd rushed out the house in her jeans and t-shirt, no time to even comb her hair. The way the nurse eyed her up and down, smelled her breath—so she'd had a beer, one beer that's all—and the sharp way she spoke to her, when all Lorraine asked was how long it would be before they could see the doctor.

She lifted the boy onto the examining table, helped him to roll over.

"No, Mommy." Not his underwear.

"Dr. Berber just wants to have a look. Can you let him have a look?" She held his hands while the doctor removed the pants, the air so warm she felt she couldn't breathe. "Let's put your bear on his tummy too. Let's show Dr. Berber the bear's sore bottom."

"Can you lie still now?" said the doctor. "I need to look at your bottom, Jesse." The doctor slipped on a glove, gently inspecting a painful reddened area. "Tell me, Jesse, has anyone ever touched you in your bottom?"

"You have."

A nod, a smile. Dr. Berber was a nice young man, a local boy. He'd once worked in the hardware store. "No, Jesse, I don't mean me." The

doctor tapped him on the nose. "I mean, is there anyone else?"

"A bad man."

"Who?"

The boy giving her an accusing look. Eyes round and dark, like hers. Black curly hair, not blond like his father.

She turned to the doctor, then to the boy. "Go on, Jesse, you can tell Dr. Berber what you told me, it's okay."

"Jesse, it's important you tell," said the doctor. "If someone is hurting you we want to know so we can help you."

The boy looking at her, just looking, his face a perfect blank, a mask. "Uncle Fred."

* * *

So what was it? A finger? A toy? Could he have fallen on something? Questions she asked the next day, while she played with the boy in the yard. Disbelieving. Trying to make sense. Unsure how to put things so as not to scare him.

Your father says you fell off your bike. He says you ate too much birthday candy and couldn't go to the bathroom. Tell me, did you fall off your bike? *Did you fall off your bike?* Did you eat too much candy? Shaking him. Are you telling me the truth? Trying to make her voice calm. Sitting together on the front steps as she stroked Mitten the cat.

Here, scratch him under the chin. He likes to be petted like that.

You're feeling better now, aren't you, honey?

* * *

Those first nights she curled up in the chair beside the boy's bed, unable to stop thinking. *What do you mean, doctor, that we have to wait for tests? Can't the police do anything?* He couldn't answer. All he could tell her was the medical part. From his experience the police would probably want to wait for the pathology report. It could take time, the slides had to go to Edmonton. We need the report, he said with a shrug.

A shrug, that's it? Well, it isn't as if it's your child. Holding her hands still. Breathing deeply. Control. Control. But isn't the fact that he told you, doctor, evidence enough?

For *me*. Dr. Berber nodded. But of course, children do get into things. Had she noticed other bruises? Any strange marks? And of course, children do imagine.

* * *

She'd met her husband when she was nineteen, working in the IGA. He was ten years older, had a real job. His own construction company. His family went to the old-fashioned white church on the main road. She didn't like church, but then she'd never really been part of anything. When Steve was first in her life, it was like a sudden warm wind, his family hers, the sisters and brothers she'd never had.

When did the ugliness start, her husband always jealous, accusing her?

A night with him in the hotel bar, dancing with some other guy. Enjoying herself.

You're drunk, bitch, aren't you?

Enjoying herself. Wearing her soft lavender sweater, tight black pants. Remembering how her husband could make her laugh. The odd way he held his fork, chewed loudly with his mouth. Male manners. She couldn't figure out if she liked it or not. A dance. Someone just asked her to dance. A guy who spoke French, and what was wrong with that? Steve later grabbing her by the neck. Shoving her against the bedroom wall.

You're drunk.

And she was drunk. At first she blamed herself. But his suspicions continued to grow. She should have left the first time he hit her. Couldn't even go to the grocery store without the accusations.

* * *

Waiting. For the pathologist's report. For the slides the police took to be analyzed. Two weeks. A month. Two months. Doing what they wanted her to do. Being pleasant, polite.

Thank you for your letter of

Acute anal fissures present in the 6 o'clock and 12 o'clock position.

To Corporal Tate of the RCMP who said he didn't mind her phoning, but he'd already interviewed her son and Jesse didn't disclose during their session.

To her lawyer, who'd reviewed her concern, but there just wasn't enough evidence. Maybe a restraining order?

To the RCMP, who agreed the logical thing *would* be to put a restraining order on Fred. But he wouldn't want to alert the guy, not until the evidence was in.

What? You mean to tell me you're going to leave that child in there? You're going to *leave* him in there because you need more evidence? Thanks for your time. Yes, I'll apply to Family Court. A court list? But my ex-husband has temporary full custody, I get access only on weekends. His family has completely misrepresented me. Can't you get the date moved up?

Her friend Cindy said, But Lorraine, he's always been a dramatic child. Are you sure? The play therapist said children didn't lie, not about something like that. The boy's Grandma Edna was always phoning, warning her, Now he better stop this nonsense about Uncle Fred or else. The boy's father was no help at all.

Christ, Lorraine. He fell off his bike. He ate too much chocolate and couldn't poop. How the hell am I supposed to know? Maybe he saw some program on TV. What do you learn in that parenting course anyway? Ways to bribe the kid, manipulate him? Don't give me that shit. You don't send him back, and you'll be in contempt of court.

Then one morning, a phone call from the social worker.

“Hello, Lorraine. It seems the final report has come back. I’m afraid they weren’t able to confirm sexual assault.”

“Look, Frances, I know my son. Jesse didn’t lie to the doctor. He trusted him.”

“Yes,” said the social worker, “but Jesse *didn’t* disclose to Corporal Tate.”

“What did you expect? Jesse was terrified when he went in there. And the fact that Corporal Tate is a friend of Steve’s, he goes to Steve’s church—”

“Yes, that may be true, but still—”

“Don’t give me that, Frances. Steve’s family has lived here for years. They all go to the same church, have their reputation to preserve.”

“Lorraine, I know you’re angry. But it doesn’t do any good to shout at me, I’m just the messenger. Please try to understand, I have to remain as objective as I can or we’ll both lose our credibility.”

“Credibility—is that what you call it? What right do you have to sit in judgment, to be so *neutral*?” Lorraine hung up.

* * *

Waiting. She didn’t want to say the wrong thing, or make him any more frightened. The boy hiding each time he saw his father’s truck pull into the driveway to pick him up. He ran and hid behind the couch.

“Do you like me, Mommy?”

“Of course! Mommy loves you.” She held the bear out to him, ruffled her son’s curly hair.

“Do I have to go? I don’t want to go.”

The RCMP Constable who said it was unfortunate.

The social worker who empathized. A mother herself.

The boy’s father, her ex-husband, threatening. Always threatening if she made waves.

Listen, Lorraine. I know you’ve been working him up, getting him in a state. You stop him from coming here and you’ll lose him completely. I’ll make sure of it.

* * *

The reports she filed.

The night he came home talking about a house with a tunnel. People in White and People in Red. The People in White were nice, but the People in Red had knives. They made him drink blood, but he spit it out because his father wouldn’t drink it. Then they took him up a dirt road and the Devil was there. Something was put on his forehead.

What was he talking about? A cult?

As she was getting him ready for bed he wanted her to close the shades because the moon was bad and scared him. “What do you mean, the moon is bad?” she said. “Who told you that?”

“Uncle Fred. The Red People.”

“Who?”

“Up the road. By the red silo.”

It was a story, Lorraine. A story the babysitter read him. Alice in Wonderland. The Red King and White King. You can check it out with any of those clowns you run to every time he sneezes funny.

“It was a story the babysitter read you.”

“No. No. No!” His voice, rising to a scream. “It’s true!”

What to do? As a child, she too was frightened—of the dark, shadows. She didn’t believe in the devil but thought there must be a God. She sat with him and prayed.

Then, as she leaned down to tuck him in, he whispered, “Shhhh! They’re listening. You can’t tell, I’ll get in trouble. I’m not supposed to talk about it. They’ll hear.”

* * *

Each time that he had to go back to Steve’s after their weekend together, she phoned Frances and told her the boy was afraid.

Yes, Lorraine, you say he wets his bed? Nightmares about the Devil? The Red people? But Lorraine, you and your husband both agree he’s an imaginative child. Of course, Lorraine, I’m not arguing. What we must understand is the root of this disturbance. Can anyone verify what you say, Lorraine? Yes, I’ll make a note of it. Don’t hesitate to call. That’s what we’re here for. Keep us posted.

By the door, the boy’s blue knapsack, packed. T-shirt, pants, a toothbrush, teddy bear, underwear, lots of underwear. The boy hiding, angry with her when he saw his father’s truck in the driveway. Telling her that the Devil was real and alive. Asking if she would be sad when he died. They were going to kill him.

* * *

One morning Lorraine phones the play therapist. This time he’s drawn a picture. Tangible evidence. “I think Sharon will like your picture a lot,” Lorraine says.

When they arrive, the play therapist gives the boy a big hug. “Did you bring your picture? Let me see it,” says Sharon.

The boy smiles. “It’s a picture of the secret place,” he says as he plays in the toy box, divides the toy soldiers. “You be the good guys,” he says to the play therapist.

“What should I do?” Sharon asks.

“Shoot all the bad guys,” he directs her, aiming his guns.

Behind the therapist’s desk is a tape recorder. But it’s so far away from him that Lorraine fears the tape will be useless. “Would you like to show Sharon your picture?” Lorraine says. He shows the play therapist a red felt pen drawing.

“What an interesting picture!” Sharon says. “What’s that? It’s so big and red.”

“Fire. The Devil breathes fire,” the boy says. “I saw one of His friends.”

“Where?”

“Dad’s mean.” The boy kicks the chair. “He pushes me. Beats me up.”

“Are you scared of anyone else?”

“Uncle Fred.”

“What does he do?”

“Hurts my bum, don’t tell anyone. The Devil has a boss. A bad boss. He’s ugly—a monster boss.”

“Who?” Lorraine has to shake him, to bring him out of it. “Who’s his boss, Jesse?”

But the boy won’t say any more. Lorraine tells the boy she’s proud of him. “Doesn’t it feel good telling Sharon?”

Jesse seems fine. She thinks he’ll be fine. That night he falls asleep easily. He doesn’t have nightmares or wet the bed.

* * *

In the morning she phones the play therapist.

“Didn’t Frances get in touch with you? I gave her the tape,” Sharon says. Lorraine phones the social worker, but she’s out for lunch. Then with another client. They’re becoming impatient with her.

“We *do* have other clients, Mrs. Williams.”

The next day Lorraine reaches the social worker.

“Yes, the play therapist did give me the tape, Lorraine. I’m sorry not to get back to you. I gave it to my supervisor and he’s looking into it.”

“Can I get the supervisor’s number?” Lorraine asks.

“He’s talking to someone in the Ministry who has more experience with these sorts of cases. Yours is so complex and, well, there are issues on which my supervisor and I don’t... He’s referred your case to a Protection Consultant, a woman not directly involved, more at the administrative level.”

“When can I meet with her?”

“Oh, I doubt you will. You see, a Protection Consultant just looks at the facts. Most don’t meet the client at all. They say if they’re emotionally involved, it only clouds the issues.”

* * *

Friday when the boy comes back, he won’t look at her. He runs to his room, pushes his bureau in front of the door.

“You can’t come in. You’re the Devil,” he tells her.

“Jesse, why are you talking like that?” Lorraine says.

The boy tells her his father took him to the broken bridge.

“Which bridge? What happened? Tell me,” she says. “Did anyone do anything to you?” Lorraine pounds on the door, pleading with him to tell her, then breaks down and cries. “You know, Jesse, I can’t deal with this. I can’t deal with it any longer.”

Finally, the door opens and he comes out.

“Don’t cry, Mommy. Don’t cry.”

“Okay,” Lorraine says, wiping her eyes, “then tell me what’s going on. Right now.”

“Daddy told me you wanted to kill me,” he says.

“Oh no, never, Jesse. How could you think I’d ever want to do that?”

“In your tummy. Before I was even born, Daddy said.”

“No.” She hugs him. “Come, let’s make some brownies.”

But it is true. How can she explain? The drinking. The arguments, beatings. If she’d had the abortion?

Not in my family, you don’t. Her husband’s reaction frightened her. She wraps the boy in her arms. She has only him. “Mommy loves you more than anything. More,” she says, “than I ever thought it was possible to love anyone.”

He looks up, puzzled. “Mommy, what the difference between *gone* and *dead*?”

* * *

That Sunday evening she says to him, “Let’s get cozy together. Remember how we used to sit and watch movies on TV?”

“Daddy was here then,” he says.

“Yes, but that was a year ago,” she says. “Now we can really be cozy. It’s just you and me.”

Lorraine makes a big bowl of popcorn and sits on the couch with him. She puts her arm around him, but he stiffens, then looks up.

“I heard something, Mommy.”

“Where?”

“At the window.”

She hugs him to her. “Come on, Jesse. Sit with Mommy.”

“I heard Him, Mommy. It’s the Devil.” The boy gets up.

“Jesse, come away from the window,” she says. “*No one’s there.*”

But he won’t sit down. Is it because he can’t sit close to anyone?

“Want me to look?” Lorraine’s sure there’s no one, but she walks over and opens the curtain anyway. “Only Mitten, that silly cat. See?”

Suddenly, outside the window, the motion light goes on.

“Mommy, do something. He wants to get me.” The boy begins to cry. Lorraine turns off the lights and TV. Now she too believes there’s someone. She is afraid. Why does she still live in this house? There are no houses nearby. Only fields, fields on all sides, open highway. In the dark, she and the boy see shadows. People running. Lorraine phones the police. A constable comes hours later, near midnight. He checks around the house, but there’s nothing he can see. Probably kids with nothing else to do.

* * *

In the morning, her flowers are all trampled, by intruders or the policeman, she doesn’t know. The boy starts kicking a stone in the dirt. “I hate

this house. I hate you. I hate my Dad.”

“Jesse, what’s the matter?” she asks.

He tells her he lied.

“What do you mean, you lied?” she says.

“It wasn’t true.”

“What wasn’t true?”

“It wasn’t me. It was another boy, Mommy.”

“Who? What other boy? Tell me,” says Lorraine, but he won’t say.

* * *

Lorraine calms the boy down enough so he can go to school, then phones the social worker.

“You’re saying he lied?” asks Frances.

“He says it was another boy,” Lorraine says, “but I don’t believe that.” She explains what happened in the night. The boy’s terror. “Now Jesse really believes the Devil’s out to get him. He’ll *really* be punished if he tells.”

“I’m sorry, Lorraine. I wish I could move this more quickly for you, but I can’t. It’s just, well, the supervisor’s been meeting with your ex-husband, who apparently has expressed some concerns.”

“The supervisor? He’s just hired my ex-husband to build him a house.”

“Well, he says that you drink, you bring men home. That Jesse told him you’re friends with a drug dealer. I’m afraid there’ll have to be an investigation done to counter charges.”

“A drug dealer!” Lorraine laughs. “It was a friend. He came in for a beer. I do have a life, too.”

“Well, why don’t you date during the week? So you can spend time with Jesse on the weekends?”

“Frances, come on, it wasn’t a date. Besides, why doesn’t Steve give up *his* weekends? I’m the one who always has to give up my life, what about him?”

The social worker doesn’t say anything.

“As for my drinking,” says Lorraine, “so what if I have a few drinks once in a while? I tell every man who shows any interest in me, ‘If I went out with you, I’d lose my kid.’ I do not, I repeat, do NOT have a drinking problem. He was an abusive husband, that’s why I left him. What makes your supervisor think he wouldn’t be an abusive father? He comes from an abusive family. They may be Bible-thumping, churchgoing pillars of the community, but it doesn’t stop them from beating their wives. I do everything I can for that child except when the courts give him to my ex-husband. What do you people want?” She takes a deep breath, tries to keep her voice calm. “I’m tell you my son’s being abused. What do I have to do to make you believe it?”

“I believe you,” says the social worker. “But there’s only so much I can do.”

“Protect my son,” Lorraine says. “Isn’t that your job?”

* * *

The supervisor talks to the boy. But by the time the supervisor can arrange to see him, Jesse has already gone to his father’s. The father brings him to the supervisor’s office. Afterwards Lorraine receives a phone call, but it’s not from the social worker. It’s someone named Phil.

“I’m Frances’s supervisor. We haven’t met formally,” says Phil, “but I’m certainly familiar with your case. Frances gave me your tape.”

“Well, that’s great,” says Lorraine, trying to sound positive. Her stomach is a pit of fear. “We can use all the help we can get.”

“I listened to the tape,” Phil says. “But there seems to be several times the recorder must have been turned on and off.”

“Well, yes, there were times Jesse didn’t say anything. So the play therapist thought we should turn the tape off,” Lorraine explains.

“I see. That’s unfortunate. It would have been better to keep it running.”

“Well, it would have run a long time when he wasn’t saying anything, just playing.”

“I understand. Nonetheless, you can appreciate...” Phil says. “We’d want to know if anyone said something to him.”

“What do you mean?” says Lorraine, though she knows quite well. “You think I’ve been coaching him?” She laughs bitterly. “Well, some-one is, but it’s not me.”

“Anyway,” says Phil, “that’s not the reason I called. I called to let you know I’ve talked with your son. We met in my office an hour ago. I’m sure you’ll feel relieved to know Jesse said it was just his imagination.”

“And you believed that?” Lorraine is incensed. “My son’s never met you, why would he trust you? Where do you suppose he learned a word like *imagination*?”

“Have you ever thought it *could* be his imagination?” the supervisor says.

* * *

The next time he sees the play therapist, he won’t talk.

“The walls have ears.”

“Where? Show me,” says Sharon.

“It was a dream,” he whispers. “A bad dream.”

“Who told you that?”

“Shhh. The Devil can hear through the walls.”

* * *

He won’t see the play therapist again. He won’t talk to doctors. He won’t draw pictures anymore. He won’t tell anyone now. He never tells her anything.

“You said if I told I wouldn’t get in trouble. You promised!” he screams at her.

“But you’re not in trouble,” she says.

“Yes, I am. The king is here.”

* * *

At night, he’s afraid to go into his room. He has to sleep in her bed. He keeps talking about the Devil’s boss. The king. He can fly through the window. He has a little pill. He killed Jesus. He can kill anyone because he’s big.

How big? she asks. Bigger than this? She opens her arms wide.

When I wake up my alarm clock has a face on it.

No, it doesn’t.

Yes. I hate that face. It’s telling me something. All my stuff has faces.

And outside on the trees.

Whose face? she asks.

He lives inside the floor too.

* * *

The boy hates the social worker, the doctors, the play therapist. He hates his father and the nightmare king. But most of all he hates her.

He wants to play with her friend Cindy’s son. But Cindy won’t allow it. Cindy has told Lorraine that Jesse has been seen pulling his pants down.

“Let me touch your wee-wee,” he says to boys.

When Lorraine tries to talk to him he’s angry.

“Do you like eating poop? Do you like me?” he says to his mother.

* * *

The psychiatrist diagnoses Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and recommends Ritalin.

“How dare you put my son on Ritalin when he’s being abused! How dare you!” Lorraine screams on the phone at the supervisor.

When Lorraine calls Frances, she’s told the social worker is on sick leave.

“I’m not surprised,” Sharon, the play therapist, tells her. “Burnout, exhaustion. Not being able to do the job you want to do. Happens all the time.”

Alarmed, Lorraine phones the supervisor again. “I just want you to know how much I felt Frances cared,” Lorraine says. “I’ll certainly miss her.”

“Well, yes, Mrs. Williams, I’m sure you will,” says the supervisor. “But there are other social workers too, we’ll be assigning someone to your case.” He’s glad she called, had something he wanted to discuss with her. “How would you feel about our putting Jesse into foster care, just until some of the issues we’ve discussed are resolved? Of course, we’d like to discuss this with his father as well.”

* * *

Lorraine knows she must leave. That Friday while the boy sleeps, she packs their bags. She sits by his bed and watches him breathe. Then sits

in the living room, drawing the curtain. Out front a truck is parked under a tree. She runs upstairs, looks from behind the bedroom shade where no one can see her. It's the middle of the night. Someone is watching.

Where will she go? There's an old high school friend in Edmonton. It doesn't matter. What matters is that they leave. Now.

She wraps the sleeping boy in a blanket, strokes his hair. He is so sweet like this, his face so unlike during the day when he's yelling and angry. Glancing again from behind the bedroom shade, she sees the truck still there. She moves quickly, leaving the boy asleep on the sofa, and goes out her back door to the place near the house where she has parked the car. She opens the car door as silently as she can, listening in the dark for the sound of a footstep, a car starting. The two suitcases slide onto the back seat. She goes back in and carries the sleeping boy out, closing the door softly behind her.

* * *

Heart racing, hands shaking. The ignition catches, the motor unbearably loud. He wakes up and looks at her, eyes wide, uncomprehending.

"It's okay," she says. "We're going to someplace safe. Sooner or later, someone will listen to us."

"But Mommy, why don't you have the car lights on? Why are we driving in the dark?" His voice rising. What if he becomes hysterical the way he so often does, now? Flailing at her. Screaming.

"We have to be careful right now. We don't want anyone to see us," she says. "We don't want anyone to hear us."

Thank god he is quiet. No truck, no car follows. She lets out a breath. Now she can turn the headlights on. They're going to be okay. She looks at him, grateful, relieved.

And sees him staring. Eyes on the lit-up radio. Is the radio turned on? he asks her. No, she tells him, the radio's off. But he's leaning forward. Something about the way he's sitting frightens her. Focused. She can't put it together.

What does she really know?

"It's okay," she tells him. "It's all going to be okay, Jesse." She touches his hand.

"But I can hear the king, Mommy." He's still staring at the radio. "He's here. Can you hear him? The king, he's right here. He's talking to me."

M. A. SCHAFFNER has work forthcoming in *Stand* (UK) and the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, as well as poems in past issues of *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah Poetry Ireland*, and *Poetry Wales*. Other credits include *The Good Opinion of Squirrels* (Word Works); the novel, *War Boys* (Welcome Rain); and *School of the Clerk*, a guide to military administration in the American civil war.

M. A. Schaffner / **Five Poems**

Opechancanough

When the Emperor of Virginia went to war,
he sent emissaries to his enemies
and bade them return with that country's corn.
As he ate, the land came alive for him:
first trees, whose ashes fed the soil; then beasts,
who came at night to inspect the plantings,
and learned first from the moon the time to eat.

From one mouthful Opechancanough
could see each thatched and palisaded town,
the wicker-walled gardens, bark-roofed long-houses,
fishing weirs, deadfalls, and fires. And he knew
who would obey him, and who would betray
his plans to the English, the Tassantasse,
men of the coat and the gun. In this way
he twice attacked all of the strangers' towns,
killing hundreds in two bloody mornings.

The wars that followed diminished the tribes,
while from a nearby star the white canoes
descended with ever more invaders.
At last, when more than a century old,
deep in the forest with the young servant
who held open his eyes so he could see,
the Emperor fell to English horsemen.

In the Jamestown jail he ate their corn
and slowly tasted the inevitable:
trees, beasts, and birds receding, and the soil
hardened by boots. Yet also, through it all,

a laughter no more foreign than the cries
of his own great-grandchildren—or the man
who jingled the keys to the iron door,
spat in his food, and in a vengeful fit
would shortly fire a bullet through his spine.

End of No Story

World as a whirling wedding cake, melting
icecaps into winter storms, mountains into
silted rivers, women and children bloated
out to sea, men hunting cattle with
Kalashnikovs, all the while we celebrate
tumescence in capital markets, rampant
seasonal fluctuations leaving a few
neurotic species rustling the underbrush
while most central bankers urge spark plugs
as cabinet ministers in the home governments,
Chamber of Commerce personifications of
leading economic indicators, and meta-
parasitic journalists scramble like five
colleagues in a conference room, all trying
to screw the same chicken.

I could be wrong
in thinking it started as a sacrament, but wind
winds its way down every thoroughfare
with a reminder of the force of nothing
registered for gifts. The happy couple
left before we got to know them, the party
continues on the momentum of our own
nostalgia for the hopes born of virtuous
eroticism, on into smashed crockery
and icing smeared over the now
illegible program.

Convention Center

Just inches above a building painted
as a Nissan Pathfinder Armada,
the sky streaks lapis blue between the layers
of alternately smooth and piled clouds.
All forecasts claim they'll billow past the trees,
now greenish gold, to a more vibrant land
of hills garnished in lemon and scarlet.
Some of us will drive there in our pickups,
as if braving bears instead of traffic.
Others will dream of sailing off with fleets
of suggestive vapor. But no one today,
looking out an office window—and lucky
to have that window—will think of staying.
Today is fall, and memos fall unread.

Fugue

Three seconds after the falcon misses,
rabbits seem no worse off. They don't report
for stiff drinks or therapy. They never tell
the same story countless times to everyone.

It helps to not have the time. Years ago
I'd listen to anyone for years. Time
was an indulgent barkeep and I spent
whatever I had on what I wanted.

It's useless to even think about it now,
or rather a waste of decaying time.
Wings rush past my face at least once a day—
a sudden whisper, then the passing eye:

passionless, indifferent, yet driven
by something like the urge to write it down.

Greek Siding

Whenever the weather turns I tend to think
I should never have left Ithaca for the wars.
Another dispatch rider brings a case,
which opens on a story from a friend.
A long story, going nowhere, filled with names
as ornate as they are improbable.
Earth shudders and shifts from the bunker's ceiling
as in the final sequence of *Duck Soup*,
burying a week's paperwork. At least it's safe
equally from destruction and employment.
From somewhere psy-op megaphones cry
"Give it up, now!" and "Sale Ends Sunday!" Oh,
if only the winds were worth her sacrifice.
All day the carpenters hammer; their work,
splintered over No-Man's Land, shows their humor—
elephants, cats, baboons, the occasional vole—
not one getting as far as the gates, but
the work's been steady, really a career,
and only fools look forward to retirement,
whittling biremes while Helen watches soaps.

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

To Travel the Distance

(The Serialized Saga of Ulyssa Segantini)

Chapter 9

Margrith Schraner

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON by the time Tomas and Ulyssa stepped outside the narrow skirt of shade clinging to the castle wall. The guest house seemed miles away. Neither of them felt the need to talk as they descended the cobbled pathway, Ulyssa more weary than she liked to admit, reluctant to face the savage summer heat, while Tomas, keeping his arm close at her elbow, seemed determined to plough through the blazing sunshine, intent only upon bringing Ulyssa back to the *Chesa Trais Fluors* down by the Julia River, close to the shady enclave of trees.

The man with the scythe came upon them unexpectedly. Allowing themselves a brief moment of rest, they had alighted on a low stone bench in the shade of a tree. Ulyssa, letting down her guard, sat looking out at nothing in particular, contemplating the dilapidated appearance of a barn wall across the path—the mortar having worn away in the course of centuries, laying bare the struts that held the smooth, gray river stones in place—when her gaze was rudely intercepted.

She gave a small cry at the unexpected sight of him, an imposing figure with a scythe who stood much too close to her. She stared at the sharpening stone hanging from his belt, at the grey wool trousers laden with dust. She was seized by fear; the street behind him looked bare in the slanting sunshine, recalling the boards of a stage, and he, an actor having been summoned to play the part of the Reaper. She rubbed her eyes, as if it were possible to erase such a vision.

The man, on closer inspection, could hardly be said to look menacing. He was at ease, a man comfortable in his surroundings. He stood there,

wiping the sweat off his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt, smiling down at them. Ulyssa watched as he pulled a packet of *Gitanes* out of his shirt pocket and offered Tomas one. He took his time, lit their cigarettes, made some small attempt to enter into conversation with them. He turned toward her and said a few words in Italian, spoken haltingly, inquiring whether they were here on holidays. Ulyssa felt unwilling to return his smile and gave a mere shrug, feigning unfamiliarity with the language.

Tomas, on the other hand, was more generous in his dealings with the Reaper. He turned toward him with a broad smile and, guessing at what the man might have said, nodded at him, then pointed vaguely off to the right, in the direction of Savognin, further down the slope, beyond the farmers' fields, where a church steeple could be seen cutting narrowly into the ether above.

Still, the Reaper wasn't certain. He had taken the scythe off his shoulder and now stood leaning against it, immobile in the slanting sunshine, looking off into the distance as though he were expecting someone. Ulyssa heard him mumble some words in French, watched as he gestured beyond the rise of a hill, at the arc of blue sky above. Rain. She thought she may have heard him mention the word *pluie*. But there was no sign of rain. There wasn't even a breeze rising up out of the valley, only a solid wall of heat. Perhaps he had been spending the afternoon scything the grass that grew further up along the slopes beyond the village.

She was thinking of this while the men stood together and smoked, looking out at the mountain ranges and farmers' fields that surrounded them. Then, suddenly, the Reaper was gone. She breathed in the thin trace of smoke left by his cigarette, amazed by the suddenness of his departure. She turned and caught sight of him advancing further up the street, a figure seen from afar, bearing a scythe on one shoulder, his dark hair looking sculpted in the light that hung between the dwellings. He fitted perfectly into the diminished, vertical space of the small street, his shoulders looking as though wedged in between the blackened larch balusters of a loggia and a pile of yellow firewood stacked high against a barn wall.

It was the last she saw of the Reaper. Some time later, as she stood gazing out at the farmers' fields, her mind veered back to him, to the stab of fear she had first felt at the sight of him. And later still, while walking in silence with Tomas along a wagon road, the day's heat following at their heels and the tall grass brushing against her naked calves, she thought of him again and was seized by strange feelings of agitation.

There was a coppersy edge to the air now, and a pounding at her temples that made her feel as if a band were being wound too tightly around her forehead. She blamed the sun's heat, a prickle like brass tacks pressing against her skin. Again and again, her breath would feel caught and she would be obliged to slow her pace, to draw the air in sharply. She would

stand there, inert, at the periphery of some field—green or yellow, potato, rye or wheat—and her hand would reach up involuntarily as if to verify the source of the mysterious fluttering she felt there, at her chest. Or she would gaze out at the numerous fruit trees that stood immobile, as if bracing themselves against the heat, while Tomas stood beside her, waiting patiently for the affliction to pass.

It was only after they had veered off the wagon road and were following a narrow path that cut through an overgrown pasture that Ulyssa felt the sun release its fierce grip on her brow. There was a sudden, liquid feeling to the air. She stood for a moment in rapt attention, gazing across the field before her. The slant of sunlight was nearly horizontal, the entire landscape pastoral, imbued with filaments of gold and flecks of white, pink, yellow and purple that leapt out at her as if from a painting by Giovanni Segantini. She felt giddy, thrown off kilter, as if she had tapped into a different terrain, as if the daisies, meadow sage, heartsease and clover had been kept from her sight for a long time and were only now revealed. They seemed to belong to a time far removed—phantoms from a different century—at any rate, further back than the short week Ulyssa had spent in Riom as a child.

Tomas had walked ahead and was waiting for her among the lengthening shadows near a stand of silver birch trees. “Marsh hibiscus,” he said, matter-of-factly, drawing her attention to the opulent leaves of the plants that bordered the edge of a stream. “Otherwise known as the umbrella plant.” He picked a leaf and placed it upside-down on his head. His eyes smiled back at her from the shade cast by its scalloped edge. She went to touch the gray, woolly underside of the leaf.

“In common language, they used to refer to it as pig food, but *Mummi*, my Finnish grandmother, told me it was Pestilence Root.”

“Pestilence Root?” Wasn’t it the shape of this particular leaf that used to be painted on every apothecary’s door during the Middle Ages? Ulyssa stared at the rhubarb-like leaves that glinted beneath a net of speckled light. “My mother used to say that for every ailment under the sun, there is a remedy, and that it can usually be found growing right outside one’s front door. I certainly hope the inhabitants of Riom never had to avail themselves of this plant.”

“Perhaps during the Middle Ages, they did,” Tomas said, as if he had read her mind, “to help counteract the ravages of the bubonic plague. That’s what I would suspect, anyway.”

They had reached a bend in the river and were turning right at a wooden foot bridge that would lead them toward a shady enclave of trees, when the light suddenly changed and Ulyssa was overcome by dizziness, fearing she might stumble. She felt off-balance again and was relieved to see the guest house coming into view among the trees. Urging her body forward in anticipation of the cool, dark interior, she hurried toward the deep-set,

arched doorway with its *sgraffito* design of whorls and arabesques.

The air in the lobby was noticeably cooler. The slats of the shutters, blue in the late afternoon light, had taken on a reddish tinge. Tiziana looked up from her desk. “Mr. Kurikka? While you were out,” she said, handing Tomas a note. Her gaze veered to Ulyssa, then came to rest on her face. “You’re not feeling well? Is something the matter?”

Tomas placed his hand on Ulyssa’s shoulder, as if to becalm her. He smiled at Tiziana. “Ulyssa needs to rest,” he said. “It’s been a long, hot day.”

Ulyssa peered at the note in Tomas’s hand; it was a message from her cousin, Maria Teresa.

“The lady asked me to tell you that she and her husband would be here the day after tomorrow,” Tiziana informed them now, handing Tomas a package.

“Special Delivery,” he mused as he scrutinized the stamps on the package cradled in his hands. “It’s from my publisher,” he informed Tiziana. “He doesn’t want me to be bored while I’m away on holidays.”

Ulyssa was familiar with the contents of the package; she had proofread the English translation of Tomas’s novel prior to their departure from Canada. Tomas had warned her about the impending deadline. The publisher would allow him a day or two at most to check the galley proofs.

Tiziana handed him the guest key. He gave a little, formal bow and headed for the stairway, cupping Ulyssa’s elbow with his free hand. They took the stairs slowly, Ulyssa as though with leaden feet. Tomas turned to her on the landing.

“Meeting the deadline is crucial if *Arctic Summer* is going to see the light of day,” he muttered as he walked down the hallway. He keyed open the door to their room. “I want you to rest while I get to work on it.”

The interior was in twilight, the air stifling. Ulyssa noticed that Tiziana had taken the precaution of closing the shutters to keep out the summer heat, but that the curtains were pushed aside and the windowpanes open.

Tomas turned on the pink reading lamp and deposited the package on the small writing table in the corner. “Are you hungry?” he asked, half-turning to Ulyssa.

She shook her head.

“Perhaps a glass of lemonade?”

“No, thank you, I’m fine.”

She headed to the adjoining, cubicle-sized bathroom where she stood at the sink, letting a trickle of cold water run over the veins at her wrists to cool herself, a method she had observed her aunt using during the hottest months of the year, in a country home that featured neither bathtub nor shower. Her lungs, it seemed, were laden with dust. She felt as if the air had been sucked out of the room.

“I can hardly breathe,” she called out upon re-entering the bedroom,

letting herself fall back onto the mattress with a groan. She felt unable to move. Stared at the ceiling, impassive.

“I think you’ve been touched by the heat,” Tomas said, finally. “I’m going to get you something to drink.”

He headed for the door and softly pulled it shut behind him.

Ulyssa lay as if suspended in the twilight of the guest room, with her head turned toward the window, watching the motes of dust dance on a wafer-thin beam of sunlight that fell toward her through a slit above the shutters. Small pools of light seemed to hover in the intervals between the brass rings from which the curtain hung.

The room was quiet now. Only the faint whirring of crickets reached her from beyond the window. She watched for the slightest movement of the curtain, hoping for an errant breeze to enter the room, envisioning the impulsive glide and tug that would make the curtain lash out at the pink reading lamp.

A breeze would change everything.

But the breeze did not materialize; everything, it seemed, had come to a grinding halt. She felt drained of energy, caught as if in an eddy between tides. She peered as though through a porthole at the innumerable shadows that hung, suspended, among the sparse furnishings of the room before they were finally swallowed up by the dark. She felt beset with an unquenchable thirst. Only the thirst was not for water; oddly enough, it was for rain.

She had been lying on the bed for what seemed hours—her gaze fastened on the ceiling, feeling as though the daylight had been stolen from her—when Tomas returned. He pushed back the door and kicked it shut with the heel of his foot. He was carrying two bottles of mineral water under his arm.

“One for you, one for me,” he said, affecting cheerfulness by clinking the bottles together. He set one bottle down close to her elbow on the bed. She recoiled from its icy feel.

“Sit up, please,” he said. “I’d like you to drink some water.”

“I’m not thirsty.”

He stood over her, waiting, insistent. Only after she had dutifully sipped at the bottle did he go back to the writing table, where he proceeded to open the package sent to him by his publisher.

She watched him from the bed. “Did you receive the complete manuscript?” she asked.

“There would be no reason for the publisher to send me only half of it. It isn’t that terribly long.” He retrieved the large Finnish-English dictionary from his suitcase on the floor and set to work at the table.

The room grew silent as evening descended on Savognin. From her vantage point on the bed, she watched the failing light wave like palm fronds. She contemplated it seeping in through the slats of the shutters,

imbuing the room with shades of dusky blue. Again she dwelled on the curtain hanging limply from its brass rings; sections of the mauve and green fabric appeared to merge with the wall. The whirl of crickets beyond the window had burgeoned. It was joined by a bell from a nearby church tolling for evening service and, later still, by the rhythmic twang of frogs from the Julia River. She thought she saw light coming in through the slats of the shutters, perhaps that of a street lamp. On second thought, it may have been the moon.

“Is there anything else my princess would like—a cool wash cloth placed on her forehead, perchance?” Tomas said, rising from the writing table. He bent over her, touched her forehead with the back of his hand.

She shook her head. “All I want to do is lie here and think. My cousin, Maria Teresa—”

“You’ve done enough thinking for one day, my dear. If I were your doctor, I would prescribe a period of prolonged, no-thinking therapy.”

“I’m glad you’re not my doctor.”

“Your cheeks are flushed. I’m sorry you’re not feeling well. I’ll go downstairs and get you another bottle of mineral water.”

Ulyssa heard the peal of a solitary bell across the river. Thirteen times, or had she miscounted? She thought of her cousin, Maria Teresa. She sensed her cousin might remember the way back to Miss Janutin’s house. Three decades had passed since she and Maria Teresa had last visited Riom. They must have walked from the village store to the house a dozen times. If she were to come upon Miss Janutin’s house by chance, she would certainly recognize it.

Among the memories Ulyssa retained was one of standing by a wooden fence and looking at a sunlit barn where a clump of large coltsfoot leaves nestled amidst bluish shadows, and of a dirt road leading to the house. It was clearly etched in her mind: The house, in ill repair, three stories tall, at a particular bend in the road. The roughcast exterior gave it a dilapidated air, as if it was on the verge of falling to pieces. She had described it to Tomas as they were ambling through the village looking for the house among the well-worn paths and crooked, winding streets of Riom. One of her sharper memories was of the old-fashioned outhouses tacked onto the dwellings, gray in color and shaped like a wasp’s nest. Those outhouses no longer existed; without exception, they had been replaced by stoops, porches, or verandas.

“The house you’re describing doesn’t exist,” Tomas had insisted.

She had stood at one of many crossroads. It was late afternoon; the streets were deserted. She had looked in vain for signs of village life, for cattle being herded back from pastures, had listened in vain for the mooing of cows waiting to be milked. She had been stricken by the fact that most of the dirt roads had been paved, that many of the barns had been torn down, that most of the large farmhouses had been subdivided to create

smaller family dwellings. The geranium-decked windowsills seemed to have vanished; no longer were there any villagers sitting in doorways or attending to their gardens. She had looked around, perplexed. Where were the goat paths she remembered? Where were the old gardens with their oleander shrubs and their little, pink roses?

"I feel as though I've come to the wrong village," she had lamented. "It's futile to keep looking for Miss Janutin's house."

"Nonsense," Tomas had said, waving off her suggestion.

"No, it's a waste of time," she insisted, suddenly vexed, flinging the words in the direction of the dark, hunched shape in the corner. Her mouth felt parched; the words seemed to leave her lips all askew.

Tomas's chair creaked. "Are you talking to me, or are you dreaming, my dear?"

A great distance seemed to have fallen between them; Tomas's voice drifted toward her as if from afar. Ulyssa thought she heard the click of a door. Fragments of muted conversation, as of guests in a dining room, reached her ears. Heat lay heavily, like a thick blanket, on her chest. She tried to divest herself of it, surfacing briefly before plummeting back into sleep.

The room had grown cold all of a sudden. She was shivering now. She thought she heard the clapping of thunder in the distance, but it may have been the rattling of pots in a kitchen, somewhere downstairs. Her chest felt damp, her skin clammy. She felt as though she was sunk in a tropical morass, yet she seemed to be floating, too, her body lolled as though by the rocking motion of waves. It was night. Above her, the moonlight was so bright it brought tears to her eyes. Looking out over what seemed to be the edge of a blue pool, she could see the lit façade of an old house with many windows. She seemed to be wearing the blue peasant frock Tomas had given her as a gift; it was wet and clinging to her body. Its color clashed oddly with the walls of the pool that looked methylene blue beneath the light of a nearby street lamp.

When she glanced to her left, she discovered someone else bobbing in the phosphorescence of the pool. The man, she noticed, was wearing a hat—what was he doing, wearing *her* straw hat? He strongly resembled the villager she had met earlier in the day, the peasant with the scythe. But on second glance, she couldn't be completely certain; shadows were dancing on his face, as though cast there by palm fronds that were waving in a breeze under a full moon.

As she was looking at him, he said something inconsequential—*It's rather nice to be taking the waters at night, don't you think?* His utterance was interrupted by a rapping sound on a door, somewhere. Paying no heed to it, he went on speaking to her in a voice that was soft and insistent, about the sizzling Dog days of summer. He encouraged her to look up into the far reaches of the night sky, indicating if she did so she was

certain to locate Sirius, the Dog Star, together with its pale companion, the white dwarf. Although Ulyssa was not conversant with the Rhaeto-Romansh language, she was, curiously enough, able to understand everything he told her. Throughout their conversation, she noticed his hands, swishing rapidly to and fro like small propellers to keep himself afloat, which seemed strange if not redundant, because, as she now noticed, he was wearing water wings.

A moment later, there was another distraction: the sound of chair legs scraping across a floor, followed by the opening and closing of a door.

Then, silence once more.

The silence resembled a container. It was shaped like a basin, closed-in and confining. Ulyssa could hear water burbling as if from a pipe; it was gushing forth with great abandon into the pool in which she and the villager were floating on their backs, looking up at the star-studded sky. His need to talk could not be stanchd. Words were spilling forth from his lips at an increasingly frantic pace, until her mind was dizzy with understanding. The words, she realized, were not unlike the opalescent water that was rapidly filling the pool. Without warning, as she looked on panic-stricken, one wall of the pool gave way. A tumultuous wave of water carried them like a couple of limp dolls into the street. Ulyssa paddled frantically with her arms, gasping and sputtering, trying not to drown. The avalanche of water moved on down the street, leaving them high and dry on the cobblestones.

“My, that was quite the ride, wasn’t it?” The man with the water wings laughed uproariously, getting to his feet and brushing mud off his clothes as though it had all been a matter of great amusement.

Ulyssa turned to look back at the pool that was now bathed in a strange, unearthly light. It seemed to have magically rebuilt itself; she saw that its form was inviolate, the walls intact. There seemed to be a symbol engraved on its side. What did the symbol mean? She glanced sideways in bewilderment to seek an explanation from the man with the water wings only to discover that he had vanished.

Someone was calling her name—intimately, and yet from far away. She felt the pressure of a hand on her shoulder, shaking her. Dragging herself away from the dream that fiercely gripped her with its tentacles, she struggled to regain consciousness.

She knew the voice. When she opened her eyes—startled, her mouth agape—she perceived a silhouette looming over her, standing out starkly against a rectangle of bleached light. It was Tomas.

“I saw it,” she said, her mouth parched, filled with cotton.

“Saw what, my dear?”

“The fountain. There was a fountain in front of Miss Janutin’s house. It was embossed with a symbol, a kind of rune.”

“The Tick” was first published in ERNEST HEKKANEN’s collection, *Medieval Hour in the Author’s Mind* (Thistle-down Press, 1987); it was revised for inclusion in *Medieval Hour in the Author’s Mind, the Revised, Expanded Edition* (New Orphic Publishers, 2003) and it has been revised yet again for publication in this issue of *The New Orphic Review*.

The Tick

Ernest Hekkanen

A WEEK HAD PASSED since Leonard Niemi was awakened in the middle of the night by something small and bug-like crawling across his upper lip. In his panic he grabbed whatever it was and squeezed it very tightly between his thumb and index finger. Then he turned on the light, only to discover that the creature was a tick. The insect was still very much alive, trapped though it was between the pads of his fingers, its tiny legs waving about quite mechanically. He pinched it hard between his fingernails and, to his horror, it released a spurt of blood, about the volume of a teardrop. He flicked the tick onto the dresser top and, with the rim of a cup, pulverized it by rolling the cup back and forth. There was no doubt in his mind where the tick had come by its liquid cargo: the blood was his own! Beyond any doubt! During the night, the tick had plunged its head beneath his skin and had siphoned off a little nourishment. It had, in effect, fed upon him.

* * *

Leonard was in an extremely agitated state of mind. In the middle of the day, he had fallen asleep and had proceeded to dream that he was a monk. He was pacing back and forth in the shadow of a monstrously large cathedral, long ago in medieval times. As far as his eye could see, the countryside was ablaze, flames unfurling like orange banners toward the sky. For all intents and purposes, he should have been roasting, but, to the contrary, he was suffering from chills—horrible, quaking chills that made him embrace himself around his own chest. Was it the shadow, the deep and sullen shadow created by the cathedral, which produced such chills? Directly below his breastbone, it felt as though an icicle was about to stab him coldly in the heart.

He was pacing back and forth in the shadow of the cathedral, alternately shivering and burning with guilt—guilt because the countryside was ablaze and he was as cool as a corpse. He seemed to be in a small courtyard of some sort, where flowers bloomed with frenetic abandon, exploding in colors that hurt his eyes. He reached the end of the courtyard and turned around to retrace his footsteps, when a monk stepped directly into his path. A cowl was pulled over the monk's head and the monk's hands were hidden in the large sleeves of his robe.

"Excuse me, but you've stepped in my way," Leonard upbraided him. "On purpose, I might add."

The monk neither moved nor spoke. He simply stood there, like an upright shadow that had congealed in the middle of the day.

"Okay, if you won't move, I will. It makes no difference to me. The same purpose is achieved."

Leonard stepped to one side of the path, intending to go around the monk; however, the monk anticipated his move and stepped in front of him again.

"This is ridiculous," Leonard began to rage. "We achieve nothing, this way."

He stepped in the opposite direction. Again, the monk stepped in front of him. Suddenly vexed by his adversary's antics, Leonard tore back the cowl that covered the monk's head, only to discover a lime-white skull underneath, grinning madly, a gold tooth prominently displayed among its rotting companions.

* * *

Again, Leonard was awakened—by what, he didn't know. Now that he was well into the seventh day of his fright, this was becoming a habit. He was sweating; the grimy sheets of the bed clung to his body. Was this sweat being produced by one of several possible fevers that the tick might have passed on to him, or was it the result of the summer heat that lay trapped and stale in his room?

He thought, upon waking, that he heard the prattling of countless birds. He had been walking along a corridor past a series of stained-glass windows and the sound had poured down like bright, spangled notes from above. Shadows beat like frantic wings against the other side of the stained-glass panes, and he thought to himself: those poor birds, they can't find their way out.

Suddenly, in the middle of recalling the dream, Leonard heard the yelp of his next door neighbor's dog. The dog started to scrape its nails against the other side of the wall; however, the noise was soon stopped, when the old man began to beat the dog with what sounded like a rolled-up newspaper. There was one further yelp and then—silence.

On warm days, the old man next door would take his dachshund for a walk. However, because the dog was arthritic in its hind legs, the old

man ended up dragging it by its leash. He dragged the dog twice around the block and then back up the stairs to his room, the dog choking with each yank of the leash. One day, out on the landing, the old man had shown Leonard how well the dachshund could play dead. The mangy, festering cur had lain on its back with its stubby legs sticking up in the air, its head askew.

“Now, isn’t that a fine example of a dead dog, if ever you did see one?” the old man said, quite pleased with the dog’s performance. “If you came down the street and saw Butch lying like that on his back, wouldn’t you think he was dead? I certainly would,” the old man chortled, and proceeded to drag the dachshund into his room.

* * *

Each night, Leonard hurled back the covers on his bed and inspected them for ticks. This was how he came to discover the second tick—clinging to the folds of the sheet. Carefully scooping it up with the lid of an aspirin bottle, he dumped the tick into the container beside the mangled body of the first tick.

“There, how do you like that,” he told it. “You’re in prison now. *My* prison.”

Three days had gone by since finding the second tick. Leonard opened the aspirin bottle and stared through the narrow opening. The live tick seemed to be visibly weaker now, although the fresh air, which had just finished gushing into the bottle, had revived it to some extent. It lifted one of its little legs, placed it on the white wall of the container and then let it drop, as though overcome by the futility of escape. Leonard could well imagine the tick’s panic. Although the insect didn’t have a rational understanding of what it was to hope, it clung to life anyway—a life it probably had no idea of possessing. The dead tick lay beside it, crushed beyond description. Leonard doubted whether the live tick was able to recognize its deceased comrade, but in case it did, he hoped the dead one would instill a sense of fear in the live one.

* * *

Each morning, Leonard stood at the window of his room, jangling the coins and keys in his trouser pocket as he watched what went on in the street. He was struck by how much the electric trolley buses resembled gigantic insects, with their long poles jutting up into the air at a thirty-degree angle. Every couple of minutes, he would glance around him, on the lookout for ticks. He checked his socks and shoes, often mistaking the odd itch for insects that might be crawling up his legs. He checked the ceiling to make certain none were about to drop on him and then, giving a shudder, he went back to contemplating the street below his window.

Sometimes he would ask himself, “What am I doing here? Shouldn’t I be somewhere else?”

He twisted the string that was tied to his door key tightly around his finger and wiped sweat from his forehead. Was the sweat being produced by a fever? Any day now, he expected to succumb to illness caused by the tick that had fed on his blood. He could imagine dying, right here in the confines of his room. His body would be discovered when the reek of his rotting flesh finally reached the street. He visualized his body lying on the floor, covered first by flies and then by maggots. A death cart would stop in the street below his window. Two men in scruffy clothes would climb the stairs to his room. They would lift him by his ankles and wrists and haul him out through the door, past the other tenants who would stand gawking or holding handkerchiefs to their noses.

At the top of the stairs, the poorly clad men would each grip one of his ankles, in hopes of restraining his momentum as they slid him down the stairs. His corpse would bump like a sack full of gelatin on the treads. The men would drag him outside to the sidewalk and then heave his body up onto the death cart, on top of a pile of recently deceased human beings. A man standing on the wagon's seat would pitch a shovelful of lime on his face, while the horses neighed and jostled in their harnesses, anxious to travel down the street in the direction of the graveyard.

* * *

Leonard was being chased by hounds. The dark underbelly of the sky had begun to fume; he was scrambling, hand and foot, up a hillside. Earth kept breaking free under his hands, and the hounds, leaping and bounding after him, were snapping their fangs not far from his backside. Meat. He thought he could smell decaying meat on the tepid breath issuing from their mouths.

Leonard gripped the trunk of a squat bush and pulled himself to the top of the hill and, stumbling forward, found himself at the door of a monstrously large cathedral, gargoyles peering down at him from an archway. By now, the hounds had surged up over the brow of the hill and were loping toward him, their tongues hanging like obscene-looking lizards from their mouths. Leonard began to beat on the rough wooden door; he hollered frantically for someone to let him in. He turned around and, putting his back up against the door, shot out his arms in an attempt to fend off the coming attack. The hounds, with their mouths agape, allowed him to see that their teeth were as white as porcelain. The dogs sprang in unison, their forelegs raised, ready to drag him down onto the ground. He fell backwards, as though into empty space. Then he discovered that he was lying in bed, adrift in what seemed to be a waking dream. The sheet clung to his body; however, his feet were exposed, exposed and extremely pale. A crone, wrapped in a black shawl, stood at the foot of the bed, creating rings of light that hovered in the dark air. She made three such rings, all of them interconnected; then she smiled at him, benignly, bowed her head and skirted out through the door.

At first, Leonard couldn't tell whether he was asleep or awake. He lay perfectly still, a feeling of lethargy gripping his limbs. Only after realizing that he was indeed awake did the rings of light begin to fade. He jerked himself out of bed, roughly hurling the sheet aside, and pursued the crone out onto the landing. He thought he saw her disappear into the corner suite and began to beat on the door. He smashed it hard with a clenched fist, demanding that it be opened, and opened at once. Doors all around the landing began to open. Heads popped out to see what was going on. One person asked him what the fuss was all about. Now the door he was pounding on was pulled back with a jarring noise. A woman with oily brown hair confronted him. She was dressed in a pink bathrobe and fuzzy pink slippers.

"Jesus Christ, what is it? What the Sam-u-hell's got into you, this time?"

Leonard looked around at the other tenants on the landing and realized, quite suddenly, that he was naked except for a pair of undershorts.

"Smoke," he stammered. "I thought I smelled smoke coming from your suite."

"Smoke," the woman said. "Hey, Fred, he says he smells smoke coming from our suite. Do you smell any smoke, for chrissake?"

A dark voice rumbled:

"No. No smoke in here. Tell him he's imagining it."

"You heard him," the woman said. "The smoke's in your head, you idiot."

"But I'm sure I smelled smoke," Leonard said, convinced that he had indeed smelled it.

"Sorry, there ain't no smoke coming from our suite," she said, and slammed the door in Leonard's face. He turned to go back to his room. The other tenants continued to gawk at him. Snarling in their direction, he said:

"What the hell are you looking at, you bunch of gargoyles? Anyone can smell smoke."

* * *

Leonard Niemi was afraid to get out of bed and go to the wardrobe in the corner of his room. He was convinced, if he opened the wardrobe door, that he would find, hanging from the crossbar, a man who resembled him. The man would be spinning rather lazily around—by a rope secured to his neck. His calves would be cinched up in back of him, kept there by a rope that was also looped around his hands. He would be in the beginning stages of decomposition. Flies would cover his face, maggots would be feeding on his eyes; his mouth, having fallen open, would disclose the fact that his tongue had been ripped out by its roots.

A trolley bus went by outside the window, issuing sparks where the poles met the cables. He wound the key string tightly around his index finger and gripped the key in his hand. A few feet away, on the dresser,

stood the aspirin bottle that contained the ticks. He could divide his life into two unequal parts: *before* and *after* the arrival of the first tick. The part that came before had been quite simple, quite routine. In the morning he would pick up his bucket, brush and squeegee from beside the door and head out into the street to wash windows, ultimately to return in the evening with a few dollars in his pocket, to the solitude of his room. But ever since the arrival of the first tick, he had been able to count on only two things—uncertainty—uncertainty, and the likelihood of fever.

* * *

Leonard dreamed that he had walked out of the dark into a small town in South Dakota. He was dressed in a black robe with a hood tossed back on his shoulders. He was walking around town in a rather disoriented fashion, twisting and craning his neck due to some sort of pressure he was trying to alleviate. Every now and then, he would fix himself in a pose, his head cocked to one side, listening with his left ear to what hovered above and slightly to the back of his left shoulder. When he listened to what was hovering above him, his mouth would drop open and he would intensify his hearing for several seconds—sometimes for as many seconds as perhaps ten. Then he would shake his head, regain his momentum and walk on.

The thing that hovered above and slightly to the back of his left shoulder seemed to be a moth with a human face and wings that spanned twice the length of its body—which, at the outset, had measured at least a meter. However, the moth was actually composed of numerous flies which, because of a will or an authority that was in operation, had been forced to assume the shape of a moth, much as cells in the human body have been forced to assume a shape and activity that allows the greater mass to move and function as an entity unto itself.

Leonard walked around town for several hours, the moth with the human face gliding along above his left shoulder. He had collected an entourage of children and disheveled-looking adults who, no doubt, had experienced better times at some point in their lives. On occasion his followers would attempt to provoke him with a stick or a missile flung at his person, but under no condition did he speak. As the day wore on, so did the abuse. Finally, as dusk was beginning to fall, something quite foul hit him on the side of the head, namely a paper bag full of excrement. At that juncture he turned on his followers and proceeded to act out a mime. However, the mime resulted in further taunts and abuse and, to his horror, a volley of stones began to beat a lively tattoo on his head.

* * *

Leonard woke up to what sounded like the falling of the sky. A tremendous clu-bang, clu-bang, clu-bang shook the entire building. Instantly, he sat up in bed and tried to ascertain whether or not the sounds were real. From what he could tell, they were coming from somewhere in the ceiling,

over in the corner of the room above his closet. They were loud, resounding thuds that seemed as though they were being produced by a sledge hammer.

Leonard threw back the blankets of his bed and, scanning the floor for ticks prior to setting down his feet, sat on the edge of the mattress, one eye raised in the direction of the sound. Although he could hear and indeed feel the thuds, he was reluctant to believe that they were real, considering the state his mind had been in for the past week or so. The aspirin bottle containing the ticks now sat on the dresser, surrounded by the contents of Leonard's pockets. He got up and walked over to the dresser and stood looking down at the keys, coins, comb and pocketknife. He picked up the knife, unfolded the blade and cut himself across the flesh of his underarm. A ribbon of blood appeared in the gash; it grew in thickness until it finally overflowed from the wound and began to drip onto the floor at his feet. The blood made perfect little splats on the linoleum. He smeared them around with the big toe of his right foot. If anything proved the thuds were indeed real, it was his blood on the floor.

As if to give substance to his thoughts, a galvanized pipe came crashing through the corner of the ceiling. Lath and plaster flew in every direction, some of it hurtling onto the floor at his feet. He watched the pipe disappear back up into the hole and come crashing down again, with a mighty clap against the top of his closet. Leonard watched with great curiosity. The galvanized pipe rose and then plunged, rose and then plunged, the end of it spitting fragments of wood. Finally, the pipe buckled the top of the closet and began to wreak havoc within. Leonard went to open the door of the wardrobe. The tip of the galvanized pipe penetrated a large box of cornflakes on the top shelf and scattered flakes all over the floor. The pipe rose with the cereal box impaled on it and came crashing down again, slamming through the shelf and into the open mouth of the man hanging among Leonard's clothes.

"God, what a mess," Leonard mused.

At that point, Leonard realized he must do something. Clad only in his underwear, he ran from the room and headed straight to the shaft that ascended to the roof. He climbed through the window at the bottom of the shaft and hurried up the ladder toward the clear blue sky. When he pulled himself up onto the roof he discovered that the caretaker—an immense man well over six feet tall, with a girth as large as a 65-gallon barrel—was ramming a galvanized pipe up and down in a vent pipe directly over his room.

"Stop! Stop what you're doing!" Leonard shouted. "You're wrecking the place. You're smashing everything to smithereens."

The caretaker stared at him. His face reminded Leonard of a picnic ham with day-old stubble. "What's that? What are you shouting about?"

"I said, you're wrecking the place. You and your goddamn pipe—you're wrecking the place!"

The caretaker raised the pipe and slammed it down again. “That just shows how much you know about such things,” he said, giving a hearty laugh.

“But you are, you’re wrecking the place!”

“No, I’m not. I’m cleaning the drain.”

“That’s what you think,” Leonard told him. “But, in fact, you’re wrecking the place.”

“Get the fuck out of my sight,” the caretaker yelled at him, “before I ram this pipe down your goddamn throat.”

Leonard climbed down the shaft and retreated to his room, where the pipe continued to inflict damage over in the corner. By now, it had worked its way well down into the innards of the man hanging from the crossbar. Leonard closed the door on the destruction that was taking place. He went to the dresser and grabbed the aspirin bottle. He uncapped the lid and looked inside. The live tick took several tentative steps, stuck one of its tiny legs up on the white wall of the container and then let its leg fall.

Leonard recapped the bottle and set it on the dresser. He removed the blanket from his bed and draped it around his shoulders. He listened to the plunging thuds of the pipe while he stared at the aspirin bottle on the dresser, trying to resist the temptation that now threatened to steal over him. He seemed to remember that he was dreaming about a monk. The monk had trudged up a long hillside, with something very weighty on his shoulders, past a collection of tents assembled as though for a carnival. Yes, indeed, it had been a carnival! Leonard remembered seeing Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds. Also, the monk had been barefooted, as he himself was right now. Yes, he remembered that very clearly.

Just then, an electric trolley bus went by outside the window, its long antennas issuing sparks. He grabbed the salt shaker on the table. He went over to the dresser, uncapped the aspirin bottle and dumped some salt inside. He raised the bottle to his lips and tipped back his head, tapping the bottom of the container so the ticks would spill into his mouth. Then he swallowed. The ticks were scratchy going down his throat. He took the key with the string off the dresser, sat down on the bed and wound the string tightly around his index finger, waiting for some sort of fever to claim him.

Meanwhile, the quaking thuds sent tremors up his legs and into his stomach, where they seemed to congeal in a pudding-like mass.

Of a Fire Beyond the Hills

Ernest Hekkanen

New Orphic Publishers

ISBN 978-1-894842-13-6

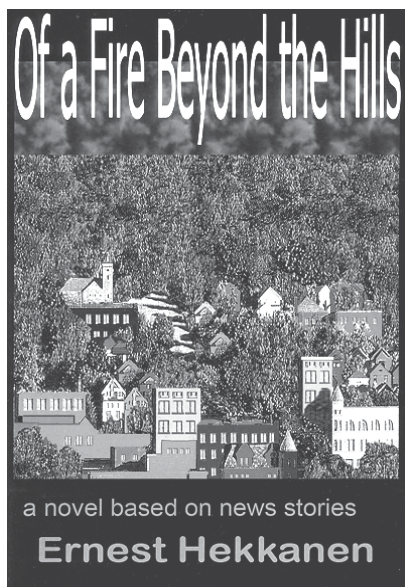
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Based on news stories that aired on CNN, ABC, FOX and the CBC, as well as articles that appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Globe and Mail*, Hekkanen's novel, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, is written in the tradition of Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* and Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*.

During a time of war, an intrepid group of anti-war activists in Nelson, B.C. decides to erect a War Resisters Monument to U.S. draft dodgers and deserters. It results in an angry outburst by right-wingers across North America, in particular by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who encourage President Bush to condemn the project. The local Chamber of Commerce is flooded by hysterical hate mail urging Nelson's city fathers to ban the War Resisters Monument.

When Ernest Hekkanen offers his front yard as a possible site for the statue, the mayor and city councilors seek to put a stop to it out of fear that it will ruin Nelson's tourist industry.

"This novel is about fear and patriotism," Hekkanen says. "And hysteria."



Shadows on a Cave Wall by Ernest Hekkanen

ISBN 978-1-894842-13-8, \$20.00

Shadows on a Cave Wall is an amusing and fascinating character portrait of a former prize-fighter, musician and fiction writer, Sebastian Salo, undertaken by a fictional chronicler, Jacques Dupuis, after Salo's body has been discovered two months after his death. As Dupuis gathers the myriad of views of Salo from members of a West Kootenay town, Hekkanen simultaneously provides a sly and revealing study of the town itself through the voices and prejudices and emotions of its citizens. The concert of opinions and personalities that comprise *Shadows on a Cave Wall* was possibly prompted by Hekkanen's leading role in promoting the favourable recognition of American draft

resisters in Canada in 2006 against the wishes of small-minded and fearful citizens in the Kootenays who failed to understand why peaceful, anti-war sentiments ought to be respected.”

Alan Twigg, *Author Bank*, www.abcbookworld.com

The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen by Margrith Schraner ISBN 978-1-894842-10-5, \$25.00

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“Ernest Hekkanen is Canadian literature’s true iconoclast and most resolute maverick. He deserves to be the subject of a book.” Bill Gaston, author of *Sointula*, *Mount Appetite*, Professor of Writing, University of Victoria

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