

The New Orphic Review

Editor-in-Chief
Ernest Hekkanen

Copy & Associate Editor
Margrith Schraner

Managing Editor
Michael Connor

*In memory of
Michael Bullock & Jurgen Joachim Hesse,
with eternal gratitude.*

Nelson



Canada

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

ISSN 1480-5243

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

EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICE:

The New Orphic Review, 706 Mill Street, Nelson, British Columbia, Canada, V1L 4S5. Tel: (250) 354-0494. Please make sure all inquires and manuscripts are accompanied by an SASE and that the return postage is Canadian. Manuscripts with insufficient return postage will be held for one month and then discarded.

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

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

SUBSCRIPTIONS PER YEAR (2 ISSUES)

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

Individual issues \$17.50 CAD or USD as applicable.

ADVERTISEMENTS (BLACK & WHITE CAMERA-READY ONLY):

Full pages:	Half pages:
\$150 CAD, \$150 USD	\$75 CAD, \$75 USD

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

Contents

Volume 12 Number 1 Fall 2009

- Ernest Hekkanen 4 *Muse, Amuse, Bemuse*
- Hillel Wright 7 *The Motel of Lost Companions*
- Allan Brown 15 *Three Poems*
- F.A. Fucile 19 *The Unlikely Career of Lindsay
Arnold, American Icon*
- Sean Arthur Joyce 27 *Four Poems*
- Jennifer Pachoumis 31 *The House on 13*
- Ernest Hekkanen 43 *The Animal: a review of
Louis E. Bourgeois's Prose Poetics*
- M.P. Wiltshire 46 *Cowboys & Indians*
- Ernest Hekkanen 54 *Two Poems*
- Tim Strutz 56 *Crow*
- Thomas J. Rice 63 *Border Calls*
- John Duncan Talbird 71 *My Dear Son*
- Margrith Schraner 75 *To Travel the Distance*
- Ernest Hekkanen 88 *The Painful Lavender Sky*

Visit Our Website

www3.telus.net/neworphicpublishers-hekkanen

ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 40 books. The most recent are *Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow*, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, *Shadows on a Cave Wall*, *Kafka: The Master of Yesno* and *The Life of Bartholomew G. Hekkanen* is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* and *Contemporary Authors* in the United States. He is the subject of Margrith Schraner's critical study, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*.

Muse, Amuse, Bemuse

Ernest Hekkanen

AS A WRITER, I have always been interested in the origin of words and how the meaning of them changes over time. I am by no means an expert on the subject, but on the other hand, I occasionally find myself flipping through the dictionary in an attempt to track a word to its origin. The word 'muse' is a good example.

Quite a few months ago, I was casually talking to a friend over coffee, when I made the claim that we live in a society in which we attempt to "amuse ourselves to death," and as a writer of fiction, I could be faulted for furthering this impulse in people. But then I said, in the way of generalization and apology, "However, that could be said of everyone who's in the arts and the sciences. Indeed, it could be said of just about everyone in every profession. We are *all* amusing ourselves to death—with this thought or that one—with one scheme or another."

According to the *New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 'muse' refers to "each of nine goddesses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who preside over the arts and sciences." It also means "to be absorbed in thought." According to the same dictionary, 'amuse' is to "entertain," to "provide interesting and enjoyable occupation for (someone)." It is as though the 'muses'—in order to keep us from getting bored to death—have provided us with the arts and the sciences, in an attempt to keep us amused. Then there is the word, 'bemuse', which means to "puzzle, confuse or bewilder." 'Bemuse' suggests to me that the individual who ponders a subject provided by one of the muses (for his amusement, of course) might find himself confused or bewildered by the object of his contemplations—perhaps to the very end of his life.

Last year, Jurgen Joachim Hesse and Michael Bullock died. They

were writers whose musings have, in part, been published in *The New Orphic Review*; indeed, at separate times, both men were Featured Poets in our journal and contributors to the New Orphic title, *The Flat Earth Excavation Company: A Surreal Fiction Anthology*. I have made mention of Hesse in my books, *Turning Life into Fiction* and *Kafka: The Master of Yesno*, and he has also been credited with having been an influence on me in Margrith Schraner's book, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*. Indeed, it was Jurgen who gave me my first computer and who then pointed me in the direction of do-it-yourself publishing, so, yes, indeed, he has had a profound effect on my life.

I remember, a couple of years ago, listening to a play written by Jurgen Hesse, on CBC radio. The play was about a man who was dying of kidney failure; he was at the point in life where he felt death to be a viable alternative to further torment, which was the case with Jurgen himself. While listening to his play, it dawned on me that Jurgen was both amused and bemused by his condition. In a manner of speaking, the problems he was experiencing with his health had *become* his muse.

Another man who eschewed the regular publishing industry in favor of setting out on his own is Michael Bullock. Oddly enough, Bullock has translated over 200 books from the French and the German, all of which have been published by 'legitimate' publishers. However, because his own musings favored those of the imagists and the surrealists (musings for which there is a much smaller market) he self-published most of his fifty-odd volumes of poetry and prose.

Last fall, after Bullock's death, *The New Orphic Review* published four of his recent poems. One of the poems, namely, "Dream Idol," was so utterly recent it was penned in longhand in the margins of a letter he sent to me. From what I can gather on the website devoted to his career at www.abcbookworld.com, Bullock was a literary man until his last breath. The muses had him firmly in their thrall; they kept him amused right to the end of his life, although, in many of his stories and poems, there are also signs that he was quite bemused—with startling clarity, I might add.

Back in the 1980s, Bullock's postmodern, surreal fables could often be read in the pages of the *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, a now defunct journal; and later still, they frequently graced the pages of *The New Orphic Review*. I read his stories with a great deal of interest, for they provided me with yet another window onto the luminous landscape of fiction. Obviously, I managed to pick up some writing techniques from him, because, later on, in Farhat Iftekharuddin's book of criticism, *Postmodern Narrative Around the World*, she would link me to his name in the following fashion: "Other writers influenced by Yates and Bullock include Rikki Ducornet, George McWhirter and Ernest Hekkanen."

Muse, amuse, bemuse . . .

The New Orphic Review

What an odd, seemingly random life we lead. Only after we have drifted through the greater part of our allotted time on earth, do we notice how much coincidence has come to shape and design our lives. Insights such as these provide us with something to muse about, I suppose; and if we're lucky, we will be amused and/or bemused right up to the end of our lives. Indeed, this seems to be a constitutional disease peculiar to writers, perhaps because writers are given to much reflection.

Reflection: now that's an interesting word.

HILLEL WRIGHT is the author of two books of poetry, a collection of short stories and two novels, the latest being *Border Town* (Printed Matter Press, Tokyo & New York, 2006). He is also the editor of four literary anthologies, the latest: *Jungle Crows: a Tokyo expatriate anthology* (Printed Matter Press, 2007). He lives in Japan with wife and Muse, Shiori Tsuchiya, teaches university classes and is Japan Correspondent for the London, England-based *Fishing News International*.

The Motel of Lost Companions

(with appreciation and apologies to Miyazawa Kenji & Neil Young)

Hillel Wright

IT WAS A foolish argument... the worst kind of argument too, over food. And not even food exactly, but over salad dressing.

She'd left his dinner on the table while she was out shopping for groceries. There was a bowl of yakisoba noodles and a plate of gyoza to heat up in the microwave. And there was a salad. Not a very fancy salad, just lettuce, tomato wedges, grated carrot, cucumber slices, wedges of hardboiled egg. The salad was in a medium-sized bowl, an individual serving. Next to the salad was a small plastic pitcher of dressing. It looked and smelled like one of her homemade dressings, of olive oil, rice vinegar, garlic, diced tofu and a dollop of Caspian yogurt. It looked like a lot of dressing for one salad, but then again there was no indication that it wasn't. It presented a classic avoidance-avoidance conflict: avoid her displeasure if he didn't eat everything she so painstakingly prepared for him; avoid her anger if he didn't leave her half the dressing.

So it was a foolish decision that led to the foolish argument. He'd gone out to the library after dinner and then over to the International Center to use the free 30 minutes of internet service. He could just check his e-mail and leave their home computer free for her to use when she got home from shopping. She liked to search for punk music performances on YouTube or play violent video games like "Postal" or "Grand Theft Auto". She said they helped her to relax. She was, after all, old enough—34—to be able to distinguish fantasy from reality. He didn't suspect she'd ever actually go on a shooting rampage in Yokohama or Tokyo. For one thing, where would she get a gun?

An ex-lead singer in an all-girl punk-rock band, she still had some

contacts in the hard-core punk scene in Tokyo, but these people were artists, not gangsters, and in spite of their black leather jackets and Doc Marten boots, they were not part of the world of organized crime. Joe Strummer might have easily bought a gun in Memphis, but Togawa Jun was highly unlikely to purchase or procure one in Kawasaki.

She was not, certainly, a potential serial-killer, but she was, against her own better judgment, a serious drinker, and when he came back home from the International Center, he found her, as he had expected, sitting at the computer with a half empty glass on the shelf beside her, playing “Postal”. He was slightly unhappy to realize that it was cheap sake she was drinking. She could handle beer alright; even *sho-chu*, but cheap sake made her a mean drunk. He decided to stay out of her way by taking a shower.

It was when he came out of the shower that the argument began. In reality, it was more a shower of abuse than an argument. It takes two voices to argue. He was merely stopped dead in his tracks, towel wrapped around his waist, reaching for Q-tips to dry the water in his ears, when she began spouting her vicious stream of invective about the salad dressing.

Once she’d built up a head of steam, there was no more stopping her than there was stopping a Shinkansen Express train at a backwater station. Defense, rationalization or arguments, he knew from long years of experience, were non-options. They would only serve to stoke her angry fire into a fury. He tried an apology, which came out sounding feebler than he would have wished. She ignored it and continued venting her over-reactive rage.

At last he could see no choice but to flee the scene. He hastily retreated to the bedroom, dressed hurriedly, threw on a windbreaker over an old sweatshirt and headed down the stairs. She didn’t pursue him. He sat down on the step above the *genkan* and laced up a pair of walking shoes.

The night was cool and clear, ten days after the Vernal Equinox. He knew that he was in for a long walk. It would take her an hour or two to chill out. When he returned she’d either be asleep—passed out more than likely—or back at the computer watching music videos and slowly sobering up. She was volatile but pretty predictable.

It was a half-hour walk to the Tamagawa River, so that was an ideal destination. Once there he could walk along the river on the dirt trails for an hour, letting the sound of the rushing water and the stillness of the starry sky calm his nerves. Then he could walk home and hopefully enter a quiet, if not completely harmonious house and go to bed. The residual emotional flak might carry over to the next day in the form of “the silent treatment” or it might dissipate and end in an apology—“*gomen, ne*”. He was never sure. She wasn’t *that* predictable.

So down to the river it was, winding his way through late night alleys

and empty shopping streets. A slight breeze stirred the cherry trees along the route, causing the few fading blossoms remaining to flutter to the pavement, dotting the black asphalt with flickers of pink. Past the shuttered shops he trudged, past the red lantern-lit little yakitori bars and “snacks,” with one or two customers nursing a cold beer or sake, Mama-sans pouring a glass of silent *sho-chu*. Occasionally a burst of laughter from the doorway of an *izakaya* as a gaggle of dark-suited salarymen with a stumbling office-lady or two, staggered out into the starlight.

The last ten minutes of the walk led through a quiet residential neighborhood, dark houses presiding over hushed streets, here and there a light in a window, now and then a stray cat disappearing behind an azalea hedge. Then the *kaido*, the two-lane blacktop he had to cross before reaching the river bank, a solitary traffic light casting a gratuitous glow of color against the ebony wall of night.

The road rose slightly as it neared the *kaido* and the view of the river was blocked by a steeper rise on the farther side. About 100 meters north of the signal was a 24-hour convenience store, its fluorescent lighting giving out a ghostly luminescence. Another fifty meters or so further on came a flash of scarlet neon, advertising the presence of some apparently new building, which he’d never noticed before. This didn’t surprise him—buildings came and went unceasingly in Tokyo. The convenience store hadn’t been here six months ago.

The traffic light was red, the odd transport truck roared by and as he waited for the light to change he looked more closely at the new neon sign: MOTEL!

Now that *was* strange. There weren’t any motels in Japan. Most Japanese didn’t even know the word. But new things appeared regularly on the Tokyo landscape and soon became commonplace and entrenched. Fifteen years ago, when he’d first arrived, there’d been no Starbucks and now they were everywhere, sometimes less than 100 meters apart, like the two near the west exit of Yokohama Station. He looked again to make sure it was an “M” he was seeing and not an “H”. And then he saw two smaller signs: HEATED POOL. BAR.

The light turned to green and he instinctively took a step forward, but changed his mind. Although it made sense to build a motel along a busy thoroughfare, especially near a convenience store, it was still so alien that it warranted verification. So he turned left and walked along the *kaido* and soon turned into the parking area of the motel. It didn’t seem to have a name, but if it was Japan’s first motel it would probably be named later as rival motels began to be built and motel signs would dot the urban nights like fireflies: HEATED POOL! BAR!

He found himself entering the bar, which was wide, spacious and very western in appearance and décor, with lights and posters advertising Budweiser, Miller High Life and even Molson’s Canadian. There was

one customer seated on a barstool, a broad-backed man dressed in jeans and a plaid flannel shirt, with short, roughly-trimmed graying hair. He chose a stool just one down from the other man and ordered Jameson's Irish whiskey on the rocks, water on the side. Casting a glance at his neighbor he made him out to be around his own age, blue eyes just slightly cloudy in a sun-leathered working man's face. Strong-looking, calloused fingers gripped a bottle of Millers.

"Cheers!" the man exclaimed, raising his bottle. Our hero lifted his glass. "I'm Jim," the beer drinker declared in a hearty, friendly voice. "Ken," our hero responded.

"That must be your pickup truck out in the lot," Ken said. "It's the only vehicle out there, after all."

"Well, you got that right," Jim said. "It belongs to an American company I'm working for. I'm a framing carpenter from New Hampshire. We're building a bunch of post and beam houses out in one of the new Tokyo suburbs... the one that's gonna get a Wal-mart in a year or two."

"Wow, first a motel, then American-style houses, after that a Wal-mart... fits right in with McDonalds, Mr. Donut and KFC. Pretty soon the whole area'll look like Boston or Seattle."

"Nothin' wrong with that, I guess."

They drank in silence for a few minutes; then offered to buy each other another round. Jim won the toss. "So what d'ya do around here?" he asked.

"I teach at a university in Yokohama," Ken answered. "I'm married to a Japanese girl... been here about fifteen years. My name's Ken Shulman."

"Jimmy Higgins," the carpenter replied.

"*Really!* My best friend when I was a little boy was named Jimmy Higgins."

"That so? Where was that exactly?"

"Hartford. Hartford, Connecticut."

Jimmy Higgins looked intently at Ken and didn't speak.

Ken felt a bit uneasy and didn't speak either.

Finally Jimmy Higgins broke the silence. "I'm originally from Hartford too. And my best friend when I was little was called Kenny. Kenny Shulman."

"Did Kenny live at 76 East Burnam Street? And did you live at 75 East Venice Street, and did your backyard touch Kenny's at the corners?"

"Yes, that's exactly right."

"And did you and Kenny have an imaginary friend, a spaceman named Dim?"

"We did, and why did we call him Dim?"

"Because at night we could both see a dim light from our bedroom windows and we figured that was Dim's spaceship, out in the distance."

"And what happened to the boys' friendship?"

“They went to different elementary schools. Kenny went to public school and Jimmy went to Catholic school.”

“And the nuns told Jimmy he mustn’t play with Kenny any more because Kenny was Jewish and the Jews killed Christ, Our Lord.”

Ken held his breath.

“It’s been over fifty years,” said Jim. “I’m so happy we can finally be friends... once again.”

* * *

Madoka was asleep when Ken returned home. She was lying peacefully in bed, not passed out on the floor as he’d feared. He guessed she’d taken a bath or shower before getting into bed. He made a pot of green tea and sat at the kitchen table, drinking slowly and thinking about the strange new motel and the incredible reunion with his lost childhood companion, Jimmy Higgins.

* * *

Ken and Madoka ate dinner together the following evening. She’d been quiet all day, but not particularly “silent”. She prepared a *wayu sechu* meal—miso soup, spaghetti with clam sauce, *gobo* salad. After dinner Ken watched the bilingual news in English on TV and Madoka played video games in another room. After the news, Ken announced he was going for a walk. It was his habit to walk an hour for exercise six days a week.

Although he usually walked along the small Shibugawa River through their neighborhood, tonight Ken set out immediately for the Tamagawa. It was earlier than the night before and there were more people on the streets, but he strode briskly through the shopping district and once more became engulfed by emptiness as he came within a few minutes of the river. And soon, as he ascended the rise to the *kaido*, there it was again, flashing in blood-red neon through the night: MOTEL! HEATED POOL. BAR.

No temptation to cross the road and descend to the river deterred his determined steps as he headed, as if pulled by magnetic or gravitational force, to the motel. And once inside the bar he again saw one lone figure on a barstool. Without hesitation he took a stool, leaving one empty between himself and the stranger and ordered a drink.

The other customer was drinking Budweiser. It was clearly not Jimmy Higgins, but something immediately impressed upon him that this man, too, was someone he once knew well.

The beer drinker smiled at him, tilting his bottle slightly in Ken’s direction. “Yes, I know who you are, but don’t saying anything... the walls have ears.”

So it was him, Bull Gordon, his best friend in college who was a fugitive from the F.B.I. As best as he could remember the details, Bull had gone beyond the pot-smoking and anti-war protesting of their ’70s

circle and found himself addicted to heroin. His addiction and its inevitable lifestyle caused his girlfriend to leave him, and in a bizarre variant of revenge coupled with a need for hard cash for hard drugs, he broke into the house of her father, a University of Wyoming history professor and avid gun collector. After stealing most of the valuable collection, Bull crossed several state lines before selling the guns to the Black Panthers in Seattle. Eventually, the F.B.I. tracked him down and in an escape that became legendary on the Colorado State University campus, Bull escaped through a back window while the Feds, armed with both guns and an arrest warrant, were breaking down the front door. No one Ken knew had ever seen Bull again. Until tonight.

“Feel like a swim?” Bull asked him. “They rent bathing suits and goggles down at the pool. We can talk more there.”

The pool was deserted and the two long-lost companions swam silently side by side for a couple of laps. Then, pulling up to the deep end, they stopped, arms resting on the tiles, feet kicking up a noisy froth in the azure stillness of the pool.

“Of course I ran like hell, but I knew the town a lot better than they did. I think they wasted some time looking through the house for me. They probably didn’t think I’d really run—and it was a pretty big house as you remember.”

Bull quit kicking the water. “I think we can talk OK down here. Can’t be too careful though, ya know.”

Ken nodded his assent.

“I hid out for a week in the rock formations at Vedauwoo. Just drinking creek water and eating frogs and lizards raw. Kicking junk, too, of course. Probably the weirdest withdrawal story of all time if I ever get around to writing it.”

They’d both been aspiring novelists at the university.

“After that week of hell I woke up in a kind of heaven. I was a free man, cleaned up from drugs and in spite of the mess I was in, I was in the best mental and physical condition of my life. Those old Indian spirits in the stones must’ve approved of me, so I followed the old spirit trails north, up through the Badlands and the Dakotas, up to Canada.”

Bull stopped for a few seconds, but Ken said nothing, so he continued.

“Canada was hot and I don’t mean the weather. Lotta draft-dodgers around and the cops were forever I.D.ing anyone they didn’t know. I made it to Halifax and worked my way to Amsterdam on a freighter. I hit a dark spell, soldiering in a private army in Zaire... ‘Roland the heartless Thompson gunner’... but I don’t wanna talk about it and you don’t wanna hear it. After Africa I island-hopped around the Indian Ocean, but spent most of my time in Goa. Lotta weirdos there, so it was easy to blend in and as long as you weren’t a child molester—plenty of those around—

the cops pretty much left you alone.”

“So what brings you to Japan?”

“Well, a kind of R&R to tell the truth... a sojourn to a strict, orderly society where the *yakuza* control the streets instead of the army or the cops.”

“But speaking of strict, it must be pretty tough to get through Immigration.”

“Well, through the years I’ve made some pretty good contacts in the passport forging business. I bet you’ll never guess who I am now.”

“Beats me—Seymour Glass, maybe. Quentin Compson?”

“Not bad—Jay Gatsby, actually.”

“Yer kidding!”

“Yeah, in a way. Actually, James Gatz.”

* * *

Once again Ken came home to find Madoka sound asleep. And in the morning, as in the day before, he kept his evening experience to himself. But later, after dinner, he mentioned that a motel had gone up along the *kaido*, just across the road from the Tamagawa. Madoka just shrugged. No new western influence infecting Japan surprised her. Not after a youth spent singing Sex Pistols covers in an all-girl Japanese punk rock band.

* * *

Later that evening, Ken set out on his customary walk, this time aiming directly for the motel. There were no customers when he entered, so he took a stool just off center and ordered his regular drink.

For a long time no one entered and although he wasn’t a big drinker, he had two more glasses of his favorite Irish whiskey and began feeling pleasantly high. When he returned to his seat after a quick pit stop, he immediately recognized his old friend and former colleague at the university, the poet John Richards.

“John! Long time no see!”

John raised his glass of red wine and the two drank a toast. They passed the time catching up on recent events in their lives, Ken doing most of the talking, John encouraging him by playing the interested listener. Soon Ken found himself rather drunk and noticed it was nearly midnight. He’d been gone much longer than his usual one hour and he didn’t want Madoka to worry, so he bid John good night, solemnly shook his hand, and set off for home.

Or so he thought... but once outside the bar he felt rather dizzy and, since the night was warm, decided a quick dip in the Tamagawa would sober him up. So he crossed the *kaido* and carefully picked his way down the bank to the river.

He stripped, bundled his clothes under the bridge and waded into a deep pool close to the shore. The water was cold but refreshing. He submerged himself briefly and came up shaking the water out of his hair like

a dog. It was then that he realized that John Richards had died four years ago... the same day that Yassir Arafat died.

* * *

When Madoka woke up late the following morning, she didn't miss Ken at first, because his morning routine was to go out to buy a paper and take it to Starbucks to read while having coffee and a muffin or scone. It wasn't until he didn't show up for lunch that she began to be concerned. And when dinner time arrived with no Ken and no phone call, she decided to go out and have a look.

Since he often talked about how much he enjoyed walking along the trails near the Tamagawa, she decided to search there first. She got out her mama-chari shopping bike and headed for the river. But when she reached the *kaido* the signal was red and while waiting for the light to change, she saw the bright red neon flash on her left, just past the convenience store:

MOTEL! HEATED POOL. BAR.

On a sudden impulse, she turned and pedaled toward the motel. Her husband had remarked about it the evening before.

She pulled her bicycle into a car parking spot, locked it and approached the bar. The parking lot was empty, but the outdoor lights of the motel were blazing. She entered the softly-lit western-style bar and as soon as her eyes adjusted to the light she made out a lone figure seated on a stool, toying with a drink. Slowly, slowly, the barstool turned and there was her husband, Ken, smiling at her.

Stunned, she was speechless, but Ken broke the silence:

"I've been expecting you."

ALLAN BROWN was born in Victoria and presently lives in Powell River. His poetry has been published in various Canadian forums since 1962 and is partly collected in 19 books and chapbooks. His collection *Imagines* (Leaf Press, 2002) was co-winner of the bpNichol Chapbook Award. His most recent titles are a partial New and Selected *Frames of Silence* (Seraphim Editions, 2005), a collection of haiku, *a penny in the grass* (Ekstasis Editions, 2006), and the chapbook *Biblical Sonatas* (Serengeti Press, 2008). He is a member of the Federation of B.C. Writers, Haiku Canada, and The League of Canadian Poets.

Allan Brown / **Three Poems**

Psalms

for Tim Lander

Most people are like psalms
(and some people even like them),
they sound different
than they look.

And you never know *just*
where you are with them,

when they seem to be ended
they keep starting again,

without (m)any contradictions,
but always with a PS.

Ballade du Mort

for Lev Shestov
d. 20 November 1938

Brushed by a bleary November breeze,
ambulating by the Seine,
I watched the ripples grow
about his philosophic stone.

Uncontradiction is no fear.
Only the shadow lingering
upon Job's balances to weigh
his intricate despair.

Contentedly into a sewer
he lay in the warm and he died.
They found him in the blood red morning.
They called him Sewer-side.

& blend in the cruel bend
of wind that sings each new ending
a word of how would cease it
this weariness, I guess
& the clamour of cold.

Bold

could I clasp my old companions;
I would be fire for them, cheer
& the charity of touch,
& tender be their true tinder.”

How speaks that wanderer
(or which was?) in a kind
of incumbent dream of death
the black brightening thing,
& the slow decay all senses are;

& screams a one very fearful
as that scatter him over
a covering seen, who seems
to hear in his lone habitation
the carol & cry of, gargle
& die of Northrop the swan.

He waits for no warm spice-wine.
The bite in his throat is bitter
with salt of the almost sea.
In pride of his lean laughing,
in place of pleasure, the passing
wingbeat of wind bears
the tale of his empty returning.

F.A. FUCILE works as a writing teacher and union organizer at Temple University in Philadelphia.

The Unlikely Career of Lindsay Arnold, American Icon

F.A. Fucile

I MET LINDSAY ARNOLD after I'd been living in the U.S. for fifteen years and making love to American women for eleven (once I'd claimed my so-called identity). Still, she was the most American of any of them, even long before she was famous. I met her as a cute but typical girl strumming her guitar at an open-mic night: spiky blonde hair, long neck, slender floating hands. I don't remember much of her set, but one song stuck out like a biological freak.

For one thing, it was a song about a porcupine, and you don't hear a whole lot of songs (especially serious ones) about porcupines, even at open-mic nights in shitty bars. But this was a song about a *special* porcupine, and we could hear the words all too well thanks to the cranked-up PA. It went like this: The porcupine goes to a witch and asks the witch to turn her into a bird, but the witch says she can't do that. So in the second verse, the porcupine asks the witch to turn her into a butterfly and is rejected again. Then in the third verse, the porcupine asks to be turned into a bat. In the last chorus, the witch turns the porcupine into a giant moth.

It was one of the weirdest songs I had heard, made weirder by its apparent lack of humor. You could see the seriousness on her face. Lindsay always had this detached expression, as if she didn't realize how absurd and banal her desires were. It made her performances a protest of reality. When she finished her set, I was the one clapping loudest, maybe the only person paying attention at all.

As silly as she was, I was drawn to Lindsay right away. It's difficult for me to explain her beauty. It wasn't like you could point to a specific

part of her body and say *that does it for me*. It didn't even come out when she played guitar (at least not then). It was what she represented (Was it Youth? Foolishness? America?) that made the movement of her almost nonexistent body send tingles through the brain of anyone who was watching her.

Her skin was that awful freckly color northern European girls get when they stay indoors too much, and she never had enough meat on her body. She set her guitar down and swayed to the bar like a pink skeleton, white tanktop dangling from sharp collarbones.

I leered at her pretty openly and asked if she wanted a drink.

She froze and stared at me: short, queer, Chinese. But she sat down and smiled. "You like the set?"

"It was pretty good." I tried to be cool and unenthusiastic. "What was the deal with the porcupine song, though?"

She squinted at the countertop. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well," I took a sip, "why'd it have to be a porcupine? Is it supposed to be a sexual thing?" I turned to her, cocked my head, smirked.

She lifted her beer and looked puzzled. "No."

"I mean, you could've made it a caterpillar instead and done away with the whole supernatural business."

She looked at me as though I were a moron. "But then she'd be just like any other animal."

That moment introduced me completely to Lindsay Arnold's mode of thinking. Like almost every other American, she was plagued with a need for what my mother used to so derisively call *Minglishuangshou*, the drive for fame and fortune. We were Communists then, and I was smart enough to see the idiocy of Mom's later ideological shift and the hypocrisy of calling it religion. We moved to the city to work, but the city also worked on us, manufacturing desires. Once my mother became shop foreman, she couldn't stop her need to push upward. The word *Minglishuangshou* now meant hard work was rewarded. Everything was propaganda, and my mom got to play the shy, dependable, pitiful woman who wins over the honorable, successful man. By the time I was fifteen I realized the whole city was taking orders from state television.

But control is obvious to anyone who realizes systems change. We might call American society retarded in this respect. Americans do *Minglishuangshou* better than anybody else; whole industries and empires are founded on the concept. But desire is the source of misery. And like many Americans, Lindsay had invested her dreams with a sense of magical desperation that ignored the sad fact of her brainwashing in an attempt to transform herself into a mythic figure through some heroic feat of individuality.

Unfortunately for Lindsay Arnold, there was nothing particularly special about her at that point in her career aside from a distant sort of cha-

risma and weird ideas about what would make a good topic for a song. When we got to her apartment, I was overwhelmed by its averageness. An anonymous white-carpeted single-bedroom in a concrete high-rise with the kind of film and rock posters you'd see in an American college dormitory. She didn't even have particularly good taste in music or movies. Her flower-print sofa was the only interesting item in the apartment, and when she sat on it and crossed the legs of her tight plaid pants, I felt relieved at the unorthodox clash of patterns and was able to focus my sexual attention on her.

* * *

The liaison might have been an entirely inconsequential event in my life; I might have even forgotten the girl's name if she hadn't called me back the very next day. I was unsure whether to even pick up the phone when I saw the strange number and guessed who it was. After all, she had been amusing enough as a companion for one night, but probably wasn't even a real lesbian and certainly not all that deep.

When I answered, though, I heard muffled distress in her voice. "Are you busy today?" she asked, clearly on the verge of tears.

"No." (I declined to get into the details of my mother's marriage to a wealthy Hong Kong capitalist and the trust fund that had made wage labor unnecessary for me.)

"Can you come over here?" she said. "I want to talk to you about something."

The sad seriousness of Lindsay's tone shocked me. She must have been entirely alone to call up a one-night fling for support. It was utterly charming.

I dressed up thinking she must have wanted something sexual, given she didn't know me in any other capacity. It might have been the only time Lindsay ever saw me in a skirt. When I got there I found the door unlocked and her slumped on the couch in flannel pajamas smoking pot out of a tiny metal pipe with some celebrity gossip show droning on television. She wasn't beautiful right then, just another lonely vapid American. And her depression, too, was typically American.

"I'm gonna die one day," she complained, "and nobody's gonna know I even existed. I'll never make it. There's nothing special about me. I have nothing to say. I'm not even that pretty."

Under the barrage of self-pity I groped for something to make her feel better. "You're beautiful," was all I could manage. And I kneeled on the carpet and ran my fingers through her hair.

She seemed to take comfort in that. After all, beauty is always the surest path to success in this country, more than talent or genius or even individuality.

Later that afternoon, sitting naked on the floor drinking chamomile tea, she stared out the window and muttered, "If only there were one

thing. Anything. Not even a song. Not even an idea. Just something I could do. Something that would be different.”

“Different isn’t necessarily always better,” I said.

And again she looked at me with an insane expression that said *what would you know about this place*.

She closed her eyes and set her teacup on the floor, then stretched her body out on the carpet. If it was a come-on, it was not directed at me. She would not respond to anything I did or said. She was putting herself into another world, totally focused on herself and the magical movement of her own body. The choreography of long, slow, graceful motions sent shivers through me.

She swam on the floor for half an hour as I lay next to her. I could do nothing but watch. Finally she rolled over on her back, opened her eyes to stare at the ceiling, and raised her arms then her legs into the air. She hummed a repeating tune and tensed her quivering body. Her sparkling skin tightened over the moving tendons. Her humming turned to rhythmic groans, and I stared at her shaking body, my cheek pressed to the carpet as a sliver of light peeked under the arch of Lindsay’s spine.

She burst into laughter as we embraced. It was beautiful then, because she had attained the dream but had not yet become it.

* * *

Over the next month, Lindsay’s talent became more pronounced. She would pace a foot off the carpet and dictate lyrics. I would take them down on a yellow legal pad. The chord progressions she wrote for them later were far less interesting, but that didn’t matter. Her lyrics were weird enough and symbolic enough to seem important, and coming from the mouth of a beautiful, floating woman they took on an aspect of gospel.

Her first performances of the new act were triumphant, astonishing. She would begin sitting on the stool, gradually lift into the air as the music and lyrics built, then hover above the stage for the rest of the set. She moved from song to song as quickly as possible, her powers faltering whenever she stopped singing. She would rise and fall in the air, everyone half sure it was some trick with wires. When she came to the end of the last song, her body would abruptly fall out of the air and land on the stage, knocking over the stool and occasionally denting her guitar.

There was a comic aspect to those first performances, but mostly people were frozen in awe. Within a few months of her new-found notoriety, she signed to a label and recorded her first album, *Floating*. The reviews were universally positive, fawning over how such a unique lyrical style had come from a woman with such a unique gift, babbling about Lindsay’s *different perspective on the world* and what *us earthbound creatures* could learn from it. Most of the songs were about wanting to be special or realizing your own specialness, or realizing you didn’t need to be special, or knowing deep down you really weren’t special no matter

what other people said. It was pretty repetitive and cheesy. The public ate it up, of course, and the record went platinum and spawned three music videos, all of which involved footage of Lindsay flying around and playing her guitar angelically.

But none of her problems had gone away, and almost a year after that first time I weakly tried to reassure her, we were back to the same place; she was depressed and stoned on the couch complaining about her life, and I was trying to make her feel better. The apartment was nicer, with a great view of Central Park. The couch was some haute European design: boxy, red, and expensive. The weed was better, her pipe an elaborate purple glass thing, but everything else was the same.

“There’s nothing else I can do,” she said in the melodramatically weary voice only people under thirty have. Then hit the bowl again, paused, exhaled. “I’m a one-trick pony. There’s no way my second album won’t bomb.”

I tried to think of something optimistic to say and stuck with what passed for advice a year earlier: “You’ve still got your body. You’re still beautiful.”

She looked back at me and sighed. I remember her cheekbones were unusually prominent that day, that her face looked too thin.

I fried up some egg sandwiches on the stovetop but couldn’t get her to eat more than a few bites. After a long, tense silence, she rubbed her eyes and said, “What would you think if I left you?” the way someone might ask *what would you think if I took a nap*.

“What do you mean by that?” I said.

She looked somehow surprised by the conversation she had chosen. “Maybe if I lived somewhere else for a while I’d get an idea of what I should do next.”

“But you’re saying you don’t need me.” It hurt in a vague way, but there was no reason I was necessary to her artistic production.

So she moved to Los Angeles. I rather jealously hoped her career would fall apart, and for about six months I was convinced it had. But when Lindsay Arnold resurfaced in the media, I was happy for her and even impressed.

Her new album was titled *Diving*, and the advance-release video I saw on MTV featured Lindsay singing in a tank that gradually filled with water. The lyrics were the best she had written to that point:

The teeth melt down to gums like they were candlesticks.

Gumline receded to the jawbone.

Jawbone flipped around worn like a visor.

And the head stayed on tight.

She kept singing as the rising water in the tank filled her lungs. At first everybody assumed it was done with lip-syncing and tricky camera cuts or some special effect. Once she started performing the act live, though,

the tabloids speculated about whether a secret team of maverick research doctors had fitted her with a gill system in the period of her absence. Lindsay loved the publicity but insisted in every interview that the trick worked the same as the floating gimmick: sheer inexplicable physical anomaly. Her freckled face twisted into a grin as she reveled in her watchability.

I was skeptical myself until her tour came through New York. Radiant and powerful, she floated above the tank and slowly lowered herself into it as she sang. They were triumphant songs of mind over matter, and she pulled them off with the professional aplomb I had never expected from her. She projected through the water in a thick, rich tone unlike anything else from a human throat. Her orange and purple robes floated gracefully in the water, and when she levitated out of the tank, the dripping clothes clung to her narrow frame like she was a hovering Greek sculpture.

She was becoming an artist, or at least becoming art.

When we met after the show, Lindsay had dried off and changed, but somehow she still looked drippy and bedraggled. Her skin was a semi-translucent, almost bluish color, and her clothing hung loose on her body.

“So how are the L.A. women treating you?” I asked.

She looked down, exhaled, shook her head. “Actually it’s been men lately.”

I tried to chuckle with her. “But seriously,” I said, trying not to sound bitter, “how are things out there? Do you like it?”

She tilted her head as if trying to decide. “It isn’t what I thought.” She scratched a bony purplish shoulder. “People don’t talk about anything important out there. It’s all just gossip.”

This seemed a strange thing for Lindsay to comment on. The only conversations of any alleged substance I could remember us having were about her lyrics, which tended to be sophomoric anyway.

“You go to these parties, and it’s always A&R reps and agents and groupies and producers and directors and high-end lawyers. . .”

“What about other musicians? What about movie stars? What about all the glitzy, glamorous people you’ve always wanted to be with?” I said this beginning seriously but escalating into condescension.

Lindsay sighed again and rubbed her forehead. “Yeah, they all blend together after awhile, I guess. It’s a nice life. You hang out and smoke dope and snort coke and sit sipping drinks and talking with famous people. It’s pretty cool.” She turned and gazed distantly out the window of the bar. “But after awhile you get the feeling that’s all you’re doing. That there’s no reason for you being there. Any of you. That all these people walking around with cameras on them all the time are just a waste . . .”

I waited for her to finish.

She kept staring out the window.

“Waste of what?”

She turned back to me but lowered her head to stare at the table. “Oh, waste of time, waste of space, waste of energy.”

Again, Lindsay had put me in a position where nothing I could say would make it better. “You got any friends over there?”

She bit her lip and bobbed her head from side to side indicating uncertainty.

We drank our beer in silence for a couple minutes before I said, “You should move back here. With me.”

She nodded. “I have to finish work on my next project, though. I’ll be back around soon enough.”

I perked up at that. “Do you know what it’ll be this time?”

“Yeah . . .”

“. . . Well?”

“I can’t tell you because I’m not sure it’s gonna work.”

* * *

Nine months later, Lindsay Arnold was back in New York for her *triumphant homecoming performance* and the release of her untitled third album. Carnegie Hall was packed, and the whole music-conscious population of the city was abuzz with rumors and speculation on what kind of stunt Lindsay would pull off this time.

She made sure I had a backstage pass, and before the show we sat for a long time smoking in silence on a sea-green couch. We had gone to dinner earlier and were satisfied enough with each other’s company by this point that speaking seemed superfluous.

Lindsay was in torn-up jeans with a black tubetop covering now almost nonexistent breasts. Her skin was the palest I had ever seen it, and her ribs jutted out like parentheses above arrow-like hip bones. Her fingers were nearly the same color and width as the joint she held in them.

“Don’t you get a tan out there?” I said, trying to fill the silence.

She laughed in a puff of smoke and made a twirling motion with her hand. “Apparently not. It’s like the light goes right through me.”

Before she took the stage, Lindsay embraced me for the first time in almost two years.

That night the set was a retrospective of her whole career to that point, starting with the porcupine song and working through the highlights of her first two albums before debuting any new material. Even stranger, the first half of the performance involved no flying whatsoever. Without that supernatural element, her music was more somber than celebratory.

The audience watched with devouring intensity and sang along like in a cult. They demanded something to feed their dreams. They knew it would happen and waited religiously.

It was only when she started into the new material that Lindsay took to the air, and the audience responded with thunderous applause followed by total silence. At first the songs were thinly-veiled metaphors about

fame, and it made me angry to hear the depths of her self-inflicted misery. She sang about being watched and admired but never loved, and it upset me to realize I had been part of that, that I had only ever been fascinated by her.

We stared up at Lindsay hovering over us. Her body radiated a current that held us in stiff focus as she sang to us about empty parking lots and blank sheets of paper. She turned our minds to deflated tires and dry coffee mugs.

We stood in silence or in song. Eyes closed or opened. Arms relaxed or outstretched. We absorbed. Lindsay's skin shimmered with blue light, and our eyes sucked it up, and we danced in improbable motions.

The dancing died down to swaying as Lindsay's strumming got more ferocious. Then she stopped playing altogether. She hung, weary, in the air. And I realized we were keeping her up there by watching. Suspended before us, she announced her last tune would be an old blues number:

I wish I was a mole in the ground.

Oh, I wish I was a mole in the ground.

If I's a mole in the ground, I'd root that mountain down.

And I wish I was a mole in the ground.

She sang no other verses, just those four lines over and over and over, soaring higher and floating back towards the stage. It was not a song of defeat; it was the old serious triumphant mode of her greatest work. It was the song of a woman determined to conquer the world itself through her words. The performance was so simple, so intense. The audience sang those same words with her for nearly seven minutes, until it reminded me of those awful chanting sessions my mother would drag me to after her reversion. Still, I was convinced of Lindsay Arnold's genius for the first time. We stared at her in glowing admiration. It was so basic, so uncreative in a way that made every one of us feel a part of the performance.

And as we watched her, I felt her body getting smaller. Not only could I see her arms getting scrawnier, her torso getting skinnier, I could feel it in my own muscles and bones. And her pale blue skin faded as her body shrunk, and before I knew what was happening I could somehow see to the other side of her. And on the last word and chord of the song she slipped out entirely.

Guitar, shoes, jeans, and top all fell abruptly to the *ground* the moment she said that word.

The audience was dead silent. It was the greatest feat of Lindsay Arnold's career, but it was unclear whether there was anyone to clap for. Because Lindsay wasn't standing there to smile and bow. And it would have seemed crazy to clap for ourselves.

SEAN ARTHUR JOYCE has been published in numerous literary journals, among them *Canadian Author*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Whetstone* and *Horsefly*. He was the Featured Poet in Vol. 7, No. 1 of *The New Orphic Review*. His previous collection of poetry, *The Charlatans of Paradise*, appeared in 2005. The following poems will appear in his forthcoming collection, *Star Seeds* (New Orphic Publishers, 2009).

Sean Arthur Joyce / **Four Poems**

Hunger

April is the cruellest month.

T.S. Eliot

All winter long we mourn the sun,
that god we love most in absence.
Blood dreams uneasily
in a moist underworld, and sap
knows its place in the darkness.

Chill air mellows on a chickadee's song.
Green light returns leaf by leaf
from the shadow side of the moon.
Bare teeth shine in granite mouths
that tear at blue sky. Something moves
in the veins, something animal.

Bones must be eviscerated,
lives sucked clean. Something moves
down the mountainside, looking
to be made one with you.

From this sleep, a terrible
awakening. A beauty so profound,
blood drips from its jaws.

Fathomless

Surf Motel, Victoria, B.C.

September 28, 2007

Cream cloud horizon. Ocean's
titanium heave and thrust.
Gulls screech and mutter,
skating a tight corner
of wind—spirits so eerie,
we never see them.

And the sea. Desperate to rejoin
the disembodied world,
the sea draws a breath
and slams its turquoise hide
to froth. The beach a boy's
bag of marbles slipping
into a fathomless dream.

Baubles of kelp
are all it leaves behind—
aqua-green eyes gone blind.
Corpses of the stunning
urge to become.

Phalanx of crows one
exploded body on stop-motion
updraft—pausing hungry
above our decay.

Crow drops in for coffee.

for Timothy Shay

This blurring highway makes me think
of Crow, who—sure enough—shows up later
in the coffee shop, the weight of the world
under his eyes, grizzled beak not so rakish
anymore, but still sharp as a shaman.

We talk about genealogy,
why history is everything we are
and ignorance of the masses intentional
to a slave empire. And realize: this has all
been done, again and again.

This is what hurts us the most—
every time we fall back to barbarism,
murder and fiefdom, we wound
the holy life force we are.

I have learned the hard way, Crow,
what shatters the family soul
resonates in the pores
ten generations later.

I have picked its glass from my heart
since before I was born. Ancestors
are calling out to me in dreams,
howling for me to right their wrongs.
And sending me you, Crow
to pick the lock on the vault of secrets,
just this once. Tell me, if you can,
why do we kill each other? Why do we
watch ourselves hurt the ones we love?
Why do we watch the eclipse of a dream

and do nothing? And Crow,
how did we become melancholy old men
ranting in steamy cafés?
We shake our heads, sip at our dark roast,
and wander into the failing light.

Walk Backward Through Sleep

Walk backward through sleep
take your sand bucket and shovel
collect the dreams you never had
and kiss the starfish to rest.

Walk backward on tissue paper air
past bottles broken in the kitchen
or hidden in the laundry
to the bedroom you shared
with a snoring baby sister,

wearing to bed the curly slippers
Papa brought you from a coup in Turkey
your eyes open wide
to the rage and shame
shredding the floorboards.

How do you tell a four-year-old
the voices aren't shaking fists at her?
How does she know
they won't tear each other apart
one bloody faceful at a time?

You are the big sister now
who puts on the night light,
smiles down impossibly tender
and says, "*It's okay. I'm here now.*
Nothing can hurt you."

You are the one itching to somersault
in your magic slippers
through cricket snapping grasses
crazy with clowns and camels
and tumble into sultry

desert

sleep

JENNIFER PACHOUMIS graduated from East Stroudsburg University in 2004 with a degree in English. She is a 2003 EAPSU award winner. Her body of work includes a completed novel, as well as various short pieces. Jennifer currently resides in Florida with her husband, illustrator Peter Pachoumis, and their two cats, Frodo and Sam.

The House on 13

Jennifer Pachoumis

THE PALE BLUE sky that had hung over my sunroof for the past several hours began thickening and darkening into a cloudy gray, and the warm breeze rushing through my open window grew heavy with the nostalgic scent of damp grass. I increased pressure on the accelerator. Doubtless I was barreling along at a good twenty miles over the speed limit, but if one bothered to observe such things on a road like Highway 13, especially while traveling through the rural emptiness of Virginia's eastern shore, one would never get anywhere and I had at least three more hours to go.

This particular stretch of road was long and straight and framed by vast fields on either side, and on a Tuesday afternoon there was virtually no traffic to contend with. But I was rushing towards the rainstorm—or it was rushing towards me, I really wasn't certain which it was—and as the first drops of rain plinked against my windshield, the old familiar panic rose inside my belly and oozed into my extremities. When my fingertips started tingling I commanded myself to focus on my breathing, and despite the rain I left my window cracked; I needed to feel the air on my face. Just relax, just breathe, I told myself.

A short burst of lightning flared in the distance and the rain surged down even harder in response. I switched on the windshield wipers but my left forearm was getting soaked and I reluctantly rolled up the window. In the usual, predictable progression of my anxiety, my nose and cheeks went numb and my hand trembled as I turned on the air conditioning in an effort to simulate the calming effect of an open window.

As I renewed my grip on the steering wheel, I indeliberately looked up at my sun visor where I'd tucked the cream-colored laminated card

which bore Melissa's photograph and a short passage from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*: "And what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and melt into the sun?" The words had been the choice of Melissa's foolish, handsome Lebanese husband. More than six weeks had passed since I'd slipped the card into my visor but I could scarcely drive to the grocery store without glancing up at it and feeling my best friend's cool blue eyes and strange, secretive smile bearing down on me in return.

Another four miles ticked slowly by and the rain had increased in an intensity so great that not even my CD player could drown it out, so I shut off the stereo. Mick had wanted it painted black for the last twenty miles, anyway.

The storm pressed against me on all sides, hammering in my ears and blinding me. The wipers glided frantically back and forth across my windshield but everything ahead was a gray-green blur. Finally, when I completely lost all feeling in my hands, I was forced to pull over onto the soft shoulder and turn on the hazards.

For five full minutes I sat stock-still in my car, eyes closed, practicing my deep breathing exercises, clenching and unclenching my fingers in an attempt to revive them. Eventually the panic ebbed, though it didn't completely retreat; it swirled and simmered in the pit of my stomach and in the corner of my mind, waiting for the next random trigger to unleash it again.

My purse lay on the passenger seat beside me, streaked with the shadows of raindrops running down the windows. A newly refilled bottle of Xanax was tucked away inside and I resisted the compulsion to tear my purse open and seize the pills. Just one was enough to take the edge off the anxiety, but just one was also enough to render me incapable of driving for at least the next four hours, and there was no way I was camping in my car overnight. If I could press on for a few more hours I would arrive at my brother's house before dinner and then be free to numb myself into oblivion if I so chose.

But the temptation to medicate myself right then and there was very strong and I knew I needed to get out of the car for a few minutes. I scrubbed at the foggy windshield with my fist. Now that I was at a stop the rain didn't seem as fierce. Maybe a short walk would help.

A quick peek in the rearview mirror showed no sign of any cars coming up behind me. I cut the engine and opened the door, walking round to the safety of the shoulder as a precaution. Thunder grumbled overhead but there was no more lightning. It was still raining steadily.

On the western side of the highway, miles of tall, green grasses bowed to the gusts of wind, the fields marred here and there by random, lonely oak trees before disappearing completely into a thick forest about a mile's distance from the road. On the eastern side of the 13 the landscape was perfectly mirrored save for an aging, whitewashed farmhouse half-hid-

den at the treeline. From my vantage point the house appeared so ramshackle that I thought it must be abandoned.

Don't even think about it, the sensible part of me whispered. You know that horror movies start out this way.

But in this new life my decisions were ruled by a consciousness less concerned with being sensible than with doing whatever I had to do simply to function in a world where I drifted from day to day, limp and zombified, ever since I'd woken one morning to find that I'd been robbed of my strongest anchor.

So I decided that a brisk walk to the tiny white house and back to the car again might be enough to set me straight before resuming my drive to Maryland. I locked my car and set off towards the house.

The wet, thigh-high grass dragged at my clothing and slowed me down. But are you really in a hurry? I asked myself. No, not really. Just keep walking.

Several minutes of slogging through the field had brought me only slightly closer to the house. It was still so small on the dreary horizon that if I raised my thumb in front of my face I could block it out entirely. It didn't matter. I could walk forever, but I still wouldn't be able to shake that oppressive sense that I was only a hair's breadth away from losing my grip. It rained and it rained. My sneakers squelched a steady rhythm in time with my breathing. My jeans grew heavier and my tee shirt clung to my damp skin as the cool Virginia rain swept over the grass, over me, and rustled distantly through the trees.

It had not been raining the morning Melissa was killed, but the driver of the SUV that hit my friend's car had sailed out into the intersection, past the red light just the same. Melissa left her house at 8:17 a.m. each morning and had driven that same five-mile stretch of road every weekday for three years. The accountant running late for his appointment had driven the road perpendicular to Melissa's every day for twice that long. Apparently their paths had crossed many times over the years, but one sunny Wednesday in April they collided in a supernova of glass and metal. The police told Melissa's husband Sam that when the accountant smashed into the driver's side of Melissa's Toyota he was traveling almost 60 miles an hour. He was battered by his airbag before the paramedics helped him out of his vehicle, but my Melissa bled her life away in minutes. She died alone, and in a considerable amount of pain.

Dr. Peterson had told me that I had to forget about that part. To forget about all the horrible things I imagined when I pictured Melissa, twisted and broken, struggling for air as her injuries slowly overcame her. But even when I could manage to stop thinking about the useless manner in which she had died, her absence was still crushing, and the reality of Melissa's death swiftly became inescapable because her lack of presence was everywhere. It was in the ending of every book when there was no

one with whom I could discuss it. It was in the theatre of every quirky movie where I sat alone in the dark because no one else was interested in attending with me. It was on the shores of the Outer Banks when I brought my sketchpad and had no one to comment on my drawings as I worked. It was in the bottle of chardonnay I drank alone at night because my husband James was still at work and no one else my age was still stuck in a job they hated. But mostly it was in every obsessive thought I was forced to keep to myself because no one but my idiotic, overpriced shrink could hear those things spoken aloud. Not that I truly kept such thoughts to myself; about two weeks ago James had crept into our bedroom late one night and caught me talking alone in the dark.

“Julie!” he whispered into the darkness. “Julie, who are you talking to?”

“No one. Myself. I’m praying.” The warm effects of the benzodiazepines had settled about my limbs like a cocoon.

“No, you’re not.” He flipped on the light but I didn’t flinch away from it. His eyes were sad, but not accusing. “You’re talking to Melissa. Again.”

“Don’t be stupid, James,” I retorted. “Melissa’s dead.” I had rolled over and covered my face against the light with my comforter.

I loved James. Deeply. He was a good man and a good husband to me. But he didn’t understand the darker, less pleasant parts of my psyche—the things that no one but Melissa had known and understood. She’d taken that understanding with her when she went. Now only the neuroses remained and I didn’t know what to do with them. They clawed and screamed for release and when I could no longer contain them I took a leave of absence from work, packed my car, and headed north to find refuge and escape in the large, empty rooms of my reclusive brother’s house. It was my last chance to get a hold of myself before James either walked or had me committed, and I would not have faulted him for doing either.

I was thirty yards from the house now. I decided to do one circuit around the place and be back to the car in fifteen minutes. Off to the seclusion of Ryan’s house and everything is going to be okay. Then one of my sneakers skidded on the wet grass and I nearly fell. Slow down, I told myself. If there’s one thing you have far too much of, it’s time. So I stopped walking and bent over, hands on my knees, to rest for a moment.

If the farmhouse had had a clearly discernible lawn, I would have been standing in the middle of it. As it was, the tall grass ran almost all the way up to the cracked foundation of the house, which had indeed fallen into great disrepair. Dingy, once-white paint was peeling away from the wooden siding and one of the upstairs windows was cracked, though not broken out. The greenish, rotted wood of the wraparound porch was short a few planks and looked dangerously close to collapse. Dozens of

shingles were missing from the roof. One of the gutter pipes on the western corner of the building had pulled free of its second-floor rivets. Raindrops tapped hollowly on its thin metal skin and it creaked mournfully in the wind, as if it wanted nothing more than to be ripped loose completely and put out of its misery. Really, I felt sad just standing there in the rain looking at the old, dilapidated place, and I dismissed my initial impulse to stroll all the way around its perimeter.

Still, I felt that the walk had done me good and having caught my breath, I did an about-face to head back to the car. But the moment I turned my back on the house I heard something. The sound was like that of a pair of high-heeled shoes on the planks of the porch; distant at first, then steady, strong and close. I froze. And abruptly, the footsteps halted.

“Hey! You there,” a woman’s voice called out to me.

My heart stopped beating at that moment, I swear it. I was afraid to move. I wondered if I had finally lost my mind. There could have been no one living in such a place. Suddenly, fiercely, I wished I had taken that pill, locked my car, and slept until I had felt able to drive again.

“Did you hear me?” The voice came again, sharper this time. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Suffocating with apprehension, I peered over my shoulder to face the owner of the high-heeled shoes and the disembodied voice.

But the woman standing on the porch with one hand on the splintered railing and a cigarette in the other was no ghost. And if she was, she was the most incongruous ghost imaginable. Wearing an expensive-looking black skirt and suit jacket with matching pumps, the slim, middle-aged figure was the picture of a modern businesswoman, one who had no earthly business standing on the damp porch of a broken-down farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. The woman squinted at me as she took a drag of her cigarette. Something on her jacket twinkled and my eyes were drawn to the brooch pinned to her lapel. It was silver and pink, quite shiny and beautifully wrought. From where I stood it looked just like a little hermit crab. The woman’s lacquered fingernails began tapping impatiently on the railing and I realized that I still had not answered her.

“Hello,” I began, embarrassed to find that my voice, in its disuse, was little more than a croak. “I’m sorry to intrude. I didn’t know anyone was living here. I’m just—” I gestured behind me towards Highway 13.

“Car trouble?” the woman suggested, flicking ashes over the edge of the railing. A raindrop splashed onto her cigarette and she frowned.

“No.” I shook my head and cast about for some decent explanation as to why I was trespassing on this person’s property, so far from the road, in the midst of a thunderstorm. Nothing came to mind. The woman gingerly patted her chignon and raised an eyebrow, waiting, as the cigarette met her lips again.

“No, ma’am,” I sighed and gave up trying to think of an acceptable

lie. Honestly, what did I care what this complete stranger thought? May as well tell her the truth. “No car problems. Just personal problems.”

“Humph,” she snorted. “I’d say you’ve come to the right place, then.” She stubbed out her cigarette and looked me up and down, assessing my wet clothing. “Well, if you want to come up on the porch until it passes, I’d say you’d do well to get out of that rain.”

As thoroughly soaked as I was, I must have been quite a sight to behold, but at that point the rain was inconsequential. I couldn’t have gotten any wetter. In any case, I was just about to politely decline when the torn screen door screeched open and another woman stepped onto the porch.

“Jane?” the second woman asked. “Jane, who you talkin’ to out here?” The screen door slammed shut behind her.

“Some strange, pasty, wet young woman.” Jane didn’t take her eyes off me as she answered. “I don’t know what her name is. But she doesn’t look well at all.”

“Huh? What’re you talkin’ about?” The second woman, overweight and stringy-haired, shuffled deftly around a section of missing planks and set her glass of amber-colored liquid on the railing next to Jane. She wore a faded blue-and-white floral housedress, which was streaked with food stains and discolorations. Her face was deeply lined and she wore no make-up at all. She fixed me with a heavy-lidded brown eye.

“Well? Whoever you are, you come right on up here on this porch. I ain’t gonna shout at you and I sure as shit ain’t goin’ out in that rain again.”

I paused. I could have turned and run back to the car but somehow, now that a conversation of sorts had begun, doing so would have felt incredibly rude. Plus, I didn’t fancy the idea of being shot in the back for a trespasser. I was fairly certain that Jane wasn’t armed, but this second woman struck me as such a hillbilly that I didn’t want to take any chances. So I did the only thing I could do: I walked round to the deteriorating stairs and mounted them carefully. The last thing I needed was a broken ankle to trap me in this godforsaken place.

“What’s your name, girl?” The large woman leaned against a post and the wood groaned in protest. Jane produced a silver Zippo from her coat pocket and lit another cigarette.

“It’s Julie,” I replied.

“Julie,” the large woman repeated. “You got a last name to go with that?”

“Bergstrom.”

“Julie Bergstrom,” she repeated again. There was a slight slur to her words, but if she had not emerged from the house with a drink in her hand I might not have noticed it. “Julie Bergstrom, I’m Lucinda Rose. This here is my house. And this lady is my sister, Jane Parker.”

“Hello.” Jane idly waved her cigarette at me in acknowledgment.

I nodded in return. There was almost no resemblance between the two women, and Lucinda either read the dubious expression on my face or she was accustomed to the reaction.

“We’re fraternal twins,” she explained.

“Twins?” I repeated. Even fraternal twins didn’t seem plausible. Standing next to Lucinda, Jane’s attractive features looked even more beautiful, though there was still something indefinably cold about her. She was like a mountain of fire encased in a thick layer of ice.

“Did I stutter?” Lucinda turned to Jane.

“It’s true,” Jane assured me. “We are twin sisters.”

I didn’t know what else to say.

“So anyway, what’re you doin’ here at my house?” Lucinda asked.

I shifted my weight uncomfortably. “I’ve been driving for a long time. I needed a break. I needed to get some air. When I saw your house from the road I thought I would walk to it and—”

“Through a rainstorm?” Lucinda interrupted. Ice cubes clinked as she picked up her glass again.

“Well, I doubt she came with the intention of robbing the place, dear,” Jane pointed out. Lucinda ignored her but Jane continued. “And if she’s having some sort of a problem it’s probably best that she come in for a bit,” she dragged at her cigarette, “at least until she feels a little better.”

“No, thank you, I couldn’t impose,” I said, even though the two of them were talking as if I wasn’t even present. Everything I’d been hard-wired to believe told me to politely take my leave and return to my car. You simply didn’t go into a stranger’s house alone. Even if the strangers were a pair of middle-aged women.

Lucinda shrugged and stirred her ice cubes with one finger. “Supper’ll be on the table in a bit. I reckon you’re welcome to stay, have a drink and a bite before you head on.” Jane nodded in agreement.

A pair of middle-aged women with supper and a seductive glass of whisky. It was tempting. And just then, as if to make up my mind for me, another cloudburst opened up and a new deluge doused the surrounding field. Thunder rolled overhead and the planks beneath my feet trembled faintly. Fuck it, I thought. If they kill me maybe Melissa will be waiting for me on the other side.

Lucinda caught me eyeing her glass. “Care for a drop of the Old Number 7?” She shuffled past me and reached for the rusty handle of her screen door.

“Jack?”

Lucinda gave an affirmative grunt.

“Thank you, yes.”

“I’ll be there in a moment, honey,” Jane called after Lucinda. Lucinda grunted again as she heaved her swollen foot over the step leading into

the entryway. I held the ratty screen door open for her and followed the broad floral bottom into the house.

The interior of the house was a very slight improvement on the exterior. The place smelled of mold and mildew—not overwhelmingly so—but just enough to let one know that water was a frequent and unrelenting intruder. The yellowing wallpaper in the foyer was bubbling and curling in places and a thin strip of it hung down to the dirt-streaked pine floor, which had begun to buckle. Lucinda led me through the foyer and into the adjoining kitchen. She set her drink down on the rickety, square-shaped table and went to the drying rack for a second glass.

The kitchen was a large room at the back of the house. Distressed wooden counters supported a gray Formica countertop, with a deep sink in the middle, and the floor was a matching gray linoleum. Five wide, grimy windows—the far left of which was cracked in one corner—overlooked what might once have been a modest vegetable garden. But the chicken wire had collapsed in places, been chewed through or torn away in others, and the garden had long since surrendered to a hopeless tangle of weeds.

It sounded as if it was raining inside the house. I glanced over my right shoulder and saw a beige-colored plastic bucket catching raindrops as they leaked in through the low ceiling near the back door. An ugly, fresh stain was spreading over the older one.

“Here you go, sweetie.” Lucinda pressed a glass of Jack Daniel’s into my hand.

“Thank you.” I nodded. I took my whisky over to the table and sat down. The plastic covering the spongy upholstery of the aluminum chair was cracked, and it gave a sharp, breathy sigh as I sat.

As always, the first sip was a powerful thing. Though the alcohol itself had no immediate effect, just the taste of the whisky was enough to assure my poor, troubled brain that some relief, however fleeting, was on its way. In my other life, I would have known better and felt guilty. In this one, I didn’t give a shit.

“You wanna turn that radio on for me?” Lucinda asked.

I leaned over and switched on the cheap silver radio perched on the opposite end of the table. With a staticky crackle, the low buzz of music filled the kitchen. The radio was preset to the local country music station, but I rarely listened to that sort of music and I didn’t know who was singing just then. Lucinda did, and she hummed along as she systematically took a drink, warmed the oven, took a drink, took plates of cold fried chicken, creamed corn, mashed potatoes, and peach cobbler out of the refrigerator, took a drink, shoved food in the oven, refilled her glass, pulled dishes and forks and knives from the cabinets, and took a drink.

“Can I help?” I asked when she started setting the table.

Lucinda shook her head and dropped a scratched blue ceramic plate

in front of me. “You just sit there and drink your drink, girly.”

I did as I was told. A new song came on the radio, and that one I knew: “Folsom Prison Blues.”

Lucinda knew it, too. “My man in black,” she sighed pensively. Though she pushed the several empty bottles of cheap liquor littering the countertop out of her way, she kept the half-full bottle of whisky well within reach.

“Johnny Cash was the man,” I agreed. I raised my glass as another round of thunder momentarily reduced the lights and the radio to a flicker. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, three cats—a tabby in the lead with one orange and one black following close behind—scampered across the floor and, one by one, slipped through the kitty flap at the bottom of the kitchen door. Where did they come from? And where are they off to in such a hurry? I mused.

Before Lucinda could answer, the screen door slammed again and Jane’s heels clicked towards us. “We about ready to eat?” she asked as she entered the kitchen.

“Just ’bout,” Lucinda replied. “Couple more minutes.”

Jane went to the sink, poured herself a cloudy glass of water from the tap, and pulled out the chair to my right. We sat in silence, drinking, until Lucinda took dinner out of the oven and filled all of our plates. And with a moan, she eased herself down on my left.

There was no conversation for several minutes. Forks and knives scraped against the plates. The kitty door squeaked as the orange cat trotted back inside. Mouth open, Lucinda chewed noisily. Several more drops of water plinked into the beige bucket in the corner of the room.

Finally, Jane spoke to me. “Where are you from, Julie?”

I waited until I had finished chewing to answer. “A little town in North Carolina. Near the coast. You’ve probably never heard of it.”

Jane did not ask me to be more specific. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“Maryland.” I put down my fork and reached for my glass again. “My brother Ryan lives alone out in the middle of nowhere. I’m going to visit him for a bit.” Then, “I need the peace and quiet,” I added.

“I see,” Jane replied.

Apparently, Lucinda was not listening to the conversation, but only eating her mashed potatoes and drinking her Jack Daniel’s. I could see the heat in my own face reflected in her whisky-flushed cheeks. Her eyelids drooped so much now that she looked as if she were eating in her sleep.

Disinclined to continue talking about myself, I asked, “What do you do, Jane?”

“I am a jewelry designer. I own a small shop in Bethesda.”

“A real successful business,” Lucinda piped up drowsily. Both Jane

and I looked at her but Lucinda said nothing further.

“Thank you, dear,” Jane said. “I enjoy it.”

“One of yours, I presume?” I gestured with my glass at the pink-and-silver hermit crab on Jane’s lapel.

Her hand went to her brooch and she gently ran a finger over the shell. “Yes. One of my favorites, actually.”

“What about you, Lucinda? Or is it Lucy?” I asked. “What do you do?”

Lucinda’s head came up at this. “First off, my name ain’t never ‘Lucy’. It’s ‘Lucinda’. M’name’s the only thing ’o beauty I got.” Both twins laughed at this. “And I don’t do nothin’,” Lucinda continued. “Never really did.”

“Well, you must do something. I mean, there’s food on this table, isn’t there?” I knew this was too bold, but the whisky had made me so.

“Who wants dessert?” Lucinda abruptly pushed her chair back from the table and collected our plates, despite the fact that neither Jane nor I had finished our meals. Evidently it was a rhetorical question. Without waiting for an answer from her dining companions, Lucinda picked up a spatula, shoveled peach cobbler into three chipped bowls, and dropped them onto the table with a clatter. After a few bites of cobbler Lucinda turned her bloodshot eyes towards me. “So what’s eatin’ you anyway?” she demanded bluntly. Jane did not intervene, but remained silently poised over her bowl. I took another swig from my glass and sat back.

“My best friend is dead,” I informed them without preamble. They exchanged a glance, so brief that it was nearly imperceptible, but neither sister said anything aloud. “It’s been a couple of weeks now,” I went on. “But I can’t seem to function without her.”

It was Jane who ended the silence that followed. “Well, I think that’s probably to be expected,” she said gently.

“Not, it’s not normal. And it isn’t getting better, it’s only getting worse. You don’t understand. I have a husband and friends and a life. I used to have interests, too. But none of those things are enough.” I looked down at my hands, wrapped around my glass, and noticed that the veins on my forearms and wrists were more prominent than usual. The Jack was free-flowing through my system now. It was disgusting that this was my only solace. God, how I knew better; like scratching a mosquito bite, it felt so good to do it but when you stopped you were only going to bleed. No one was saying anything and I glanced up again. Jane was patiently waiting for me to go on but Lucinda’s half-closed eyes were staring blankly at the wall. Her thin mouth was a tight, static line.

“I could go on indefinitely, I have no doubt, but in the interest of everyone’s time let me bottom-line it for you. The fucked-up reality is that I put everything into that friendship and now it’s gone. Everything else seems hollow now. My love for the others feels shallow and mean-

ingless in comparison. It isn't rational," I shook my head, "but it is what it is."

Lucinda's glass slipped from her hand, overturned, and sloshed its contents onto the table. Whisky flooded the surface and Jane and I leapt out of the way. Jane went for a dishrag but Lucinda took very little notice of the situation. While Jane mopped up the mess and I moved the bowls over to the sink, Jane shook her twin's shoulder and practically shouted in her ear.

"Did you take those pills again? Goddamn it, you did, didn't you?"

"Naw," Lucinda slurred. But she certainly had gone downhill fast.

"Goddamn it, Lucinda," Jane snapped again, wiping the last of the whisky from the table, "the doctor told you not to take them when you drink."

For the first time since I'd entered the kitchen I noticed a picture hanging on the wall to the right of the stove. The image inside the cheap frame was of a smiling young fellow, holding a can of beer and leaning against the back of a blue pickup truck. To distract the sisters from bickering I asked, "Who is that man?"

"That's Coby," Jane replied softly, without even looking, as she wrung out the dishrag over the sink.

"Coby," Lucinda repeated in a tiny voice.

And without another word she picked up what was left of her drink, stumbled out into the hallway, and mounted the stairs.

"Come on," Jane grasped my elbow. "Let's go out on the porch."

I left my glass behind.

The rain had stopped but water continued to run in drips and rivulets from the roof. An early twilight had settled over the landscape in the wake of the thunderstorm. Soon it would be dark and I would have to be on my way again.

"I guess I asked the wrong question," I said as Jane lit a cigarette.

"You didn't know." Jane tossed her head back and exhaled. "Coby was Lucinda's son. He was killed six days ago in a boating accident."

"That's terrible," I said, though I felt almost nothing. No one's loss could have been as great as mine.

"The funeral was this morning." Jane leaned forward and rested her elbows on the railing. She took another drag of her cigarette as she stared out over the field. "Dinner was a retread of the luncheon the church provided afterwards."

"I see."

"What are you, Julie? Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine years old?"

"Thirty-three."

"Well then, my nephew was younger than you. Coby was twenty-eight. He was out on the Chesapeake with a couple of his buddies, drinking on his friend's boat. They were drinking and swimming and fishing, like

always. But Coby slipped on the deck that day, hit his head, and fell into the water. No one had the presence of mind to pull him out in time, and he drowned.

“Lucinda’s taking it pretty hard. I’ve no kids of my own, and I’ve survived an ugly divorce myself, just this past winter, but I imagine that the death of a child is just about the worst thing that can happen to a person. Coby was all she had. Her husband Jake left five years ago and ever since then it’s been just the two of them. Coby was a good boy. Not real bright, but he went to his job every day and took care of his mother. I expect I’ll have to figure something out now.” Her eyes scanned the darkening horizon. “I’ve worked hard my whole life to avoid just this sort of situation,” she said bitterly, more to herself than to me. “I’m not used to having to take care of someone.”

In a perfect punctuation of this last, something upstairs crashed loudly to the floor and there was a muffled wailing from inside the house.

“I should be back on the road anyhow,” I said as Jane stomped out her cigarette. “Please thank your sister for her kindness and tell her how sorry I am.”

Jane reached out and brushed a bit of ash from my shoulder. “Good luck to you, Julie Bergstrom.” She unbuttoned her jacket and went back inside as Lucinda’s cries grew louder.

Thankfully, the strong effects of the whisky abated sometime during the long walk back to the car. There were no stars to light my way. Nothing but the endless chirping of frogs and crickets pierced the darkness until the headlights of a passing car assured me that I was still pointed in the right direction.

I climbed back into the driver’s seat and started the engine, but I didn’t put my car into gear.

I couldn’t. I took the key out of the ignition.

For I had found that I was unsure as to whether I should continue my journey north or turn back south instead.

I didn’t know where to go.

I didn’t know where I should go.

It was a long time before I restarted the car and pulled back onto the highway again.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. His reviews have appeared in *Books in Canada* and on the web.

The Animal: a review

Ernest Hekkanen

The Animal

By Louis E. Bourgeois

BlazeVOX [books]

126 pages, \$16.00

ISBN: 978-1-934289-61-7

THE ANIMAL by Louis E. Bourgeois is the most challenging collection I've read in quite some time. Although it bears the subtitle, *Prose Poetics*, I would be inclined to refer to it as a collection of parables and aphorisms, and I know, from having read *Complete with Missing Parts: Interviews with the Avant-Garde*, an anthology edited by Bourgeois, that he holds both of these genres in high regard.

Bourgeois's *modus operandi* is alluded to in a quote that precedes the text. The quote is by Antonin Artaud, the French director and poet credited with developing the Theatre of Cruelty, and reads as follows: "Man on earth is bored to death and this boredom is buried so deeply within him that he now no longer knows it."

I can't say for sure whether Artaud was influenced by Søren Kierkegaard, but I strongly suspect that he was and, as proof of my assertion, let me quote a few lines from page 286 of *Either/Or* (Princeton University Press, 1987): "The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings. Adam was bored because he was alone; therefore Eve was created. Since that moment, boredom entered the world and grew in quantity in exact proportion to the growth of population."

Franz Kafka found Kierkegaard's adage to boredom so inspiring, he decided to pen one of his own: "Everything feels itself to be a thought,

even the vaguest feelings. I hate everything that does not relate to literature, conversations bore me (even if they relate to literature), to visit people bores me, the sorrows and joys of my relatives bore me to my soul. Conversations take the importance, the seriousness, the truth of everything I think.” (July 21, 1913, *Diaries*.)

Bourgeois is following in the tradition of Artaud, Kierkegaard and Kafka. Some random samplings from *The Animal* will indicate what I am getting at: 1) from the prose poem, “The Wise Man”: “There is no experience worth having, he thought. There is nothing left that I want to know. There is no one with whom I want to talk. There is no painting or ocean that intoxicates me;” 2) from “The Anti-Natural”: “The thought of rock formations sickened him...if he couldn’t have exclusive rights to all the dust in the world, then he didn’t want dust to exist anymore;” 3) from “Dead Sky”: “This time it’s a fundamental malaise...;” and 4) from “Statements Against Existence”: “Does this mean that life will repeat itself from the first moment to the last? If so, it will be imbued with the same futility as before.”

The Animal that is being dissected here is, of course, Man. In particular, Bourgeois is examining Man’s contrary nature: the nature that forces him to conquer the world (because otherwise life would be endlessly boring) and the nature that allows him to realize that his efforts are pointless. The prose poem, “Alexander the Great,” is a good example of this:

At least, he thought, at least it would be better than this terrible nothingness that has crawled into my heart and will not leave. “Everything is the same,” he cried out loud to no one but himself, “nothing I have done makes one bit of sense.”

Or consider “Heidegger Playing with Children,” in which you’ll find the following lines:

Gather ’round me boys and girls; see, this is not a fish.
This is definitely not a fish and if you look above, you’ll
see there is no sky there, nor has there ever been a sky...
The only reality is ash. Jewish ash and stardust ash.

It is obvious from the above passages that Bourgeois is working in the tradition of writers whose thinking has dissociated them from life but who then, in the manner of de Sade, seek acts of violence and degradation in order to prove to themselves that they exist. Take, as a further example, the poem, “The Monster of Village Z”:

He could not be sated; all the cormorants we brought

him, all the blood sacrifices wasted on him... WILL THE REVOLUTION NEVER COME?... Until that day comes when he'll die of Boredom, all our sacred birds will be extinguished, even though we'll have total freedom.

There is a defining conundrum in *The Animal*: Do things exist in and of themselves or do they depend on our minds for their existence? If they depend on our minds for their existence, then there is no limit to the degradation we can subject them to—at least in Bourgeois's world. Take, for example, his poem, "Thoughts of a Healthy Man," in which you'll find the following passage:

...but he knew in advance of these objects that his imagination was a greater acknowledgment of their presence, their *raison d'être*... For once, he was truly frightened by what his imagination beheld; every night for a week he dreamed of them screaming in an indescribable voice...

The Animal is not an easy book to read. It begs to be studied, and to be studied in the context of the traditions I have alluded to in this review. But, if I might be allowed one observation, I think Bourgeois is carving out a considerable niche for himself in literature on this side of the Atlantic. Indeed, I would contend that he is a major 'French' voice in American letters.

M.P. WILTSHIRE's work has appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *Grain*, *The Antigonish Review* and *The Nashwaak Review*. She is currently plot-challenged on a novel to do with Edward Abbey.

Cowboys & Indians

M.P. Wiltshire

WE WERE LOST, out in the middle of Navajo country. It was the fault of the Indian map. We should have followed the Rand McNally map and gone back the way we'd come, six miles along a dirt road to the junction with Route 13. But Scott was being an asshole, driving the Sebring over washes and ruts, thinking he could beat the gas gage. The dust-coloured sky came right down to the edge of the desert and there were no roads, just tracks and gullies meandering off into nowhere.

There was a point, not then, when I realized that being lost was what I'd come for. It was high noon in late May, and we were almost out of gas. Somewhere up ahead was a place called Rattlesnake Pumping Station. There was no sound at all but the sound of flies.

"Shit," Scott said. "Did you pack enough water?"

Earlier I'd tossed a green water canteen onto the back seat and our last two beers into the cooler. "No worries. Worse comes to worst, we can drink the bag of ice. After that there's the radiator fluid."

"Very funny, Nicko."

"This isn't the Sahara, for fuck's sake. We're ten miles from the main road—what are you worried about?"

Somebody back in Toronto should have predicted it. Two city guys driving through the desert in a rented red convertible—who the hell did we think we were? Those women in Cleveland and Chicago checking us out: hookers in thigh-high boots, shop girls dabbling in crystals. We were buff, we were young, we were bloody Thelma and Louise. The Navajo don't want white city guys on their land. The land itself is a riddle, set up to foil trespassers. Dirt tracks leading to nowhere.

“Okay, smart-ass,” he said, shoving the map at me. “You navigate.”

Scott was my cousin and a hotshot orthodontist back in Toronto. He had a friend named Amy who catered for film crews, and I’d been thinking of asking her out before we left, but didn’t get around to it. Truth is, I’m a procrastinator, and a narcoleptic procrastinator at that. I had a lagging thesis and a financial deadline at U. of T., and I kept conking out, falling asleep at my computer. Pumping iron at the gym, day in, day out, was my way of avoiding writing and warding off sleep.

Out in that desert, you forget you’re in the USA. The Navajo don’t believe in upgrading. Government dollars pouring in, dollars creamed from that surreal coal-burning plant outside Page, and all they can do is litter the roads to their sacred monuments with beer bottles and used condoms. It’s a desecration. An hour before, I’d sat in the car while the flies buzzed, almost high noon, and watched Scott disappear into the shadow of the monolith called Ship Rock, watched his white t-shirt getting smaller and smaller against that aberration on the face of the desert. I don’t know why I didn’t follow him. I didn’t even get out of the car. Sleep was courting me, to tell the truth; I felt as if I could sleep forever. But I clicked the image into his digital as he was coming back.

Then we drove on, instead of retracing our tracks. We had the roof up and the air conditioning on, but I kept falling asleep in the passenger seat, banging my head against the window. Narcoleptics are hell to travel with, I’d warned him back in Toronto; you might as well go alone. But he was between girlfriends, dead set on driving to L.A., and he needed a driving mate. I had my prescription for methylphenidate and I was in better shape than a lot of guys, but in the car, on hot afternoons, sleep hounded me like a demon. And when I woke up, we were out in the middle of nowhere. Ship Rock was miles behind us.

“Well, look who’s awake,” Scott said sarcastically. “Look who’s joining us for the tour.”

Until then I’d managed to ignore his bouts of sarcasm about my sleep disorder. Secretly I felt superior, which was probably unwarranted. Scott hadn’t read a book in years, unless you counted consumer guides, but you had to grant that he knew a lot about teeth. I was working—okay, *not* working—on a thesis called *Cowboys and Indians and the Decline of West in the American Psyche*. This gave me the intellectual edge, even though he had the money. We pumped weights at the same gym and had started hanging out by default in the fall, when I was new to Toronto.

I rubbed my banged head. “Where are we?”

“The road just petered out. Although according to the fucking Indian map it should have brought us out onto Route 64. Surprise, surprise.”

That was when he asked if I’d brought enough water, and told me to navigate. I unfolded the Rand McNally map of New Mexico and found Ship Rock, elevation 7178 feet, in the top left-hand grid. We were only a

handful of miles from Four Corners, where you can get down on your hands and knees and simultaneously place all four limbs in a different state. “The road’s that way,” I told him, motioning back towards the monolith with its Gothic spires, six or eight miles distant.

“Let me ask you something, Nick. Why didn’t I buy that Mitsubishi Outlander when I had the chance? The one with only 54,000 kilometres on it?”

“I don’t know, why didn’t you?”

“I’m sure there must have been a reason, but I can’t remember it.” He sounded gloomy. “And this last half-hour has convinced me of the absolute necessity of owning a sports utility vehicle. As I’m convinced of the necessity of handguns.” He had an electric blue Miata sitting back home in his underground parkade, but he hadn’t wanted to subject it to wear and tear. He also had a handgun, purchased during our half-hour buying spree in Cleveland. It was sitting right in front of me, in the glove compartment.

I reached back for the binoculars and fastened them to my face. Something glistened in the distance, up on a ridge. “Looks like some kind of settlement over there. A couple of trailers, maybe—hard to tell.”

“Maybe it’s that pumping station.” He lurched the car along the track, in the direction of the ridge.

Of course, the potholes were impassable. Fifteen minutes later the track drifted into nothing, and the ridge didn’t look any closer. If anything, the trailers seemed further away, and too far west.

Scott grabbed the binoculars. “Thought you said there was something up there.”

“There was.”

“Yeah, right.” He yanked into reverse and revved the car over a pothole.

Ship Rock was ahead of us now, and off to the right, eight or nine miles away. This direction seemed better, with the track widening in places. For a minute I even thought it was becoming a road. Then it narrowed again and disappeared in a series of potholes. The rock was further off than ever, and at the wrong angle.

I started to laugh—I couldn’t help it. I sat there in the passenger seat, chuckling like a moron, and Scott glared at me. “What the fuck are you laughing at? You think this is funny?”

“Ever read *Through the Looking Glass*?”

“*Through the*—this better be good, Nick.” He was rummaging on the floor, looking for his bag of jujubes. For a teeth guy, he was pretty into jujubes.

“Part where Alice—you know, Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*—tries to get to the top of the hill, but keeps ending up at her front door instead.”

“Your point?”

“Just that I’m getting déjà vu.”

He looked at me blankly, popping a couple of jujubes into his mouth. Then he braked and turned off the ignition. “Pass me that roll of toilet paper.”

“You’re kidding.”

“You in a hurry to get somewhere, Nicko?” He reached into the back seat and grabbed the toilet paper. “Guy’s gotta take a crap, guy’s gotta take a crap.”

There was no point telling him to be sure to dig a hole and bury it. Scott didn’t like to listen. He preferred to ram metal things into people’s mouths when they were lying prostrate, and start up a conversation. I watched him take off down that dirt track in the afternoon heat, and then I got out of the car and lit a cigarette. I had three left and was planning to quit once I’d smoked the last one.

Leaning against the car, I noticed the intensity of the light, even through the haze. I saw how a heat-crazed person might experience optical illusions in the desert, when there’s nothing there but wind. Because there I was, watching my cousin get smaller and smaller, and suddenly there were two figures instead of one outlined against the horizon. In my mind there wasn’t a doubt, but I told myself it was a trick of the haze. I rubbed my eyes and looked again, and the second figure was still there, keeping pace with Scott. I could see Scott’s bleached-blond head—he used something called *L’Oreal for Men*, out of a box—and the long black ponytail of the other guy.

Then the second guy vanished, and Scott’s t-shirt headed into a downward dip. I grabbed the binoculars from the front seat and looked again, and no one was there. I wondered if my methylphenidate was working overtime, too much stimulus to the central nervous system. “Get a grip, Nicholas,” I said out loud.

I finished my cigarette. Then I got back in the car and ate a few jujubes, swigged them down with some water. I wondered if Scott was planning to leave a mess of used toilet paper out on the plain, with all the beer bottles. I didn’t want to think about it. I slid over into the driver’s seat and turned the key in the ignition; fiddled around with the radio dial, trying to pick up the Navajo Nation. No go.

I waited twenty minutes before starting the engine and shifting into drive. Then I bumped southward cautiously, no faster than five miles an hour. I went the direction Scott had gone, even though losing him seemed a better idea at that moment. It was okay as long as I kept Ship Rock on my right, up in the distance. But before I knew it, I’d swerved east again. The grey spires were behind me. It was hopeless. Something didn’t want me to get home.

“Okay, desert,” I said, turning off the engine. “Tell me what you want.”

It was then that I saw the guy again, up on a ridge. Another ridge, not

the first one. He was unmistakable, standing motionless, maybe half a mile away, his long black hair blowing in the wind. Except there wasn't any wind, that I could feel. He was looking straight at me, and then he beckoned.

* * *

I took half the water, and half the ice from the cooler; slung the canteen over my shoulder. I left Scott a note on the dash. I debated locking the doors and decided not to. There were valuables in the car—his camera (mine was shit); a few decent pairs of hiking shoes. But if he came back, he needed to be able to get in. I kept the key, and hid the gun under the seat.

The desert survival books all say to stay in your vehicle, if you're lost. A car is easier to spot than a human. Furthermore, as long as you leave the windows open, the shade provided by a set of wheels might be your salvation. So why do rookies, time and again, get impatient and head out on foot across a parched landscape? Great Basin, Mojave, Sonoran, Chihuahuan—they're all the same. Cruel zones, devoid of empathy.

Maybe they saw what I saw, those rookies. Something out of the ordinary, something they hadn't expected. I took precautions—fished a long-sleeved shirt out of my duffel bag, tied a t-shirt around my head, making sure to cover the back of my neck. Slathered on sunscreen everywhere else and threw a couple of Power Bars into my knapsack. Then I headed out toward that low-lying ridge, the place where the Indian had stood and beckoned me. The Navajo. The Anasazi. Whoever he was.

It was mainly cattle range and dust and pungent sage, that stretch of northwestern New Mexico. Beigegreygreen emptiness, broken by fissures in the earth, igneous rock thrusting skyward like Ship Rock and the five-mile-long fin that ran into it. I didn't see any spindly-legged bovines, although there was evidence that they had been there, cow pies and trampled brush. What I was really looking for was a sign, some Rider of the Purple Sage to come galloping along that ridge, bringing enlightenment. Not an Indian but a cowboy, one of those extinct solitary types who couldn't be bought. The man I wanted to be, right out of a Zane Grey novel.

At last I came up to that higher elevation, panting. I looked back and saw the abandoned Sebring, a red blot on the landscape. I lifted the canteen to my lips and took a long drink. Behind the car, in the distance, was Ship Rock. There was no sign of the Navajo, or of any habitation up on the ridge. The whole place was empty.

* * *

So how I came to see it, I don't know. A rock pile in a cleft, half in shadow. On the surface, nothing. But I took another swig from my water bottle and walked around to it, and found a hogan. One of those rude huts

built by the Navajo and other roaming tribes in the last hundred years. A far cry from an Anasazi cliff-dwelling, or the pueblos at Taos and Acoma. (Or from mobile homes with satellite dishes, the preferred hogans of the newer generation.)

“Hello,” I called. Nothing. I could hear the insects in the grass.

There was no door, just a small opening. I took off my shades and stuck my head inside. I heard it before I saw it—the sound of threads being pulled down on a loom. As my eyes adjusted, I made out the form of an old woman, sitting there in the dark, weaving. Her hands were going up and down on the loom as if her life depended on it.

She didn’t say anything. Hell, she wasn’t even looking at me. But as I crouched there on all fours, I felt some words taking shape in my brain. Foreign words, belonging to one of those Athapaskan languages that comes out like marbles in the speaker’s mouth. A lot of *k* and *t* sounds: *chookety—took*, that kind of sound.

She told me to take off my shoes.

So I took them off and crawled inside and sat cross-legged in her hogan, in my sock feet. She never stopped weaving, and she didn’t look at me. “I have waited a long time,” she said, with her mouth full of marbles. But as I said, she didn’t exactly say it. She *thought* it, in that language I’d never heard before, and I understood it. “Are your eyes open?”

“Open? Well, yeah—at the moment.”

“You must train your eyes to see, even when they are shut.”

Then she motioned for me to come near and look at her work. “This is the blanket my ancestors began to weave in the Underworld. When it came time to emerge into the fourth world, they were in such a hurry that they forgot it.” She went on weaving, her gnarled, knotted hands pulling down the cloth on the loom. “So when winter came on the high plateau, they had nothing to cover themselves with.”

“How did you get it?”

“Sótuknang drew back the waters for me so I could go down and retrieve the unfinished blanket. But I could not carry the loom, which was far superior to the one I am using now.”

I reached out and touched the blanket, which was damp and heavy. Leaning close, I thought I smelled sea water. “Who’s Sótuknang?”

“The one who erased the stepping-stones of our Emergence.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Your people are part of this story. They came to the fourth world—this world which was not beautiful and easy like the others, but which was the only world my people remembered. Your people came in boats, against the wishes of Sótuknang. They ignored the stepping-stones and did not care about preserving the memory and meaning of our Emergence.”

I was watching her hands, which were ancient but graceful, moving

up and down in perfect rhythm. She said, “At that time there were very few of us left who were true descendants of Spider Woman. While we sought to do our Creator’s will, your people took the fourth world out of our hands. We gave you gifts of corn, and you gave us nothing in return.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I mean—I hate all that imperialist bullshit. I wish it hadn’t happened. But it’s not strictly true, you know. My grandparents were Russian immigrants. Your people had already been demoralized by the time they got here.”

She went on, as though I hadn’t spoken. “I have been weaving for a long time. This last piece is very difficult. I need the loom of my ancestors. Will you go down and get it for me?”

“Me?” I glanced around, through the doorway of the hogan, to the bright light outside. “I can’t even get back to the main road. How’m I supposed to find some portal to another world?”

“Sótuknang will help you.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know Sótuknang. And I don’t know anything about looms.”

“Then why have you come?”

“I told you, I’m lost. I’m trying to get back to Route 13.”

“You must find the place of our Emergence and ask Sótuknang to part the waters once more.”

I knew then that there was no point telling her about Scott, or about being low on gas and not knowing how to read the Indian map. She wouldn’t care. All she cared about was her bloody blanket. “I have a thesis to finish,” I said. “I’m just a Canadian guy on vacation. None of this was my fault.”

She didn’t answer but went on rhythmically pulling down the cloth. I held out my canteen. “Could I get some water?”

“There is no water,” she said, with her mouth full of marbles. “You must learn to drink wind.”

So I got out of there. I sure as hell wasn’t going anywhere with people who had names like Sótuknang and Spider Woman. I put on my hiking boots and scrambled over that pile of rocks in record speed. I made it down the ridge in half the time it had taken me to climb up. I could see the Sebring, forlorn and useless-looking, to the west.

When I stopped for breath, I glanced back once towards the ridge. There was no sign of the hogan, but I thought I could make out the pile of rocks, off to the left. Then I saw him, the man who had beckoned me. Sótuknang, my would-be guide. He was up there watching something, gazing across the plain toward Ship Rock.

At last he raised his hands, palms up. It wasn’t a salute—it was as if he were asking *why*? Scott would have pulled out his gun, fired a couple of shots into the air, just to show the guy who was boss. But there was grit in my eyes. I had to turn away.

What made me speed up was thinking about the beer in the cooler. I started running across the plain, gulping wind and tasting beer. As I neared the car, I could make out Scott, slumped behind the wheel. I raised my hands, the way Sótuknang had raised his.

Then the light shifted. Damn, *damn*. Ahead of me, I saw the ridge.

The following poems come from ERNEST HEKKANEN's forthcoming collection, *Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow*.

Ernest Hekkanen / **Two Poems**

An Equation for Snow and Silence

Snowflakes as large as small serviettes are falling with mathematical abandon that I'm sure some genius could describe with an equation having to do with randomness, weight, velocity and temperature or any combination of dissipative structuring events that might be dreamed into existence by the protégé of a deluded god. Whatever the meddlesome agent, the result is yet another foot of fluffy white stuff for me to clear from the walkway up to the house.

Then, quite suddenly, there's the violent rattle of pulleys and the banging of weights as the sash of a window heaves heavenward on the second floor, and there she is, my wife, her shock of red hair deity bright with tangles, yelling at me to put down the shovel; there's someone on the phone, long-distance, wouldn't give his name, each expulsion of her breath so much foggy vapor haloing in the midst of flakes that descend from the sky.

However, when I get into the house, moments later, the line is dead, all communication severed. What's the mathematical equation for something like that happening on a day when snowflakes spill without cease? I guess someone thought I needed a rest.

Winter's Weight

Winter has a weight to it
that other seasons don't have.
It is more than just the weight
of clothes necessary to keep one warm:
you know, the sweaters, long underwear
and insulated boots; it is more than
the phlegm that weighs heavily
on the lungs; it is that *sinking feeling*:
you know, the impression that the grey heavens
are little more than a lid pressing down
on one's head, and that every snowflake
is just one more trifling straw
about to break the camel's back.

Is there a remedy for that sort of feeling,
my dear?

I think what I need is a halogen light
I can switch on and off in my chest;
or maybe a sunflower I can begin to grow
smack-dab in the middle of my heart,
one that will sprout with so much determination
it will break through the icecap of my chest,
full-blown, ready to cherish the sun
that is so well hidden now, like a drab excuse,
behind the draperies of the overcast sky.

TIM STRUTZ has spent most of his adult life in Dearborn, Michigan—home to the international headquarters of the Ford Motor Company. He worked as a police officer, then a professional counselor after receiving a graduate degree from Wayne State University. Expressionist art has been a passion for most of his adult life; he has trained and exhibited at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit and other venues in southeast Michigan.

Crow

Tim Strutz

THE WANING sunlight of early autumn caused the long jet-black hair of the crossing guard to glisten in a way that was inconsistent with her advanced years. It was the kind of hair you might expect to see on the head of an adolescent girl who still had a collection of feminine dolls—silky and inviting. Her hair stood in sharp contrast to the weathered almond-colored skin and ancient stooped shoulders and sagging breasts and cheeks and chin. The crossing guard chose to wear the outmoded and optional uniform of white garrison cap and gloves with contrasting black woolen skirt and jacket over baggy pantyhose. Her one concession to comfort was a pair of spotless white sneakers. Children who waited at her intersection for assistance in crossing were always fascinated by the bright red lipstick she carefully applied each day before reporting to work.

Her name was Cynthia Redstar, and except for the rare vacation she had never missed a single day of work during three decades crossing the elementary school children at the intersection of 5th and Main. Most of the kids who passed her way did not in fact know her real name, and lovingly referred to her as “Crow.” Crow herself had forgotten the origin of her nickname, and assumed it was based on either her intensely black hair or her Native American origins. It didn’t really matter. Crow was a simple woman; a widow who lived alone, on a modest survivor’s pension; a wise and kindly woman who had somehow been denied the joy of bearing her own children and thus came to cherish each and every interaction with the tiny commuters who briefly visited her post at the start and end of each school day.

“Hey, Crow: How are you doing today?” a chunky fifth-grader with

an oversized red backpack announced as he bounded happily toward the older woman.

“Hi, Jimmy. I’m doing great. How are you doing with your arithmetic?” Crow asked, smiling warmly.

“It’s soooooo hard. But my dad helped me last night.” Jimmy beamed and held Crow’s warm, gnarly brown hand until the light turned green, then bounded carefree across the walkway.

It was a scene repeated countless times during the school year. Crow knew every boy and girl by name and knew what was happening in their tender lives. And it was not at all uncommon for the crossing guard to part with a dollar or two for the unfortunate few that could not afford a hot lunch, for Crow carried the painful memories of hunger and deprivation from her days as a youth on the reservation. A life skirting poverty had carved deep and meaningful lines in her craggy face, but her dark brown eyes conveyed grace and nobility and a clear beauty of spirit.

As the afternoon began to deepen, Crow, as was her custom, stayed on for several minutes past her shift to ensure that any stragglers would be afforded the extra safety of her hand-held stop sign. Seeing none, she began the dozen or so block walk home—home being a tiny studio apartment near the old strip mall that adequately served the needs of a woman with no family in the area and very few close friends. Not having the expense of an automobile allowed her to save a modest sum that she hoped would one day establish a scholarship fund for impoverished students at the elementary school. As she plodded along through the brisk fall Montana air, Crow relished the thought of the upcoming evening spent with a hot mug of tea and the new romance novel she had recently purchased at the used book store.

* * *

The teenaged computer hacker was leaning dangerously from the front edge of his swivel chair almost as if he were ready to dive into the dark keyboard in front of him. His feral grin displayed the multi-thousand dollar effort that his parents, both MBA types, had invested over the years to ensure that his teeth had the appearance of being perfectly straight and aligned and white. The brilliant whiteness of his teeth, however, was now eclipsed somewhat by the bulging eyeballs that were threatening to burst out of his head as he concentrated and furiously pounded the keyboard. The hacker’s name was William Alexander Hessberg, and he was known to his very limited circle of friends as “Skull.” His spiked, yellow hair and chrome nose ring seemed to complement the sunken eyes and hollow cheekbones that resulted in his nickname and tickled his dark fancy.

“Hey, shithead, are you ready?” Skull called over to his dorm roommate, Jerry “Punch” Phillips, who stood by the window, gazing through binoculars.

“Yeah, man, let her fly,” said Punch. Punch was a fellow hacker but not in the same league as Skull. He was focused on a window across the narrow corridor between dorm buildings behind which a cute blond female co-ed sat in front of her computer console.

Skull punched a button, at which time the CD tray of the blonde began to inextricably open and close. Punch erupted into staccato laughter and began to yell: “Yeah, take that, Bitch, suck on that.” Finally, the CD tray stuck open despite the best efforts of the co-ed to close it, and her computer went dark; the hard drive fried. The name of the co-ed was Jenny, and at some point in the recent past she had made the unpardonable mistake of rebuffing the crude and obscene romantic offers of William “Skull” Hessberg and Jerry “Punch” Phillips.

“That’ll teach her ugly ass,” said a chuckling Skull as he swiveled toward his pal. In fact, there was no part of Jenny that was anything near ugly; she had even been civil in her avoidance of the rude, geeky pair. “Well, now we can go out tonight and celebrate, my crappy friend. I got her Visa number,” Skull announced happily.

“Maybe we should head out now. We could probably use Molly to clear out a grand at the mall before the card is shut down,” Punch said.

“No rush. That stupid bitch won’t even know her number was ripped for a couple of days at least.” Skull relished the thought of a great meal and some shopping, courtesy of the girl who thought of herself as too good for him. He was very adept at every facet of computer-generated evil: hacking, theft, fraud, and sometimes, just for fun, viruses that could replicate and destroy wantonly for months.

William the Skull had been a computer prodigy almost since he developed the ability to use his fingertips. As a sickly, skinny and introverted child, he had never felt any real affinity toward his parents, whose life goal of improving corporate profits caused them to work long into the night on any given day. For convenience sake, William had been relegated to the world of material goods: the newest bicycles; expensive baseball gloves; model rockets. But the problem had been William’s complete and total lack of ability to get along with others. He came to loathe his playmates as well as the outdoors, and when pressured to stay outside, gravitated toward the one activity that brought him happiness: the torturing of insects and small animals. So it was that the activities of his youth took him toward the path of physical isolation and, eventually, the much safer and rewarding virtual world of computer and violent video games.

And he became very, very good at it. William’s parents were thrilled that the troubled boy had finally found something that he could relate to; something that would keep him out of their hair; something that would afford him a marketable future. So they spared no expense when it came to the purchase of the latest high-tech gadget or gizmo. And when it came

time to push him out of the house and into college, they were once again happy to foot the bill. When his grades flagged, however, they decided to stem the flow of money as a way to motivate William to work harder. It was then that William the Skull decided to transition beyond the virtual murder, rape and mayhem of video games, and the petty creation of destructive viruses, in order to make some real money through the hacking of personal identity.

As far as Skull was concerned, his parents and every other stinking pisshead on the planet could go screw themselves. He relished the thought of how later in the evening he would play the updated version of his favorite video game: “Destroyer of the Earth.”

“Are you coming, or what?” Punch said.

“Screw you; keep your pants on,” said Skull.

* * *

As fall moved forward, Cynthia “Crow” Redstar paid a visit to the Green Earth Outlet out on old Route 313 for the herbs and extracts necessary to keep her healthy through the upcoming winter. Her knowledge in the time-honored craft of natural healing was vast—a vestige of her informal apprenticeship to a wise and learned old tribal medicine man: her father, now long deceased.

Although Crow missed the children at her post, she loved Saturdays. After a healthy vegetarian breakfast, there would be tea with her friend and neighbor, Ellen, the widow of a postman, followed by an afternoon of browsing through local bookstores and flea markets. Crow loved old things—lamps; vases; ceramic tea pots—the way she loved the old, simple ways. Her one concession to the new age of the world was the outdated, bulky, used computer she had purchased at the school board sale so she could e-mail her sister in Minnesota and keep track of her bank account on the Internet. Knowing little of the ways of computers, the IT guy at her school had helped her set it up. Every weekend, Crow checked the modest accumulation of wealth that the account held. Soon, there would be enough to start the special scholarship fund. Crow smiled to herself as she thought of the goodness that would be created.

* * *

The college semester was not going well for William “Skull” Hessberg. His English professor had the temerity to give him a failing grade for the final class paper based on suspected plagiarism. The Skull was outraged by the lack of concrete proof. The fact that he had actually paid another student to write the project was irrelevant to William. In his mind he began to plot how he might destroy the professor’s credit, or better yet, the credit of a cherished family member.

He now sat sullenly in front of his computer screen, eyes squinting with malice. It was time to squeeze away some funds from one of the many people his special program had identified as vulnerable. William

was very, very careful: In certain circumstances his skills allowed him to raid accounts in ways that were completely untraceable. His thought process never changed: If people were stupid enough to leave their systems unprotected, then they deserved what they got. Besides, they would eventually get their money back—well, maybe.

The Skull located a suitable target. With malicious glee his pale right index finger moved forward and down. As the fleshy blood-filled pad touched and depressed the command key, uncounted trillions of electrons launched themselves through a complex tangle of circuit boards and wires and cables and routers, following the dark will of the hacker. The transaction complete, William engaged the special eraser program then shut down for the night.

Crow had been staring at the old-style boxy computer monitor for more than an hour. Her mouth was an inverted U and the lines in her face seemed deeper than usual, but what was especially alarming were the deep and dark brown eyes, the eyes that usually smiled and radiated warmth—those eyes now smoldered with repressed fury. For the computer screen had coldly told her that her money, all of her hard-earned savings, the fund that would help the children she loved so much, was taken by some heartless animal. There had been no mistake. The e-mail had been explicit: “Yo, thanks for the cash. I be having a real big bash. Be smoking maybe some real good hash. Got to dash! LOL”

Crow finally closed her wounded eyes. She simply couldn’t fathom the utter cruelty to which she had been subjected. It wasn’t really about the money: The bank would do an investigation, and she would eventually get her savings back. No, it was not about that. It had to do with something much more sinister; something that had been long asleep; something that had been planted deep in the mind and soul of Cynthia Redstar and was now becoming awake. And it was something frightful.

Skull Hessberg uttered his usual string of obscenities as his virtual self, a muscular warrior armed with a laser blaster, was squashed by the mammoth leg of the giant three-headed green lizard that had been set to assassinate him. He was not upset at his own virtual death, but by the fact that he could not proceed to the next level of the game, where he could earn extra points by virtue of slaughtering innocent bystanders.

* * *

Cynthia “Crow” Redstar had been pleased to find that she still had important contacts on the reservation—aged friends that remembered the old ways from a forgotten past. After another trip to the Green Earth Outlet, it was time to begin. Ancient memories and newer advice began to coalesce in the small living room of her apartment. The location just happened to be the place where an old, boxy computer sat glumly in a dark corner of the room. It was now a time for the recitation of ancient incantations; for the careful arrangement of eagle and coyote bones; for

the burning of herbs in discreet order; and the letting of blood from ancient capillaries. And finally, there was started an intense reverie of shamanic proportions; a brow dripping embittered sweat and a mind focused with a single purpose: to see—one mind seeking another.

As psychic tension reached a point that threatened to fracture the very air in the room, the old woman slowly, deliberately reached forward and down with her twisted brown index finger and touched a worn plastic key in front of her computer. An energy was released then; an energy most ancient; an energy of the earth; an energy that began to follow the winding path created previously by some electrons that at an earlier time had followed the dark will of a particular computer hacker.

* * *

“SON OF A BITCH,” Skull said as he jerked his hand from the computer keyboard. He had never in his entire life experienced a static shock like that from a simple computer system. William signed off angrily then plopped down on his couch. If the damn thing hadn’t been so expensive, he would have kicked in the sleek, flat-screen, all-in-one computer monitor with his high-priced Nike. With a strange suddenness, a headache began to pound the vaunted gray matter behind his eyes and he began to feel weak and dizzy. Grimacing, he intentionally kicked over the tall Miller Genuine he had been swilling a few minutes earlier from its perch on the coffee table, sending foam and spray across the filthy carpet.

It was unfortunate for William the Skull that his roommate, Punch, was out of town for the weekend, for things took a turn for the worse. William rolled onto the floor, cradling his fevered head. Sweat rolled off his clammy brow and dripped off the chrome nose ring. Sight and sound seemed like a jumbled and swirling mass of light and pain. Conscious awareness and the thoughts that went with it gratefully faded away but there remained in William’s mind a night light of sorts; a small but potent mass of energy that now pulled at the strings of his psyche. His body followed suit, and with eyes glazed, he jerkily made his way toward the computer desk.

* * *

Cynthia “Crow” Redstar, holding her stop sign aloft, smiled warmly as the little red-haired girl in the pink parka walked daintily through the crosswalk and safely entered on to the curb. The girl turned briefly and waved a white mitten at Crow, who returned the wave then walked back to her post. She had used the past couple of weeks to heal her spirit and regain her balance with the forces of the earth. Her lost money would soon be replaced by the bank, and her plans for a scholarship fund would move forward along with the goodness that was her life.

* * *

The knock on the wooden door of the dorm room startled William “Skull” Hessberg, as well as his roommate, Punch Phillips, for it was not the

knock of an insecure college freshman or even a snotty hall captain. This was the resounding knock of someone who carried a power and authority that could cause harm of a more material nature. William, immediately suspicious, put down his beer and said, “Who is it?”

“Sergeant James Palka, state police. I’ve got a search warrant. You’ve got exactly five seconds to open the damn door before I bust it down.”

William spun for a moment in panic; there was no time to ditch the computer and other crap. Punch was frozen; like a deer caught in headlights. William moved toward the unlocked window with snaky thoughts of escape when a large boom occurred and the door flew inward and landed on the floor. The room-mates saw in a blur several real and not virtual uniformed men with drawn handguns rush toward them before they were pushed facedown on the carpet and immobilized.

After the initial tension had faded, the hacker was allowed the comfort of sitting up on the living room couch and the handcuffs were removed. When he finally regained the courage to use his voice, he said, “So what’s this all about? I sure hope you got your act together, because my mom and dad have a really good lawyer.”

Sgt. Palka was grinning, his face scrunched in amazement: “You ARE William Alexander Hessberg, aren’t you? I mean, I’ve got an arrest warrant for you in addition to the search warrant. You can’t really be *surprised* by all of this, can you?”

“What do you mean—surprised?” William’s eyes were wide.

The sergeant held up a thick manila file folder, said, “William, *you sent us everything*: the accounts you ripped, the facilities you hacked, the programs you developed, which, by the way, were quite impressive, I must admit. In my ten years of heading the computer and internet crimes division, I don’t think I have ever seen anyone better.”

William “Skull” Hessberg hung his head, overwhelmed and baffled.

Sgt. Palka added a final shot before taking his arrestee to the station: “Oh, and by the way, I love the way you signed your little confession: *world’s greatest hacker*. Nice touch: maybe you’ll be in the movie of the week; or better yet—you’ll get a book deal.”

THOMAS J. RICE grew up on a sheep farm in County Carlow, Ireland before emigrating to Sheffield, England and later, the U.S., in 1959. He is Chair and co-founder of The Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) which partners with other non-profits to promote social justice. He's been a farmer, construction worker, carpenter, bartender, tractor-driver, professor, social activist, researcher, consultant and non-fiction author/co-author of five books and dozens of articles. He attributes his passion for social justice to his rural Irish roots, which he recently explored in a memoir, *Far From the Land*, due for publication in 2009.

Border Calls

Thomas J. Rice

FINNEGAN WOKE at dawn, anxious and irritable. Something had roused him from a deep sleep. The soothing symphony of the Wicklow mountain morning—cattle, sheep, horses, mourning doves, and Border Collies exchanging signals across the valley—was off key. Clearing his head, Finnegan placed the problem. It was in the barking of the dogs. This was not the idle broadcast of sheepdogs impressing a distant or imagined rival. This canine chorus had the chilling ring of hunting dogs roused to a killing fever.

Instinctively, Finnegan sprang to the floor. With surprising agility for a man of six feet four, he flew across the room, threw open the second-story window and called Collins, his champion Border. Normally, the big dog was on duty day and night in the farmyard below his master's window. This morning, he was nowhere in sight. Wide awake now, sensing the danger at hand, Finnegan jumped into his clothes, ran downstairs and pulled on his Wellington boots. Anger, mixed with dread, began to rise in his chest as he grabbed his cap and blackthorn stick.

Rushing into the farmyard, he remembered his whistle and field glasses, reversing direction to fetch them from the kitchen cupboard. Feeling the cold, tiny whistle in his palm reminded him: this was the same instrument, the magic flute, that enabled the man-dog team to come away with a Blue Ribbon in the last four National sheepdog trials. In his mind's eye, he could still see the cheering, cap-waving crowd as he and Collins walked the winner's circle at the Curragh showgrounds in Kildare.

The memory was soothing. He recalled the Sunday afternoon he drove

the thirty crooked miles to Rathdrum to look at Eddie Doran's new litter. The dam, Wicklow Tess, was renowned for her brilliance and soft-eyed control at sheep trials. Doran knew his Borders—he'd bred her to Leinster Rock, a legendary stud known as far away as New Zealand. "L-Rock"—as he was known to his raving fans—had thrice taken "The Blue" at the Nationals, a record that stood until five years ago. That was when Collins won his fourth National in a row, besting his aging sire in a thrilling, head-to-head showdown.

Finnegan loved the puppy at first glance. He was clearly a champion, a big alpha male with unique markings and a joyful little bark that Finnegan heard as "take me home." Though there were six sturdy puppies in the litter, Finnegan saw only one. It was love at first sight, and it was mutual. He didn't even bother with the customary mouth check for the black roof, the one attribute all sheepmen associated with "starters"—the ones with the all-important herding instinct.

After four decades of training Borders, Finnegan knew the odds against drawing a true champion. They were not good. Out of a litter of six puppies, five should be "starters." Of twenty starters, one might be good enough to enter a trial. From sixty trial dogs, one can win a local event. A couple of wins will get your dog to the Scottish, Welsh, English or Irish National Trials, where eight hundred trial winners were winnowed to no more than fifteen dogs per nation. Since Ireland chooses only ten dogs, the odds are even more remote. Of the fifty-five national champions to run the International, only one is ranked supreme champion. The odds of picking such a champion from a litter: fifteen thousand to one. Not something you'd want to bet on.

The price of the puppy was fifty pounds, top money for pedigreed Borders. Finnegan would gladly have paid a hundred, but Eddie Doran was not a man to take advantage. He'd seen smitten sheepmen before; it just made him happy to know that his dogs went to handlers worthy of the bloodline. Finnegan was known to be worthy. Over the years, he'd produced a string of fine champions, and one legendary dog, Parnell. They'd won the International at Cardiff, Scotland back in 1958, an experience so ecstatic Finnegan gave up all hopes of a repeat. Until that Sunday afternoon in Doran's barn.

Finnegan remembered the first night at home with his prize pup. Separated from Tess and the litter, the poor little fellow was disconsolate. He cried for hours, until Finnegan finally brought him upstairs and made a nest for him at the foot of his bed. Both went immediately to sleep, blissfully bonded. That settled the sleeping arrangements for the next six months, until the pup outgrew Finnegan's tolerance for having a huge, alert Border Collie jumping in and out of bed at all hours of the night.

It took only four months for the puppy to become a dog and show his pedigree. At seven weeks, Finnegan took him up to the paddock where

he kept the ewes. This was the decisive test. Would he have the right stuff? Finnegan never doubted the answer, but it still amazed him to watch the tiny creature go into full crouch and lay the hard eye on the ewes. Controlled intimidation. Perfect. He even looked back at Finnegan for direction.

After that, it was as though a switch marked "Herd" had been thrown. First, Collins herded the ducks; then the chickens. Soon, he graduated to the turkeys, and finally, the children. At six months he was ready to do the work of a professional Border Collie. In all his years, Finnegan had never seen such raw talent. Even Parnell didn't start this strong. His fantasy of winning another International turned to possibility, and with it grew a pure love of this gifted dog.

Goddammit, where is he? Yanked from his reverie, Finnegan stepped into the farmyard talking to himself, as usual. Calm down. Maybe he's just out in the haggard chasing a rabbit. Or warning off foxes with a show of force. After all, this is not the first time the dog strayed. Only last year, he slipped off to meet Becky and Brendan and escort them home from school in Bray. That was three miles away. And he was back before anyone missed him. Yes. He's probably within whistling range....

Calmer and hopeful now, Finnegan blew a long, high-pitched signal, faint to the human ear. If Collins were in range, it said: "Get here, right now! This is urgent!" Before today, nothing had ever stopped the champ from responding to that special whistle. After two more tries, Finnegan gave up. Collins was definitely outside the one-mile earshot range. Or, he was too preoccupied to notice; maybe even knowingly defiant of the command. The thought both angered and terrified the sheepman, given the implications.

A sense of dread began to creep up Finnegan's spine. The curse a God on that dog. Was this not what Packie Murphy had hinted about last Friday night when they met in the doorway of Malone's Pub? "I'd mind that dog of yours Finnegan, if I were you. There's been some sheep-killin' over on Carrigoonna Commons." Finnegan flared at his meddling neighbor to the point that Mick Malone had to separate the two men. Murphy protested he was only trying to give some good advice. "Sure I'd hate to see any harm come to yer fine champion there. No offense intended."

Like hell! Murphy had always been a begrudger. How dare the bastard suggest that Collins might be mixed up in the most despicable crime known to the Wicklow hill country: sheep-killing. Half-breeds and mongrels, the kind Murphy and his ilk bred, might stoop to that kind of thing. But never, never, his fine thoroughbred. Besides, Collins loved sheep, protecting them time and again from foxes and sheep-killers.

But what if Murphy was right? Finnegan's mind raced as he struggled to quell the doubt crowding in. Could it be true? Could this be the same dog he had raised from cuddly puppy to national champion? The one

with the distinctive markings: all white face with two black eyes, perfectly symmetrical. The rest, classic Border: jet black coat, white socks, snow-white chest, collar and tip. The children started calling him “The Lone Ranger,” inspired by the black mask. But Finnegan was determined to call him after his boyhood hero, the youthful Commander of the real IRA. Collins it would be! The warrior.

Nonetheless, the Lone Ranger label stuck. Now, “Rangers” sired by Collins were coveted—however partial the mask—and brought twice the price of maskless littermates. Already, this dog had brought more fame and fortune, in premium stud fees, to Finnegan and the Wicklow Sugarloaf range than all his forerunners combined. Even the great Parnell had never been so popular. Part of it was Collins’ personality. He was compulsively upbeat, always seeming to smile and greet people. If he were human, he’d run for office. Surely, he couldn’t be mixed up in this....

It was time to find out the truth.

Finnegan’s farm carved a triangle high in the western foothills of Sugarloaf Mountain. From this elevation, he had a full view of the grazing range. Charging into the paddock, he could hear echoes of the pack in full battle cry bouncing off the cliffs; their location was hard to place. Training his Nikon field glasses, Finnegan followed the stone fence line down to where it connected the mountain to the lush green rectangles in the valley. He scanned the steep peak and its purple foothills. Rain clouds rose in ragged wisps from the mountaintop; it would be another damp Irish Sunday.

Directly below, on the valley floor, was Carrigoona Commons, a designated free grazing range for local farmers. Patches of fog shrouded the meadow, restricting Finnegan’s line of sight. Still, focusing the Nikon, he could catch glimpses of a large flock of sheep moving quickly toward Antrim Corner, a natural pen bounded by rock face on three sides.

The sheepmen used it as a shearing corral every spring. Finnegan kept losing track of the flock in the fog until, slowly, the last patch lifted, revealing the full contours of this grizzly parade.

About a hundred pregnant ewes stumbled awkwardly in tight formation. The pace was urgent, unnatural to the practiced eye of a sheepman. A surging pack of Border Collies, white-tipped tails bobbing, were driving the flock brutally. Unlike the graceful arcs run “outside”—that invisible space never broken by disciplined sheepdogs—this pack showed no such restraint. Snarling and snapping, they tore at the hindquarters of the terrified ewes. Even at this distance, Finnegan could make out the leader of the pack: a big, black dog, with the commanding presence of Collins, inciting a dozen or so smaller dogs. Just like Collins, the pack leader covered the full arc of the flock. The others worked the flanks. In vain, Finnegan concentrated on the leader, seeking a glimpse of the head. But the dogs were in too close to the herd for him to get a clear view. He

would simply have to wait for the right opening.

Ominous rain clouds spread across the mountain as Finnegan jogged across the ploughed field toward the first fence. A jumble of dark scenarios whirred through his mind. If Collins were involved, this could cost him a fortune! What if this ordeal caused these prize Cheviots to abort before term? Jimmy Doyle, a hard-working neighbor from up the range, had built this flock from seven ewe lambs. He'd borrowed the money to buy them ten years ago. Even if Finnegan managed to head off the pack, the aftermath could be devastating to this sensitive breed. And one way or the other, he'd have to do something about Collins if he turned out to be the ringleader. But what? He could barely stand the thought, yet feared he would have to face up to it.

He could already hear Packie Murphy cackling, "I warned ya Finnegan, but ya wouldn't listen, would ya?" Right now, the begrudger would be gleefully viewing this from his perch further up the ridge. This being Sunday, the gossip would be buzzing across the entire valley by the end of Mass this morning. Jaysus, Mary and Joseph give me guidance now. I can't for the life of me see the silver lining to this one....

Finnegan was halfway there and seemed to be winning the race. To get an angle on Antrim Corner, he had to cut across the top of Dwyer's bog, which dipped before rising sharply onto Sally Gap; this placed him directly above the pen.

Though he'd lost sight of the sheep while crossing the bog, the yelping of the dogs grew louder and he could now hear the stricken bleating of the ewes. A lifetime of sheep farming told him they were already in a bad way. Bleeding and in agony. The pack was having a field day.

The image of helpless, pregnant ewes—so gentle and trusting—being torn on the run acted like a spur in Finnegan's flanks. The rage of a protector engulfed him, driving out all other concern. As he topped the ridge to begin his descent to the corral, his singular thought was justice and, yes, revenge. By God, this would never happen to another head of sheep on Carrigoona Commons. He would see to that and see to it now. Murphy and the other begrudgers would not have to tell him what he should or shouldn't have done. T.J. Finnegan would be judge, jury and executioner in this trial. He would soon have all the evidence he needed.

The rain broke now in a steady downpour across the mountain. It blew in from the Atlantic and drove down the Sugarloaf. Drenched, Finnegan lost sight of the flock under the ledge. He slid across the last stone fence, slipping and cursing the worn Wellingtons, before reaching Antrim Corner. The pack had beaten him to it, but barely. As he gained his footing and squeezed through the sycamores, the killing was already under way. Two ewes were down and bleeding badly; three others off to the right were being savaged by a tangle of snarling collies. The dogs, normally black and white, were a gore of black, white and red. Soaking

in the rain, he could see their muzzles dripping blood, gone wild in their killing frenzy. Their high-pitched yelps, so unlike Borders, reminded Finnegan of hyenas he'd seen on a National Geographic Special.

Charging into the corral, he gripped the blackthorn stick and blew his trademark "LIE DOWN!" command on the whistle. Normally, Borders dropped in their tracks at this command. Today, it went unheeded. If anything, the pack seemed more driven to the killing by the whistle. Confused, Finnegan stuck the whistle back in his pocket and searched for Collins.

If only I can get control of the pack leader, maybe the rest will back off, he thought. Cowards and curs have no guts without the leader. The big dog was on the opposite side of the flock, head down, savaging a dying ewe. Finnegan yelled at the top of his lungs: "Collins! Collins! Heel! Heel! Curse a God on ya, Heel!" Still no response.

Anger was now replaced by desperation. He flailed at the killers with the blackthorn stick to no avail. They simply snarled, undaunted, and charged at another victim. Working his way toward the leader, it dawned on Finnegan that he might be in personal danger. What if these curs turn on me? The blackthorn won't be worth a spit. Why the hell didn't I bring the shotgun? I've gotta get to Collins and break him down; that'll scatter these mongrels in a hurry.

Now he was within a few strides of the big dog. The massive hind-quarters faced him, tail straight out, head buried in wool and gore. Finnegan's fury returned at the sight. He brought the full weight of the blackthorn to bear twice on the ribcage of the killer. Snarling in pain, the dog whirled to face the attack. What Finnegan saw brought relief and terror at once. The big angular head, dripping blood, was all jet black. Not a trace of white or Ranger mask to be seen. It was definitely not Collins. Finnegan immediately recognized the dog as Packie Murphy's Ben, a big Belgian-Alsatian mongrel. How could I have mistaken this monster for my fine champion? And where in the name of Jaysus is that dog of mine when I need him?

Like the rest of the pack, the lead sheep-killer was uncowed by the blackthorn's blows. Instinctively, all trace of domestication gone, he charged at his human tormentor. A primal growl issued from deep in his chest, as he flew at Finnegan's throat. Aware of his handicap in the Wellingtons on wet grass, Finnegan managed to sidestep the first charge. He landed another blow with the blackthorn stick, but the killer was not impressed. He now assumed a stalking crouch and moved toward Finnegan like a predator with a cornered prey. It was only a matter of time and tactics.

Behind him, two other Borders joined the attack. Finnegan, fighting off panic, started to back toward the stone fence. The dogs, who were consummate hunters, moved to cut off his escape. Six more dogs moved

to join them. Finnegan felt his saliva dry up and the Wellingtons slip on the sodden grass. He swung the stick, screaming in terror and bravado, to keep the snapping, snarling dogs at bay. Oh Mother of Jaysus, is this any way for a man to die—being mauled by a bunch of mongrels? There's only one thing for it—I'll have to make a dash for the top of that stone ditch fence. Maybe hammer a few mongrel's skulls on the way. My arm is getting tired. Five more minutes of this and they'll have me. Why didn't I bring that shotgun?

As he inched toward the fence, a new noise came in over the din of the pack. At first it was indistinguishable in the echo chamber of the pen. Then it came in louder. And clearer. It was Collins' familiar bark, coming from the other side of the corral. The pack, too, heard it. They froze for a moment, just enough for Finnegan to make his move. As he spun to scale the stone fence, the Wellingtons slipped from under him. He landed on his back and Ben was on him in a flash, tearing at his flesh with massive jaws. In that instant, Collins cleared the fence like a steeplechaser, with two feet to spare. His nimble frame landed squarely in center of the pack, scattering them in a tangle of confusion.

Finnegan rolled free of the writhing, snapping jaws in time to see Collins home in on Ben. His left hand and chest were bleeding profusely, but he felt only relief flow with the blood. With Collins by his side, they stood a fighting chance. Retrieving the blackthorn stick from the mud, he turned to join the fray. But in an instant, the need had vanished.

Ready to fight for his life, Finnegan instead found himself a bystander in a drama scripted long ago by canine nature. The powerful presence of Collins had signalled new pack leadership. Instinctively, the natural followers had withdrawn, leaving the battlefield to the natural leaders. It was left up to Collins and Ben to settle the question.

Ben stood three inches taller than Collins and outweighed him by thirty pounds. The Alsatian bloodline made him broader in shoulder and loins. But what the Border lacked in size, he made up for in speed and fighting spirit. They tore into each other with savage abandon. At first, it was simply a scene of black and white paws, jaws and ribcages clashing and rolling on the wet, bloody turf. Soon it settled into a more deadly match of wills and tactics, each combatant searching for an opening. Ben, at first the aggressor, seemed to shift to a defensive posture as Collins inflicted terrible, slashing wounds on his muzzle and underbelly.

Suddenly, it was over. Ben gave up, exposing his jugular to Collins as the Border came in for the kill. The move arrested Collins in his tracks. Submission is never abused in the Border culture. Ben dropped to the ground and rolled over on his back, cringing before his new leader. Collins turned away and cocked his leg in disdain. Surrender accepted. Anxiously, he cast his eyes toward Finnegan, now leaning, tattered, against the fence.

They faced each other in grim triumph. Where the hell were you? Another five minutes and I'd have been a goner, ya know. Don't ever leave me like that again! Finnegan opened his arms and Collins tried to jump into them, their trademark victory ritual. But Collins was too weak to jump and Finnegan realized he would've been too weak to catch him if he had. This trial was different alright. No cheering crowds, no ribbons, no offers to buy. Just dead ewes and sheep-killing dogs to deal with. Wearily, Finnegan picked up the blackthorn stick and headed for Jimmy Doyle's to break the bad news. Collins limped along at his heels.

Later, washed and bandaged, cycling to Mass in Enniskerry, Finnegan fell in beside Matt Gibson, his pint-sized neighbor from the other side of the range. Near the chapel, the little farmer, oblivious to the morning's drama, grinned and whispered conspiratorially. "Ya know, Finnegan, you ought to keep that champion of yours locked up. Our Nell is in heat and he spent the night in our barn. I suppose you'll be expectin' stud fees if they come out Rangers." Finnegan smiled faintly, stepped into the church, crossed himself and knelt to pray.

JOHN DUNCAN TALBIRD's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Wascana Review*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review* and the anthology *Literature Across Cultures*, to name a few. He is an English professor at Queensborough Community College-CUNY where he teaches writing and film studies. A writer-in-residence at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, he's on the editorial board of *Green Hills Literary Lantern* and a frequent contributor to *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*.

My Dear Son

John Duncan Talbird

YOU ARE A beautiful dancer, so graceful, like an Oriental fighter. Your feet hitting the stage in hard shoes, arms out like a cross, fingers snapping. So proud and full of love. It makes me sad to say I've seen your death: Tomorrow, the final number, your fellow dancers turned loose like animals, snarling and stomping, drummers thundering, leaps taking you to the lights, you will die. Yes, die, cease to exist. Don't ask me how. That is why you cannot, must not, perform. As your mother, I forbid it.

So talented. I love your dedication to your art, your studies, first, with Cynthia Manuella, then the great master, Geoffrey Minsk. You have put so much into your dancing, and have traveled so far from the young boy with slicked hair, taps on shoes, gleaming teeth, jazz hands, a wave to your mama.

I don't want you to think of what I have sacrificed—filled credit cards, that awful job cleaning bathrooms and hallways in your old high school, the move—after your father's death, God bless his soul—to this much smaller fifth-floor walk-up. I am nothing. I just want your happiness. And how can you be happy, or I, if you—my one child—dies tomorrow, even if you die in the throes of your one great love?

It calls to mind your father, the promise in that beautiful man. He had his paintings shown at the *Humeur de Fromage*. At thirty-three, a solo show at the *Humeur de Fromage*! And he, as you very well know, also died on the night of his triumph.

You, I know, are not “superstitious.” However, mark this “coincidence”: Your opening night tomorrow takes place exactly twelve years to the day from your father's death: On the first night of *Carnaval*. I also

foresaw his demise and he refused to heed my warning although he knew I had the sight. He looked at me from the corner of his eye and buttoned his shirt, combed his hair off his forehead, shoved me to the bed when I blocked the doorway. I could not bear to attend his opening, and, as you know, never saw him alive again.

This sounds grandiose, staged, not real, the stuff of play-acting: I read what I wrote above, and wonder if I didn't watch it in a movie, or see it in my dreams. And I think of your father's car sliding from a bank in the rain and see his lips somehow spread into a smile as if taunting me. I feel that I shouldn't have had to see your father in a drawer like a pair of socks, pale as if bleached, eyes closed and sunken so that I wanted to peel his lids back and make sure his brown eyes hadn't been stolen. He was sucked of life and even the evidence of his death. His hands, those beautiful, thin fingers which had held a paintbrush like an extension of his fingers, were under a sheet whiter than skin, and I wanted to touch them, but felt shy, as if it wasn't right. That clinic man in his white smock, staring, said, "Well?"

The funeral arrangements, consoling family, and I held you tight so you knew you still had me though you didn't now have a father (a father you surely knew was too stubborn to listen to his clairvoyant wife since our argument must have traveled to your room where you pretended sleep), the insurance men (who, it turns out, had less to offer me, us, since Papa had been borrowing against the equity under my, our, nose for years), the scraping together of change and crumpled bills to put your father in the ground as befits a Christian, the dry, gritty dirt between my fingers, that light clumping against the rosewood lid, sun glint on brass handles, dirt without moisture so that I thought: *How did this happen?* Your papa died in a thunderstorm, how could the soil I was planting him in be so dry?

I miss your father's car. Now, I seem tied to the city: the five floors to the street, the subway to the produce market, the bus to work cleaning up after children in headphones. Their pants are baggy, yet their laughs are the same, the same as when you were them. That car: we would get in it and drive, to the beach maybe, or the woods. Remember that day in the Catskill Mountains with your brother? (Where was he during your father's funeral? Perhaps he was too young to attend and we left him with a babysitter? Or maybe he hadn't been born yet, perhaps that's it.) Your father had painted a ray gun—they were calling it "pop art." But it was so real! Pop art seems like comic books, doesn't it? Your father had brought that ray gun with us to the woods and you and your brother wanted to shoot it at boulders. But your father, very patient and kind said, "No, my sons, you must not disintegrate boulders with the ray gun. The vaporized rock might be inhaled by campers and who knows what harm it could do? Anyway, people come to the woods for quiet. You have to think of others." It makes me weep to think of that man's kindness. And the cats

were with us, Leo and Fluffy, frolicking on the trail, sun down through the overhead branches and speckling us with kind warmth. Oh, if you were to see them now (but I know you're busy with rehearsals and don't hold it against you for visiting me infrequently), but you'd hardly recognize them: fat, lethargic, barely moving but to the food dish and water, the litter box and that patch of light moving slowly across the carpet as the sun sets. But then, oh then, they were kittens chasing each other's tails, Leo biting into Fluffy's scruff as if he might mount her although they were fixed—but instinct never leaves, does it? And then they chased the tarantula! Who knew there'd be tarantulas in the Catskills? I was afraid it would bite them and your father was willing to shoot the spider with the ray gun, but I wouldn't hear of it. I walked right up in my brand new high heels and crushed it. It felt like stepping on a boneless hand as I drove my heel through its center.

I can already see you like your father in a drawer in a morgue, only visible from the chest up. Eyes closed, head to the side (someone's taken the trouble of combing your hair, as if you were an actor in a daytime soap opera, sleeping). Outside the flags all hang at half mast in the day, numbers which might be dates in my mind, our lives flickering on the screen of sunlight, words in a foreign tongue tickling my eardrums and I have no one (except your younger brother, but he's not here. What does he do with his time?)

Your brother, Hans, comes in once a day to make me lunch and dinner, to hang pictures, wash dishes and take out the trash. He's a good boy, so attentive, bringing with him the slight scent of cheese. Sometimes, like today, I'll say, "Son, please give me a nice bottle of Spanish wine. Tomorrow is *Carnaval* and soon I'll abjure wine and red meat for forty days, the mark of my husband's, your father's, burnt car on my forehead. A red table wine to warm my bones and help the circulation." He'll open the bottle like a waiter, towel he's been drying my cups with draped over an arm, a pencil line moustache on either side of his nose, allow me to sniff the cork, to swirl the wine in its glass, nod and let him fill and then continue about his bustling (the sweet boy, he needs a girl. Do you think he might be...? No, I can't bare to think it). I watch the bombs raining down on the city, shot from submarines floating in the Hudson. If I were to peer out my window, I'd see the streets speckled with bull's eyes. But I'm content on my couch, blanket wrapped around me, the two cats chasing the setting sun in slow motion.

When your brother leaves, the cats will retire to the bedroom to curl up on the quilt, cleaning the spots each can't reach behind the other's ears, vibrating with purrs, a murmur in the dusk. Since you are stubborn, I will drink my wine and wait for your mentor, Cynthia Minsk, to call and whisper into the phone: "He danced like a genius and the crowd wept above their applauding hands. But, alas, he died, lightning striking, car

flying out of control. You must go to identify his body. Only you can do this." I'll walk with weary hunched back to my dresser for a shawl, slide out the old wooden drawer and there I'll see him: Our Lord, Jesus Christ, face to the side, eyes closed as if sleeping. He will arise and when his eyes open they'll blaze with electricity and I'll place a crown upon his head. He will smile upon me and lead me to you.

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*. Set in Switzerland, *To Travel the Distance* is a novel-length work in progress that has been serialized in the *NOR* for five years. It deals with the nostalgic longings and nagging dislocation of Ulyssa Segantini, a character who first appeared in Schraner's short story, "Dream Dig," published by *The Journey Prize Anthology*, 2001. Her book, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*, was published in November 2006.

To Travel the Distance (The Serialized Saga of Ulyssa Segantini)

Margrith Schraner

Chapter 11

ULYSSA WORRIED about the lateness of the hour. Half of the village square was already lying in shadow, like a sundial, by the time she left the store. Tomas was waiting for her in Savognin; it would take half an hour for her to get there, even if she hurried. She followed the *Veia Riom* that wound its way down the hillside, past the field where the young women earlier had been raking hay into rows in the traditional fashion. A rusty, old plough stood idle, if not forgotten, in an empty field adjacent to a barn. A perfect emblem, she would tell Tomas, of the hardship the peasants in the valley had endured.

She had left the familiar sight of the old burg well behind when she began to feel the pounding at her temples. Seeking respite from the heat, she allowed herself a brief rest in the shade of an apple tree, watching a flock of sheep grazing on the hillside and tearing off a piece from the peasant loaf in her backpack now and then to stuff in her mouth. Hastening on again, she crossed the squat little Roman bridge down by the river, and then doubled back along the *Stradung*, where the Cresta Palace hotel was located. Tomas had assured her it would be easy to find, a prominent hotel near the post office, the entrance set back from the street, in a small courtyard with two or three large chestnut trees. He had handed Ulyssa a tourist map. She had looked closely at the place he had marked with a red circle. They would be meeting inside, at the Ramona, Tomas had said. The entrance to the restaurant was just off the lobby. It was Titziana at the *Trais Fluors* who had recommended the restaurant to him. Apparently, the Ramona was an independently owned, boutique-type restaurant that

featured a colorful, Romansh cuisine Tiziana said they might find appealing.

It wasn't officially suppertime yet when Ulyssa arrived. She was perspiring profusely by the time she got there, but at least she would be able to relax now that she had found the red circle on the map. She stopped only briefly to read the menu posted near the entrance.

The Ramona, it turned out, was a rather small, windowless restaurant, shaped like a corridor and paneled in the traditional Engadine style. The chairs were of a pleasing, blond color, made from the wood of the rock pine. Only three tables lined the walls on either side. A painting hung above each of the tables, and the little spotlights that were mounted above each one exuded a soft glow that imbued the place with an air of quiet elegance.

The place was nearly empty. Tomas, having arrived before her, rose from the table at once and pulled out a chair for her. She felt rather self-conscious; her street clothes were no match for the elegance of the place. She briefly glanced at the reproduction of a painting that hung on the wall. It comprised a winter's scene, where two young women, scantily dressed, floated amidst the denuded limbs of some scrub trees. She quickly stuffed her backpack out of sight, below the table. Then she sat down and Tomas pushed in the chair for her.

"You look tired," he said. "What has taken you so long?" He spoke to her *sotto voce*, although they were the only people in the restaurant. Her heart had started racing again; a trickle of sweat ran down along her temples. Her hands felt hot and sticky. "I can't take the heat," she told him, exasperated, brushing stray hair away from her forehead. "It's much too hot to talk. And besides, shouldn't we have something to eat, first?"

"I'd prefer to have a drink, first," Tomas said. "I've taken the liberty of ordering a bottle of *Pinot blanc*; the waitress assured me it would go well with almost any dish."

He'd had a bit of a chat with her, he told Ulyssa. "She's new here; from Ascona," he added, speaking in a confidential, whispering voice. Apparently she had been away at university for her freshman year. Her subject of study was philosophy; waiting on tables was her summer job. She had started work at the restaurant the day before. He had been teasing her, he told Ulyssa. He had asked her whether she had a boyfriend yet.

Ulyssa had turned around when, as if on cue, the waitress emerged from behind the bar. She looked to be a sophisticated young thing, judging from the black hair she wore pulled back neatly into a ponytail. She gave them both a friendly smile as she rotated the bottle of wine nestled among ice cubes in a silver bucket that sat to one side of their table. She left only briefly before coming back with a plate of appetizers on a wooden cutting board that was laden with rolled-up slices of traditional, air-dried beef amidst an attractive display of tomato wedges and gherkins. "It's one of

our specialties,” she informed them, her arm brushing against Tomas’s elbow as she set down the plate. “They’re cut paper-thin, so you can eat lots of them.”

“I simply couldn’t hold off any longer,” Tomas told Ulyssa by way of apology. He was eating rapidly. “I’ve always loved finger food,” he said, picking up the beef slices with his fingers and stuffing them directly into his mouth. “I was pretty hungry.” He was crunching down on a gherkin and reaching for another slice of beef when the waitress came back with a basket of French bread. She pulled the bottle of wine from the silver bucket and uncorked it, then poured the customary sip into Tomas’s glass for him to taste. The wine appeared to be of a yellowish green color. It gleamed in the low light—like peridot, the semi-precious stone, Ulyssa thought, or Pernod, perhaps, before the addition of water turned it milky.

Tomas lifted his glass. “*A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread,*” he began, winking at Ulyssa. “*And Thou—beside me, singing in the wilderness,*” he added, taking his first sip.

“The wine will do, then?” asked the waitress and Tomas nodded his approval.

Ulyssa reached for a slice of bread. “At least, one of us is happy,” she said, feeling suddenly irritable due to the heat she had had to endure. “An Omar Khayyám you are *not*,” she told him, seized by an irrational need to set him straight. “And neither is this the wilderness.”

He gave her a searching look. “You’re not trying to edit my observations, again, are you? I’ve tried my best; I even went so far as to find you the best view in the restaurant.” He nodded at the painting. “What’s the matter? Don’t you like it?”

“It makes me shiver with delight,” she told him, “especially the agonized presence of the damsels, caught so frigidly amongst the withering branches of those scraggy bushes.”

Tomas put down his glass. “I selected this table with you in mind,” he said. “I thought the snow and ice might help to chill you out a bit.”

“You can’t be serious,” she said, her breath oddly rasping now in her throat. She hadn’t eaten a thing all day, she explained, and here he was, expecting her to appreciate a piece of art. Whoever heard of a painting that would ease the devastating, delirious effects of an endlessly hot and sultry day?

Tomas looked up, full of uncertainty. If only momentarily, she berated herself for having doused the flames of his enthusiasm. “Why don’t you finish making your toast,” she said, as if he needed reminding.

Tomas lifted his glass. “A glass of wine, to toast the loaf of bread—*Oh, wilderness were paradise enow.*” He leaned back in his chair and gave the painting an appraising look. “To the Alpine Sirens, then,” he said, the timbre of his voice suggesting reverence. “Ah.” He let out his breath in a sigh. “Aren’t they simply gorgeous?” His words trailed off,

became another sigh.

Ulyssa turned toward the painting. It depicted a wintry scene; the vast expanse of frozen lowlands, glistening and serene, was presided over by a lofty mountain range that spanned the entire upper width of the painting. The undulating strands of the young woman's coppery hair on the right looked as if caught in the dark branches of the tree protruding from the snow. On closer inspection, she discovered other, similar figures in the distance, looking suspended, as if in some vast silence. Bare-armed and chastely swathed in shroud-like, flowing garments, these damsels appeared to be floating on their backs—or rather, they were hovering, trance-like, several feet above the snowy plain. Although the painting was a reproduction, it was of excellent quality. Ulyssa bent closer to inspect the brush strokes that were comprised of countless, thread-like filaments of white, gold and blue paint, coalescing to give off an impression of scintillating warmth. Only the warmth, it seemed, was paradoxical; the sensation conveyed was one of icy warmth.

She looked back at Tomas. "They're rather scantily clad, the young women in this painting, don't you think?"

Tomas did not respond. "What I like about this painting is the implied mysticism," he began. His voice sounded as though amplified. Was it an effect produced by the grotto-like environs of the restaurant, or was it her hearing? Perhaps he was intending to be heard from several tables away?

Looking around, Ulyssa saw the waitress busily putting a fresh tablecloth on the table across from theirs.

"Thematically, of course, on the surface, I would say it's all rather simple, don't you think? Just have a look: Here they are, the pretty damsels—floating apparitions, I would call them—looking every bit as though they'd been dispatched to Siberia." He paused to clear his throat. "They're off to somewhere. They're being transported, I mean." Tomas appeared to have been seized by an unusual, feverish sort of enthusiasm. He was going on and on about the painting. "It's pretty obvious that they're headed for another shore," he presently said, leaning forward in his chair. "Some far and distant shore—of a particular kind, I would say."

Ulyssa humored him. "Which shore might you be alluding to, pray tell?"

The waitress, who was now laying out the cutlery and the cloth napkins, which were folded into elaborate shapes resembling bishop's hats, looked over at them, an amused smile on her lips.

Tomas had ignored her question, but he was now making other observations about the painting. It seemed to Ulyssa that he was pulling words out of a magician's hat. He was talking about the skin of the Alpine maidens, now. Their skin, he said, looked as though it was lit from within. It was glowing, due, he said, to the fact that it was suffused by a blush of pink. He stopped himself. "Very attractive, I would say," he added,

breathing in audibly. “Very attractive, indeed.”

It was his choice of words that alerted her. She saw right through his pretensions. You may be posing as an erudite scholar, but you’re not going to pull the wool over my eyes, she wanted to tell him. It was overblown, the sensuality of his language; the erotic words were a dead giveaway. Early on, when they had first met, Tomas had made it a project of his to introduce her to Finnish literature. He would translate passages for her, aloud, and rather badly, too, explaining that these were to be seen as examples of bad literature. “Bah, bah, black sheep,” she had teased him. “Bah, bah, bah-ad literature.” But she had listened to him just the same, lying beside him on the bed in his little house on the banks of the Similkameen River while he translated directly from the original, passages that were unbelievably awkward. No, no, he had protested, putting up one hand. It wasn’t his translation that was at fault. It was all there, in the original text, all that stuff about the lover’s attentions, about him caressing her breasts, and about his hands, seeking her bush—fingers fluttering there, like moths caught in a lampshade.

The passages had been clumsy and pathetic. They had jostled her funny bone. She had laughed until her sides hurt. It wasn’t long after that when he brought up the subject of his first love, Bay-Atta. Ulyssa could still hear the odd manner in which he had pronounced her name. The memory had even made him hold his breath, it seemed. She had been Finnish, an innocent girl from Lohtaja, of Swedish ancestry. His tone had been confessional—halting words that described their first erotic encounter. It was a long time ago, he had assured her; back in Finland, in his youth. Ulyssa had been lying on the bed next to him and was looking up at the ceiling when he had started on the tour of that particular memory. There was something about the pallor of Bay-Atta’s skin, he had said, the masses of undulating hair she had worn tied in a knot. He had seen her loosen the knot only once. It had been an amazing sight; those long, blond tresses, cascading down over her shoulders, barely concealing her breasts.

“Ahh,” he had moaned, summing up the experience. *Bay-Atta*. She had reminded him of the Venus painted by Botticelli, he had said.

Tomas was still staring at the painting beside the table. Just then, the waitress sidled up to the wine bottle in the silver bucket and handed them each a leather-bound menu. Again, she stood at Tomas’s elbow—much too close, Ulyssa thought.

“Why don’t we order some food,” she reminded him, “and let the waitress get on with her other duties? However, I do agree with you, the technique displayed in this painting shows great accomplishment. Have you noticed the echo the painter has set up—between the faint rose of the young women’s skin and the faintly pink light that seems to be bathing the mountain tops?”

“You mean the alpenglow?” Tomas had always been fond of the word alpenglow. “But what’s the painter’s name? I can’t seem to remember it. There was another famous painting by him—*Beata Beatrix*, I think.” He gave the waitress a broad smile. “Bay-Atta,” he repeated, glancing up at the ceiling. “Blessed Beatrix—the most famous example of his work.”

“You must know the painter I’m speaking of?” He looked helplessly to Ulyssa and then to the waitress for help. “He tends to paint his women with coppery hair—great, voluminous masses of it, too. And then, most notable of all, is the exquisite pallor of their skin, augmented by the mere suggestion of a blush, resulting in what I would call a sublime translucence.”

“I think the wine has gone to your head,” Ulyssa told him. “You’re getting awfully poetic.”

“To poetry.” The waitress, smiling, gave Tomas an encouraging nod.

“Besides, the pallor is misleading.” Ulyssa made a face. “The women of those times were all anemic, I’m sure.”

The waitress touched Tomas’s arm. “The painter was a Pre-Raphaelite, if I’m not mistaken.”

“What was his name, again?” Tomas snapped his fingers as though it might help Ulyssa to remember. “Come on—it’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“Don’t look at me,” Ulyssa said. “You’re the one who professes to be familiar with this painter, not I.”

“*Not I said the pie.*” Tomas gave Ulyssa a meaningful smile. He drank from his wine glass and turned to the waitress. “I like this wine. It has a fine, subtle, fruity nose. It’s soft to the palate; mellow, and distinctly elegant.”

“*Viva!*” The waitress smiled agreeably. She picked up the bottle and refilled both their glasses. “To Dante Gabriel Rossetti,” she said, placing the bottle back in the silver bucket. “He is among my favorite painters.”

Tomas appeared nonplussed. “You’re familiar with the painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so. Not exactly.” The waitress blushed, seemingly embarrassed to be standing there, in front of them. She smoothed down the front of her short apron that was trimmed with lace, the white of the cotton standing out beautifully against the black of her skirt. Her fingernails were manicured, shellacked a tasteful shade of pink. “I took a couple of courses in philosophy and art history, earlier this spring,” she told them, as if to apologize. “Would you like to place your dinner order now?”

Tomas took a quick look at the menu. “The wine seems a perfect accompaniment to white meat,” he said. “It begs for some of the jugged hare that Ernest Hemingway wrote about in his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*. I’d be willing to give something like that a try. But then, the venison with chestnut sauce might be another, excellent choice.”

"I'm afraid we're nowhere near the hunting season," the waitress informed him. "Those are our hunting season specialties. During the summer, we offer other culinary delights—*Capuns*, for instance, or the *Bizocals cun ravitscha*."

"Sure, why not," Tomas said impulsively. "We might as well try one of each."

"Why not," the waitress echoed and walked away, back to the kitchen to place the order. Tomas watched her disappear through the door behind the bar.

Ulyssa said she thought the Alpine Macaroni might have been a better choice for Tomas. It was a savory dish, she told him, traditionally prepared by cowherds and cooked in a large cauldron over a fire, with milk and cheese from the alp for the most part, supplemented by whatever else they might have managed to lug up the mountainside in their packs.

"It sounds too bland," he said. "Nor did I see it on the menu."

"Cheese from the alps is savory," Ulyssa told him. "By the way, I bought a big chunk of it today, at the Riom village store—for our hike tomorrow with Maria Teresa and Walter."

Tomas had yet to meet Walter and Maria Teresa. "Did your cousin mention to you when she called last night that they were planning to take us up to the high alpine meadows?"

"The alpine meadows of Radons? Oh, Tomas, I can hardly wait. I've had so much excitement already; I'm not sure I can take much more."

"What do you mean?"

Ulyssa didn't quite know where to begin. Should she tell him about Tatta and Duri who owned the village store in Riom? She imagined Tomas looking at her, bemused: "Tatta and Duri? Who are they—a couple of fairy-tale characters?" And then, of course, there was the question of Ida Janutin. What a coincidence, that the woman who used to help out at the store should turn out to be Tatta's aunt. Ulyssa could still hear Duri's remark: "Who knows whose fate might be intermingled with ours?" Or should she tell Tomas about the black and white photograph with the beveled edges that Tatta had pulled out of a drawer, and which proved beyond a doubt that the woman leaning out of the second-story window of the old house with the peeling façade was indeed the *Fräulein* Janutin Ulyssa had known as a child? She had suddenly remembered Miss Janutin's glasses—upon seeing the sun refracting from the small, round lenses. Her house, Tatta said, had indeed been situated at the bend in the road.

Still, Ulyssa hesitated about saying anything. Tomas would most likely respond with a shrug. "That's wonderful," he would say. "But what does it prove—that everyone in the village is related to everyone else? There's some poetry in that, I guess, but nothing more."

"*Viva!*" Ulyssa said, raising her glass. "The time has come for me to

propose a toast.”

Tomas looked up from reading the menu, expectant.

She raised her glass higher and thrust her chin at the mountains in the painting. “To the genius who painted the Alps, the grandeur of which is beyond compare,” she said, her voice ringing out as if through clear, mountain air. “And to the Alps, whose beauty ceaselessly inspires us.”

“Spoken like a true Swiss,” Thomas said. A mischievous smile played on his lips. “I’ll drink to that.”

“And to the painter—wherever he may be,” Ulyssa added, sipping at her wine and perusing the lower right-hand corner of the reproduction. The painter’s signature was easy to miss, having been painted in white; it was barely discernible among the footprints in the frozen snow. *G. Segantini, 1891*, it said. The footprints looked as though they were melting in the sunshine. She had the sudden impression that the intervening years had converged upon the present moment, and that the painter himself had passed through minutes earlier to write his name in the icy slush.

Ulyssa blinked. The painter’s footprints had veered off at the edge of the canvas. Had he crossed the landscape in pursuit of a better vantage point? The footprints, so fresh, so recently left there, seemed to suggest that his existence was unfolding elsewhere—beyond the confines of the canvas.

“Viva!” Tomas winked at her. “It took you long enough to notice,” he said, refilling her glass. “To the most eloquent of painters—who conjures up entire mountain ranges, making them so lofty they appear to be floating in thin air.”

Ulyssa drank half the wine in her glass. “I’ve been thirsty all day,” she said, and then emptied her glass. “G. Segantini, 1891—it’s unbelievable, isn’t it?” Now that she had started giggling, she couldn’t stop. “You aren’t by chance thinking what I am thinking, are you?”

“That the mountain range in this painting belongs to this region? Certainly not.” He reached for the last piece of bread in the basket. “In 1891, Giovanni Segantini was living in northern Italy. He arrived in these parts in 1894, if I’m not mistaken.”

Ulyssa had speared a tomato wedge on her fork. Looking up, she was surprised to see the chef coming in through the door behind the bar. He approached their table and now stood over them, a steaming platter in each hand. “*Capuns*? A delicious, rich pasta dough, studded with smoked ham and wrapped in Swiss chard leaves?”

Tomas put up his hand.

“Best eaten while hot,” the chef cautioned, smiling good-naturedly. He spoke in English, with a marked Italian accent. “And for the lady, a culinary delight, the *Bizzocals*,” he said, putting a plate down in front of her with a flourish. “Homemade buckwheat noodles with cabbage? It’s been the holiday dish of peasants for many centuries,” he added. “You

would never know it, eh?"

Ulyssa felt hollowed out by hunger. She had forgotten to eat lunch, she told Tomas. She had barely had time to rip off a piece of the peasant bread and gulp it down. Of course, she had been tempted to eat more. But she had held off. The *turta grischuna* in her backpack was a treat she wanted to share with Maria Teresa and Walter.

She looked down at the steaming *Bizzocals* in the round baking dish, the tufts of noodles and red peppers smothered under mounds of melted cheese.

"On a day like this we would be better off crunching on ice cubes, straight out of the freezer," Tomas told the chef. "That's probably the reason I'm so fond of this painting," he added, gesturing at it with a forkful of food held in mid-air. "Indeed, I'm getting fonder of it by the minute."

The chef refilled their wine glasses. Tomas winked at Ulyssa.

"Ulyssa and I are having a little disagreement," he told the chef. "We're mystified as to the painter's true identity. We thought you might be able to enlighten us."

"The painter?" The chef seemed pleased to be asked, judging from the smile that spread across his face. "The painter is revered in these parts—but did you know that three countries have claimed him as their own?" He wiped his hands on the apron he wore over his black and white checkered pants. "This one was done by Segantini. He was born on Austrian soil, but lived in Italy for many years. Finally, toward the end of his life, he chose to make Savognin his home."

"But the mountains—are they from around here?" Ulyssa looked intently at the chef.

"I can't tell you for sure. Had you been here a year ago, of course—"

"What happened a year ago?" asked Ulyssa.

"Excuse me." He had turned away briefly to acknowledge an elderly couple now seating themselves at one of the tables near the entrance. "It's too bad you weren't here for the centenary celebrations of the painter's career. A special installation was devoted to him, near *Veia Purmaglera*, in the very spot where Segantini is said to have stood when he painted his famous *Plough*. I was so proud to see the original painting on exhibit, in the *Sala Segantini*, at our library. They had posters for sale; art books and prints, as well. So—"

The food had now sufficiently cooled and Tomas started tucking into it. He gave the chef a compliment on the cuisine. "But still, we're curious to know," he said, gesturing at the reproduction on the wall with his fork. "How did you come by it?"

"Ah." The chef nodded. "You will scarce believe me when I tell you this, but I have a family connection."

Tomas raised his eyebrows. "A family connection?" He was intrigued.

“Let me guess: You haggled with your maiden aunt until you obtained it, finally, at a cut-throat price?”

“Close.” The chef topped up the wine in their glasses. “You see, my mother’s father’s wife, she was a Segantini. All her life, she maintained that she was a distant relative of the painter’s.”

“How wonderful,” Tomas said. “And quite the coincidence.” He gestured at Ulyssa and then beamed at the chef. “Please meet Ulyssa—she’s a Segantini, too. She’s not exactly sure whether she’s related to the painter, but she would sure like to be.”

“Birds of a feather,” the chef said with a chuckle and extended his hand for Ulyssa to shake. “The Segantinis, they have always been a special tribe.”

Ulyssa shook his hand. The *Bizzocals* were still too hot to eat, so she had to blow on each morsel on her fork before putting it in her mouth. “Still, I’m curious,” she told him. “Where did you purchase the reproduction?”

“My mother’s father’s wife, she loved the arts,” the chef explained. “And my grandfather, you see, he would buy reproductions for her birthday, here and there, you know.” He gestured at the other paintings on the restaurant walls. “But the reproduction that hangs right here, it was a special gift for their fiftieth wedding anniversary.”

The original title of the painting had been *The Punishment of Lust*, he went on to explain. However, the authorities had found fault with the title. They hadn’t liked the overtones of lechery, of excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures, and as a result, it was renamed *The Punishment of Luxury*. “It’s easy to see how the wicked women in the painting have abdicated the sanctity of motherhood,” he added.

“They may even have been prostitutes,” Tomas dared to interject.

“The painter came from a country shaped by Catholicism,” the chef said. “For him, his mother was a saint. He lost her much too early, when he was only seven. I read about it in an art book, somewhere, not too long ago. She died from complications that arose while giving birth to him, it said.”

How tragic, the beginning of the painter’s life, Ulyssa thought. The dumplings were rich. They sat in her stomach like a heavy weight, made weightier still with each of the comments the chef made about Segantini.

“The painter’s father refused to look after him. That’s the story, anyway, that Giovanni was brought to Milano to live with in-laws. That’s where he learned to paint—at age sixteen, if I’m not mistaken. Some people say this painting depicts the mother’s trauma.” The chef looked thoughtful. “The trauma of a mother losing her child—through abortion, perhaps, or neglect.”

Ulyssa stared into her wine glass; grief about love and loss began to flood over her. It all sounded so grim. What bothered her was the word

‘punishment’ in the title; it was written so large. She could see the misogynistic overtones now. Something about the painter’s identity didn’t seem to add up. Was he, for sure, the same artist to whom the country had dedicated a special art museum in St. Moritz, and whose achievements had been the cause of so much celebration in Savognin?

“For whatever reason, Segantini refused to marry Bice Bugatti,” the chef told them. “She was his partner and also the mother of his four children.” He glanced in the direction of the waitress who was now taking the order of the elderly couple seated near the entrance. “Supper time will soon be in full swing,” he told them. “Please excuse me, while I return to the kitchen to resume my duties.”

The waitress came by some time later to remove the plates from their table. She asked whether *Monsieur* and *Madame* would care to see the dessert menu.

“Perhaps a *Digestif*,” Tomas suggested. The waitress enumerated the choices on her slender fingers, one by one: Would they like Kirsch made in the valley? Schnapps distilled from mountain gentian? Or perhaps they might care for a *Mirabelle*, made with those sweet, little, yellow plums?

“We’ll have one of each,” Tomas told her, without giving it much thought. “Along with two *café pressés* and some steamed milk, if you don’t mind. And then, the bill, of course.”

They had raised their glasses, again and again. Ulyssa, feeling rather tipsy now, wondered if they were beginning to seem drunk or, indeed, obnoxious. By now, three of the other tables were occupied—by people who kept sending glances in their direction. Sipping at her little glass of Kirsch, Ulyssa thought she might have been better off, had she opted for water, or a tall glass of blackberry *frizzante*. Wasn’t it funny, she asked Tomas, her voice turning hoarse, that here they were, having journeyed all the way to Maloja to see Segantini’s grave, while completely forgetting to pay a visit to his atelier?

Tomas took it all in stride. “To haphazard pilgrimages,” he said, blowing aside some of the foam atop his coffee cup before he sipped from it with pursed lips. She clinked her liqueur glass against his, and he, crunching on a sugar cube, told her he wanted nothing more than to dedicate one of the drinks to his agent, back in Canada, who was his hero, now, after having optioned his novel to a movie studio.

Ulyssa, seeing the twinkle in his eye, said she would make a toast to discrepancy, to incongruity, and to impermanence. To her mind, it was the chef who deserved hero status, she said, for it was the chef who had salvaged Segantini’s *Lap-of-Luxury* painting from the sure fate of being thrown on some garage-sale heap. She shuddered now to think that the chef’s mother, who had inherited the reproduction, but had disliked it with a passion, would have even considered throwing it on the bonfire they had had in their backyard, on Swiss National holiday.

By now, Ulyssa had finished arranging the empty wine and liqueur glasses in a circle on the empty tablecloth between them, when the chef came back unexpectedly. “I enjoyed our discussion immensely. As a compliment, I would like to offer you both a glass of Absinthe as a gift,” he said. “Banned in Switzerland for many years, I’m happy to say that the Green Fairy is now available on Helvetic soil once more.”

Ulyssa had accepted the gift graciously. “I’d like to raise a glass to Segantini—painter, relative, and friend—who lived, and breathed, and painted in these parts—”

“And to the untold riches buried on the mind’s ocean floor,” Tomas had said, nodding. He shook hands with the chef.

Then, suddenly, they were outside, under the leafy chestnut trees. It was the Green Fairy’s fault, Ulyssa insisted, feeling downright inebriated now. She had no memory of Tomas paying the bill, or of them leaving the restaurant. It was the Green Fairy, she repeated, leaning against him. It was the Green Fairy that had done her in.

Only a few cars passed by them as they walked hand in hand along the *Stradung*, back to the *Trais Fluors*. Ulyssa complained about her feet. They were hurting, she said. Why not take a taxi? She was dog-tired from all the walking she had done that day.

Tomas didn’t seem to hear her. He had started to sing in a drawling voice as he traipsed along beside her. “*A King in a carriage may ride, and the Beggar may crawl at his side—*.” He stopped in front of a bookstore and looked in the window. “*But in the general race, they are traveling all the same pace.*” The jaunty, little tune was something he seemed to have made up, a Finnish nursery rhyme, perhaps, Ulyssa thought. Tomas pointed to a cat in the window, asleep in a wicker basket amidst some paperbacks.

It was now quiet in the street. The traffic had ceased altogether. They passed a homeopathic pharmacy, a flower market, and then a computer store. Tomas stopped walking and looked at her, beady-eyed. “*A King in a carriage may ride—*do you mean to tell me you’ve never read Omar Khayyám’s *Rubáiyát*? It is Persian essence distilled, as pure and exquisite as any liqueur—”

The sun had dipped below the mountaintops by the time they reached the outskirts of Savognin. “Look, the castle is open for business,” Tomas said drunkenly. Up on the hillside, across the river, the dark shape of the castle was visible, backlit by the last rays of the setting sun. Then, all at once, the floodlights were turned on, and the granite walls looked transformed, having turned a softer, watercolor shade of brown.

They had veered off the *Stradung* to follow the path back to the guesthouse, along a field of corn and then a field of alfalfa. Tomas pointed out an odd, little cloud formation to her, low on the horizon. The shape reminded him of the head of a crocodile, he said, but even as he spoke it

started turning into a boar. A flock of starlings, flying low, swooped down over an orchard of old fruit trees. “It’s their bedtime ritual,” Tomas observed. Ulyssa watched, delighted to see the birds lift off once more. She heard the swooshing of their wings as they gathered themselves into an elliptical shape, the movement of their wings continuous, the darkish shape pulsating against the pinkish evening sky.

Night had started to close in around them. The first star was becoming visible, far off in the eastern sky. Ulyssa took Tomas’s elbow. It was time to go home, she said, and he instantly quickened his step. “First star I see tonight,” she began. “I wish I may, I wish I might—”

He put his arms around her and pulled her close. Happily, for once, he was without a single wish to speak of, he said, beaming at her. It had been a great evening all around. All his wishes had come true. “Good wine, good conversation, great food—ambrosia.”

She looked into his eyes. His eyes were shining.

“Oh—the *ravitscha*,” she moaned. She felt bloated of a sudden. “Only Eastern Europeans know how to digest cabbage,” she said.

“The Painful Lavender Sky” will appear in *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hekkanen: Naturalistic, Gothic, Surreal and Postmodern*, in 2010.

The Painful Lavender Sky

Ernest Hekkanen

THIS, THEN, was how it happened: how Antone Perry, one unequivocal morning, came to run with the hounds. Unlike other mornings, darkness withdrew, leaving in its wake a lavender sky, and his wife, Yvonne, who had quarreled with him the previous evening—in front of the children, the islanders and, quite possibly, God Himself—awoke to find a note, scrawled on a torn piece of brown paper, pinned with a hunting knife to the pillow beside her head. The sky beyond Shaggy Hill was so radiant it looked as though a volcano had spewed lavender all over the heavens. Down in the meadow, where a wheelbarrow lay rusting on its side, the color was reflected back by every drop of dew that bent the tall grass. Only the mist that swirled and eddied was untouched by it, hovering as gray as gossamer in the cold air. Lying in bed, swaddled by warm blankets, Yvonne imagined hounds slithering off into the wooded gloom, followed by Antone, down on all fours, switching his buttocks as the shadows took him in.

Clothes were heaped on the burnpile and the smell of death had gone. The note, written in green crayon, was stuck to the pillow that had held Antone’s head while he was sleeping off his drunken torpor on the living room floor. He had left the back door ajar and the house had cooled to the same temperature as outside and Yvonne, girdled by blankets up to her neck, watched her breath turn to fog above the note, which, so far, she had declined to read. A howl unwound like a bright ribbon through the deadfall on Shaggy Hill, one long piercing wail that eventually became lost in the gloom. The swathes of low-lying mist shifted uncertainly in the meadow, one of them recovering from the trailing vortex of the man who had recently passed through it. The house, although silent, ech-

oed with shouting. The children were curled beneath their blankets, oblivious to the arrival of dawn. No matter how hard Yvonne tried to shake off the impression, she could not help but think of them as rats curled against the cold. The smell of death, which she and the girls had lived with for almost a week, was gone now and Antone had reverted to his animal self.

In the bedroom at the rear of the house, bedsprings recoiled as Michelle, sound asleep, thrashed about in the covers that had tangled around her limbs. Small quakes traveled through the floor and up the walls, jostling the trestle-like structure that Antone had built to hold her toys, books and drawing materials. Suddenly, a book dislodged, falling with a flutter of pages to the floor. Down by the pond the white geese, lying with beaks tucked under their wings, unveiled stark eyes, staring in the direction of the house. Earlier, a man in a T-shirt and jeans had stumbled through the tall grass of the meadow, heading toward the shadow-laden woods. The clothes on the burnpile continued to smolder. Rivulets of smoke trickled up from the charred remains and eventually flowed together in a grayish column. Yvonne felt the chill on the back of her neck and knew she must rise to start a fire in the cookstove. She snaked her arm through the folds of the bedclothes, her hand reaching for the note that was skewered by the hunting knife to the pillow. She found that she was empty of any emotion, carved out as she had been by yesterday's anger. In the adjacent bedroom, her daughter, Sylvia, lay immersed in dreams. She was dancing, pirouetting across a field in the sunshine, toward a darkness that drew her as forcibly as a magnet. The hounds moved like stealthy shadows, wending their way up through the dark underbrush. Antone, feeling the sting of wet branches against his bare arms, suddenly stopped beside a stump, waiting for a sound of some kind—the breaking of a twig, or the rustling of salal leaves—to guide him.

In the cold sod, the rats lay curled against death. Mist swayed in the meadow while out on the road the first of several cars went by, heading toward the ferry terminal. Yvonne pulled the hunting knife out of the pillow and dragged the note off the blade. The previous morning had been so different; Antone, having awakened early, had brought her a cup of steaming coffee, to be sipped at in bed. He had planted a kiss between her breasts, in a mood of jovial rapport. The house had been warm – not cold like it was this morning, with her breath turning to fog each time she exhaled. Now, another car went by on the road, the sound a hurtling wave of air that seemed to drive the chill deeper into her flesh.

Dew ran together on alder leaves, collecting in large drops that fell toward the surface of the pond. A raven flew out of the fold between Shaggy Hill and Heck Hill and, with low, guttural cries that resonated like dark laughter, coursed down the glen. The note, scrawled in green crayon, said: *It's no use. Everything's turned to rot—to rot and decay. And death. Antone.* Yvonne crumpled the note and hurled it into the cor-

ner beyond the mound of clothes on the ironing board. When she and the girls had come home from church the previous day, Antone had been raving drunk and everything stored in the basement had been carted out into the side yard.

“God, is this what I have to come home to—to filth? Goddamn filth! Can’t you keep anything clean, Yvonne?”

Sylvia’s alarm clock sent its cheap rattle through the house. There came, through the closet wall, the sound of something being knocked over as she tried to stop the noise. Yvonne flung back the bedclothes and sat up. The floor was cold beneath her feet and already she could feel the cold climbing her legs. The previous night she had gone to bed with her sweater on, having cast a backward glance at Antone lying face down on the floor, breathing in a gurgling fashion through his mouth. She remembered the glance he had given her down at the ferry terminal:—it had been like a flash of blue steel from the corner of his eye.

“Smell—what smell?” he had said, tossing his army-green duffel bag on the back seat of the car.

His eyes had alerted her. Hunching her shoulders at the steering wheel, she had looked straight-ahead through the windshield. Foot passengers were locating their rides, others were pulling carts up the steep grade to the top of the hill.

“I just thought I should warn you, is all.”

“Warn me?”

“About the smell.”

“Look, I don’t want to hear anything about smells—not when I first get off the ferry.”

The rattling of the alarm clock had ceased, to be replaced by rock ‘n’ roll on Sylvia’s radio. Yvonne, pulling on jeans, yelled at her daughter through the closet wall, “Turn that thing down. Turn it down, right now.”

Down by the pond, a white goose stretched its leg out behind its body, webbed toes spreading and then folding like a fan when the goose tucked its leg back under its body. A rabbit, seeing light come on inside the house, nosed its food tin closer to the door of the hutch and a rat that was searching for stray pellets in the straw and manure darted into some nearby blackberry vines.

“You’ve made a perfect place for them to breed. Can’t you see that?” Antone yelled, kicking a tea crate full of linen down the slope.

Drops were beating a lively tattoo on the pond and the sky, suffused by lavender, seemed to swirl. Antone stood absolutely still in the dark forest. He thought he saw the hounds slinking through tangled deadfall on the hillside. He raised his ear in that direction, listening. Out on the highway, another car sped past. Sylvia, lying in that half-conscious state between sleeping and waking, thought at first that she was dreaming. She seemed to be floating in a vacuum, watching her hands tape cardboard to

a broken windowpane. Yvonne nudged her feet into slippers and padded through the living room to the kitchen. Seeing that the back door was indeed open, she cursed Antone under her breath. The lowest of the three panes had been masked by cardboard. She glanced at the hill which slouched like a shaggy beast. Antone was up there, now; he had awakened to barking in his head and had gone to run with the hounds—hounds he had convinced himself were roaming the forest on the hill. She switched on the light above the sink. The blue ceramic tiles inset in the ebony table formed a pool upon which a single white plate had set sail. Each time Yvonne picked Antone up at the ferry terminal, he smelled faintly of diesel—from having worked around the engines of a tugboat, one that plied the waters of Juan de Fuca Strait. Usually, the first thing he did upon getting home was to take a bath. However, this time, upon sniffing the air, he flung his duffel bag on the sofa and went down to the basement to see if he could locate where the odor was coming from.

“God, can’t you tell when something has died? That’s the smell of death, Yvonne. The smell of death.”

Yvonne wadded sheets of newspaper and shoved them down into the firebox of the cookstove. She latticed kindling on top of the paper, replaced the stoveplate at the far back and reached for the matchbox on the window sill above the sink. She struck a match and dropped it through the nearest stoveplate hole—onto the crumpled newspapers. Flames leaped up through the stoveplate hole, followed by a thin veil of smoke. For the briefest moment, she was held by the sight of the flames. The newspaper withered and turned black, the kindling began to snap. With a rough clank, she replaced the nearest stoveplate. Again, she heard Antone howl up on the hillside behind the house. It was a long, treble howl that lodged near her heart.

Two nights ago, when Antone opened the basement door, the smell had washed over him: putrid, nauseating, pushing out on the warm air. He flung the door wide and stepped back to let the basement breathe. The house was old, riddled by decay and rat holes. Immediately inside the doorway was a cistern covered by planks. During the winter, a freshet ran across the concrete floor, downhill in the direction of the pond at the back of the property. His intention had been to demolish the house and then to build a new one, but his plans had fallen through—had folded back into oblivion. He reached around the doorjamb to switch on the light. The airtight furnace sucked rhythmically at the air. The heat was caught by a canopy and funneled upstairs, along with the stench. Cobwebs hung from the beams and joists, lolling like waves on a peaceful bay. Someone had left the lid off the metal barrel containing rabbit feed. Several feet away, lying partly under an old wringer-washing machine, now kaput, was a dead rat that teemed with maggots.

“Jesus Christ O Mighty, what do you do every day—come down here

with blinders on?”

Rats watched from the safety of the blackberry vines, waiting to see if the light in the house would be followed by someone coming outside. When no one appeared on the stoop, first one rat, and then another, scampered across the ground to the manure pile beneath the hutches. The rabbits huddled in the corners of their cages, watching the rats move like stealthy shadows across the mounds. Michelle awoke, humming to herself. Light from the kitchen filtered through the curtain over her bedroom doorway. She could hear her sister’s radio and her mother clanking the stoveplates in the kitchen. Antone climbed onto a large boulder. Squatting silently, his large hands dangling between his thighs, he gazed up the hill to where the lavender sky shone through the dark trees. The hounds were nowhere to be seen, but he thought he heard them panting up the slope, maybe fifty feet ahead of him.

“Where’s the shovel, for shitsake? Why can’t anyone put my tools back where they’re supposed to be?”

Yvonne had heard him downstairs, roughly hurling things aside, cursing at the top of his voice. The girls came out of Sylvia’s room, where they had gone to watch television. They stood beside the vent in the floor, their faces pale and frozen.

“I take it Dad’s home,” Sylvia said, scowling at the grate over the vent.

“I think you girls had better go to your rooms.”

Then, from down below the floor, in a voice that shook with rage, “God, here’s another one, in the trough behind the deep freeze. I told you, when I set out the poison, that you should start looking for dead rats. Why didn’t you?”

“Rats?” Michelle said, widening her eyes.

“Go to your rooms and turn off the television. Quickly, please.”

“And here’s another one—in a box full of linen. No wonder it fucking stinks in the house.”

Sylvia felt herself being shaken.

“Come on, it’s school today. Time to get up.”

Sylvia could see through her eyelids that the light had come on in her room. She rolled over, dragging blankets over her head. Her mother had shoved Antone back against the new washing machine, shouting, “We don’t need your help. You’ve done quite enough, already. Go away—for good!”

In his drunkenness, he had fallen off balance, sliding down the side of the machine to the floor. Sylvia blinked her eyes, trying not to remember. Yvonne shook her roughly by the shoulder. “What’s the point in setting your alarm if I have to come in here and get you up out of bed every single morning? Can you tell me that? Huh, can you?”

“I’m awake.”

“Then get up. It’s almost eight o’clock.”

Yvonne switched off her daughter’s radio and went to the kitchen. In the dim light of the basement, the shadows were bunched so closely together it was impossible to see into every corner. Antone knew there had to be more dead rats lying in the cobweb-laced darkness, for he could smell them—cloaked in death—but where they had crawled off to die was difficult to say. He grabbed the pail of dead rats he had collected and took it down to the meadow, where he buried the maggot-infested bodies below the sod. It was twilight and every window in the house was full of light. Leaving the shovel and pail in the meadow, he marched up the slope to the house. He slipped a wooden wedge under the basement door so it would stay open and, with a face twisted in disgust, he trudged up the backstairs. He opened the door of the house, with a rough shove of his shoulder.

“Put something over the vent.”

His face looked like a burl and Yvonne could tell that he was extremely upset. “Did you get them all?”

“Most of them, I think. I’ll take another look tomorrow—when it’s light.”

“I know you’re mad at me,” Yvonne said.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he told her. “I’m going to take a bath. My skin feels like it’s crawling with maggots.”

Michelle hummed while blinking her eyes. The lavender color poured through the window onto her bedspread. When she opened her eyes, her head filled with lavender. When she closed her eyes, the humming in her throat rose in pitch and intensity; in fact, it vibrated throughout her entire body. Down by the pond, a goose pushed itself to its feet and began to beat at the air with its wings. The fog stirred. Beyond Shaggy Hill, the sun struggled to rise above the fog. The hour of singing birds had passed. Usually, the prattling would wake Yvonne and she would lie in bed alone, listening to it. Antone had risen from where he had slid to the floor beside the new washing machine. Supporting himself against the washer, he thrust his leg out like a karate master, the heel of his boot knocking out the lower pane of the window in the back door.

“Don’t think you can lock me in here. I won’t be locked in—not by anyone.”

“You’re out of your mind, Antone. Completely out of your mind.”

He cocked his ear, as though listening to far-off voices. “They’re howling.”

“Who’s howling?”

“They are. The hounds. Can’t you hear them?”

“I don’t hear anything.”

“I can. They’re up on Shaggy Hill, roaming the forest.”

“Go track them down, then, but leave us alone—in peace.”

“Come on, I’ll show you if you don’t believe me. They’re roaming the woods up there. I know they are.”

She wrenched her wrist free of his grip. “No, I don’t want to find them. I don’t *need* to find them. You go do it if you have to.”

Sylvia threw back her bedclothes. She stared at the photographs pinned to the walls of her room, not really seeing the rock stars who peered at her with mannequin-like faces. She and her mother had gone down the backstairs, away from Antone’s glowering face in the frame of the broken windowpane—out to the side yard where their possessions were strewn on the grass in the sunshine. What impressed her was how still the world had become: the trees, the sky, the meadow; they were all so silent, as though they existed in a different dimension.

When he came out of the bathroom, his dark hair was plastered sleekly to his skull. A towel was draped around his waist, hanging to the level of his knees. He glanced at Yvonne beside the kitchen sink, and padded on bare feet to the bedroom. Yvonne followed him to the doorway of the room. His muscles buckled like taut springs in his back.

“Would you like to have dinner now?”

“It’d make me puke.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for living.”

He turned around to face her. “I don’t understand it, Yvonne. How could you live with that odor? Didn’t it make you want to vomit?”

“I didn’t know what was making it.”

“Well, why didn’t you track it down?”

Yvonne shrugged. “I thought it was the septic tank, backing up again.”

“God, I can’t believe it. I simply can’t believe it.”

“Look, I’m not like you. I didn’t grow up in the country. I didn’t learn how to take care of such things.”

“Come on, it’s not that difficult,” he said. “There’s an obnoxious, sickening odor. You track it down to its source. You don’t just leave it, hoping it will go away.”

All week they had burned incense and sprayed Lysol, but Yvonne didn’t explain that to him. She didn’t explain to him that she feared the smell, that it was so repugnant to her she dreaded what she might find if she followed it to its source—down in the murky, shadow-bitten basement, where things rotted in dark corners, furtively, without being noticed.

Antone had brought her a cup of coffee, to sip at in bed. He had planted a kiss between her breasts and scooted off down the hallway to the kitchen where he and Michelle were making pancakes for breakfast. When he came back to the bedroom to pour her a second cup of coffee, she could tell by his preciseness, by the way he held himself so erectly, that he had had something to drink. By breakfast his eyes were getting glossy. Rather than sitting at the table, he elected to keep making pan-

cakes at the cookstove.

“Drunk already,” she told him, when she got up to put her plate in the sink.

He winked.

“In preparation of going down to the basement,” he told her, pointing at the floor. “I don’t expect it to be very pleasant—down there.”

“I’m sure you’ll see to that.”

From far down the glen came the guttural cry of a raven. In the house, lying in bed, Michelle heard the raven’s wings fan the air. She leaned toward the window, cocking her head and glancing askew at the sky. Above the trees on Shaggy Hill, the low-lying clouds swirled; they gathered in a kind of mask that eventually became a lion’s head, with a great yawning mouth full of needle-sharp teeth. The previous day, when they came home from church to find their possessions strewn in the side yard, her father was so drunk on home brew he stumbled with each step, like an extremely large raven, squawking and lurching about, ill-fit for walking on land.

“That smell you’ve been plagued with all week. Would you like to see what was making it?”

“You already told us,” Yvonne said. “We don’t need to see it. Really, we don’t.”

“I think you do.”

“Really, Antone. Why do you find it necessary to act like this?”

“Look, I’m away for two weeks. I come home and the place reeks of death. But who has to clean it up? I do—every single time.”

Yvonne, Sylvia and Michelle had stood in their good clothes, in a patch of sunshine on the lawn. A breeze lifted the green ribbon in Michelle’s blond hair, twisting it so it caught the light. Antone grabbed the garden rake. He hooked the prongs in one of Sylvia’s old winter coats and dragged the garment over to where they were standing.

“This is what was causing that terrible stench,” he said, flipping back one half of the coat.

In the folds of the garment, the rats lay side by side, as though curled against death, their bodies teeming with maggots. A horrible stench billowed around Yvonne and the girls, as they stared at the dead rats.

“And that’s only two of them. There were at least a half-dozen more in the same condition. That’s why I keep telling you to keep things clean, if you’re going to be raising animals.”

“I try to keep them clean,” Yvonne said.

“What do you mean? The basement was filthy. Junk all over the place, mildewing. There were even some food scraps where the kids had erected a little fort. Don’t tell me you were trying to keep things clean, because you weren’t.”

“I’ve been awfully busy, Antone.”

“Busy doing what, for godsake? I come home and all I do is catch up on chores you haven’t been doing.”

Yvonne shoved two split pieces of log in the firebox and clanked the stoveplate roughly down. Sylvia stumbled from her room, grinding the knuckles of her right hand around in her eye socket. For a nightgown she was wearing a long, red undershirt with *Hawaii '97* printed on the front.

“Why is it so cold this morning?” she said, switching on the bathroom light.

“Your father left the back door wide open. That’s why.”

“Where is he, now?”

“Up on the hill, somewhere.” She jerked her head in the direction of Shaggy Hill. “Anyway, that’s where I think he is.”

Antone cupped his hands to his mouth, and howled. He waited for a reciprocating cry from the hounds, but none came. The forest was perfectly silent. Impelled by the thought that he might have lost track of them, he ran up the slope, flailing his arms, driving himself through underbrush. He had awakened on the living room floor—in the middle of a dream. In the dream he was bent over the stern of a tugboat, examining the wake produced by the slowly turning propeller, when, all of a sudden, a pallid blob rolled up out of the water. It was swollen and breaking apart. At first he thought it might be a seal sliced to pieces by the propeller, but then he saw the lipless mouth and teeth arrayed like coral, and he knew he was remembering rather than dreaming.

“Select what you want and the rest goes down to the burnpile.”

“We’ll haul it down there ourselves, thank you.” Yvonne snarled at him. Her fingers brushed light brown hair away from her face. “We’ll burn it all.”

“You don’t have to burn it all. Just the stuff that’s trash.”

“Well, it’s all trash—according to you.”

Michelle watched the misty lavender face swirl off over the tops of the trees. In the kitchen, she heard the refrigerator door being closed. “Is it time for breakfast, yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Should I get up?”

“Why don’t you wait until the house starts to get warm? It’s still pretty cold.”

In the darkness of the bedroom, he had lain perfectly still, his body depressing the other half of the mattress, faintly smelling of diesel, despite having taken a bath.

“Look, I’m sorry. I should have ferreted out those dead rats, myself.”

“Forget it. I don’t want to think about it anymore.”

“I should have, though. I know you told me to start looking for them.”

“Listen, I’m tired. I haven’t slept in over thirty-six hours. My mind is reeling. I can’t keep it together any longer. I need to sleep. Really, I do.”

Soon he was snoring, like a mechanical bellows, each expiration filling the darkness with the odor of diesel. She turned her head to look at his profile on the pillow beside her. She imagined that he was smoldering; any moment now, he might actually burst into flames. Lifting the covers, she gently rolled out of bed. Late into the night, she sat in the rocking chair, the feeble rays of a lamp falling on an open book, every now and then glancing at the stick of incense that sent up a rivulet of bluish smoke.

Sylvia wiped herself with tissue paper and flushed the toilet. Washing her hands at the sink and admiring herself in the mirror, she suddenly remembered her father sitting in a folding chair, his feet resting on the rail of the deck, drinking home brew from a large Coke bottle as he watched them haul their possessions down to the burnpile. He leaned so far back, in order to suck home brew out of the bottle, the chair fell over backwards, dumping him on the deck. He popped back up like a jack-in-the-box, cursing and kicking the chair.

"I hope you know what sort of an example you're setting for the girls," Yvonne told him, walking up the slope toward the house.

"I'm sure you'll keep me well informed."

A car stopped beside the road, a Chevrolet station wagon. The round, pink face of the Anglican Minister peered out of the open window on the driver's side. "Having a yard sale?"

Yvonne creased her face in a smile. "No, a fall clean-up."

"I didn't have a chance to say how much I enjoyed Sylvia's solo this morning. She sang like an angel, Yvonne. An absolute angel."

Sylvia slid back the bathroom door and switched off the light. Yvonne stood in front of the cookstove, peeling bacon strips off a slab of meat and laying them in a skillet. Sylvia could see that her mother was crying, silently, with small spasms that caused her shoulders to writhe. Antone had stumbled down the backstairs and ducked through the basement doorway. Yvonne knew that he was heading straight for the shelf where he kept the Coke bottles full of home brew. The Anglican Minister, noticing Antone's unstable condition, pretended to clasp a glass and tip it to his lips. Yvonne nodded. The Minister mouthed the words, "Is there anything I can do?"

Yvonne shook her head.

"Don't neglect to call me, if you need any help," he said, smiling.

"I won't."

Sylvia trudged up the slope from the burnpile, her hands tucked into the sleeves of a sweatshirt. The Minister said, "Ah, there she is now. I stopped by to say how much I enjoyed your solo this morning. It really added to the service."

Antone was standing in the basement doorway, a bottle hanging from his right hand, mouthing what the Minister was saying, his face screwed

into a mask full of mockery. He uncapped the bottle with the aid of his belt buckle. Foam spewed from the opening, onto his jeans.

“Thank you for your kind words,” Yvonne said. “We had better get back to work now.”

“We’ve got rats,” Michelle said. “Lots and lots and lots of dead rats. Everywhere.”

“Rats?” the Minister said, as though curious.

“Dad poisoned them and now they’re all over the place, dead.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” The Minister tipped his hat and drove off down the road.

Sylvia stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom, offering up her breasts, dreaming of the man she would one day give herself to. He would be tall. He would buy her things: beautiful clothes, jewelry. He would take her to places far away. And he wouldn’t get raving drunk every weekend. Yvonne broke eggs on the edge of the kitchen counter and spilled the contents into a stainless steel bowl and then began to beat them with a whisk. On the other side of the window, she noticed that the lavender color of the sky was beginning to fade, as the sun rose above Shaggy Hill. In a few minutes from now, the bright, although diffuse-looking halo that was the sun would become a fiery disk. Sunshine would slant through the windows and begin to warm the house. The large brown stud-rabbit nosed its empty food tin around the wire floor of the hutch. Several geese had glided out onto the pond, where drops were falling from the overhanging alder trees. Antone had lost track of the hounds. He trudged with heavy steps up the hillside, now recalling what he had left down below. He remembered the canvas he had tried to paint, the one depicting the lipless, toothy corpse in the lower left hand corner, himself leaning over the stern of the tugboat he was working on, staring into the face of death. In the background, emerging as though from the dark, were scenes depicting island life:—home and family, a carnival with a Ferris wheel, a town with a cathedral, sunshine spilling through thunderclouds. But now, it had all gone to rot. It had all decayed. Everything. There were no longer any perfect days full of promise. There was only unremitting misery and duties performed without delight.

Michelle called from her bedroom. “I’m tired of being asleep, Mom. Can I get up and color?”

“Only if you put on your slippers. And a sweater.”

“Red is peering through the window. Can I let him in?”

“Only if you keep him in your room. I don’t want him out here in the kitchen, underfoot.”

Michelle pulled on a sweater and scooted her feet into slippers. She went to the back door to let in the orange tabby. “He’s been hunting again, Mom.”

“How can you tell?”

“His feet are all wet, like he’s been down in the meadow, looking for rats.”

Yvonne lifted her right eyebrow. She flipped the bacon in the iron skillet, remembering how Antone had clutched the rail of the deck and stared uphill at the evergreen trees. “There, can you hear them? I tell you they’re up there, roaming the forest—four of them. Each one is howling at a slightly different pitch.”

“You’re drunk.”

“No, I can hear them.”

“What you’re hearing is inside your own head, Antone.”

His eyes looked as though they were transfixed on Shaggy Hill. Later on, he vomited over the side of the deck and then, stumbling and weaving, he had gone inside the house to put on his jogging clothes. Clinging to the rail so he wouldn’t fall down the backstairs, he descended to the ground and ran toward the gate.

“See you in a couple of hours. I’m going to run around the island—to sober up.”

“You’ll end up killing yourself, Antone.”

“If I do, you can bury me in the backyard—along with the rats. How is that?”

Michelle put the orange tabby on the shelf above her drawing table and told him to stay put. He tried to wander off down the length of the activity trestle, but Michelle fetched him and told him to sit.

“Get up again and I’ll have to discipline you,” she said, wagging her index finger at the cat.

Immediately, the cat got up and wandered down the trestle in the direction of the kitchen. Michelle pulled back the top drawer of her dresser and got out the treats that she kept in a squat glass jar. She held one of the treats up to Red’s nose and lured him back to where she wanted him to sit.

“Now, I’m going to draw you, you silly cat. So don’t move. And smile—like this,” she said, molding the cat’s face so it looked as though it was smiling. Red swiped at her hand with his paw and so she gave him another treat. “What color would you like to be? Black or maybe green? How about purple? Purple’s a good color for you, don’t you think?”

Yvonne poured the bacon grease on vegetable scraps in the compost bucket and slid the skillet back onto the cookstove. She added the eggs that she had beaten into a thick froth and called to her daughters. “Breakfast is almost on the table. I hope you’re dressed and ready to eat.”

“Almost,” Sylvia called back.

Yvonne took three plates out of the cupboard and set them on the stovetop to warm. The fire was now burning too fast. She damped the stove until a trickle of smoke appeared at one of the stoveplates and then she opened the flue by just a little bit. After they finished carting their

cast-off possessions down to the burnpile, she swept up the glass shards of the broken windowpane. She told Sylvia to tape some cardboard over the opening and went inside the house to make lunch. She wasn't thinking, not really; she was moving as though through a thick, glutinous medium, a kind of gel, mindless, feeling carved out inside. Ever since Antone had forced himself to stop painting, he had been impossible to live with. The only time he seemed the least bit happy was when he was sitting beside Michelle at her drawing table, showing her how to achieve certain effects on paper. The rest of the time he cursed what passed for his life.

At last, Antone got to the top of the hill. He gazed across the lowlands where fog was rising in a veil before the sun. It was too bright to keep looking in that direction. He turned with a jerk, thinking he heard the hounds creeping up behind him, growling in low voices, their ears flattened against their skulls. Sylvia heard the howl; it wound like a bright ribbon down from Shaggy Hill and, for a moment, she was stricken by it. She remembered her father coming back from his run, sweating, his face and chest bleeding from scrapes he had sustained from falling on the gravel shoulder of the road, his mouth twisted in a clownish-looking grin.

"I did it. I made it all around the island. I guess I'm not supposed to die, after all."

Yvonne had hurried out of the living room. Antone had followed, close on her heels.

"No, get away. Don't even *try* to talk to me."

"Why, what have I done?"

"Take a look at the back door and then try to figure it out for yourself, you fool, you drunken fool. How dare you come waltzing in here like nothing has happened, like you haven't made our lives a living hell? Get out of my sight. I hate you."

When he threw the wooden matchstick on the gasoline-soaked rags, the sudden, fierce heat made him rear back so quickly he fell on his ass. His nostrils filled with the scent of singed eyebrows and hair. He swiped at himself to make sure he hadn't caught fire. The bright flames quickly devoured what had been thrown on top of the burnpile and then it settled down to gnaw at what was underneath. A doll's head, plastic but flesh-colored, puffed up like a marshmallow. The face melted around the glass eyeballs, which finally dropped out of sight into the flames. Antone poked at the pile with a rake, periodically drinking from a large Coke bottle that leaned against the trunk of a tree. The white geese honked from a safe distance, running their heads low through the grass, hissing with opened beaks and arched tongues. Antone tossed a burning rubber boot at them and the geese attacked it, only to draw back with outraged squawks.

Yvonne scraped a spoon around the inside of the skillet, folding cooked eggs back into the runny ones. "Hold still," Michelle told the cat. "I can't draw you if you keep moving around like that." What had begun as a

portrait of Red had evolved into something else:—a loud, yowling scream dominated by needle-sharp teeth and the face of a mythical beast that had swirled into existence out of the background colors. “You know, I’m not going to be able to draw you the way you look, if you don’t stop moving around. You’re going to end up looking a lot different than you really are.”

Later that night, when Antone came sauntering into the house, he brought with him the smell of burning. His eyebrows had been singed off and the exposed flesh gave him a stark look. Yvonne was sitting in a chair beside the darkened window. She had chased the girls into their rooms—not to sleep, but to stay out of sight. She glowered at Antone, utterly silent, her face a livid mask. Although he was drunk, it was the drunkenness of a somber man who oozed defeat. She watched him cross the living-room floor and switch on the light in the master bedroom.

“I hope you’re not intending to go to sleep like that,” she told him.

“I’m getting some clean clothes. Is that all right?”

“Just don’t linger in there. I don’t want you stinking up the bedroom.”

“Look who’s complaining about stink—someone who can’t smell the nauseating stench of death, even when it rudely smacks her in the face.”

Antone took an armload of clean clothes to the bathroom. She heard him splashing around in the tub. Then everything was silent, except for the mechanical trill of the refrigerator and the ticking of the clock on the kitchen wall.

“Mom, I have to go pee,” Michelle said.

“You’ll have to wait until your father gets out of the bathroom.”

“I can’t wait any longer.”

“Then knock on the door and see if he’ll let you in.”

Yvonne heard Michelle knocking on the door. Her daughter came padding back to the living room. “He doesn’t answer.”

“For godsake!” Yvonne rose from the chair and went to the bathroom. She knocked loudly on the door. “Michelle has to go to the toilet. Can she come in?”

There were no sounds of any kind. Trying the door, Yvonne found that it was unlocked. Antone had passed out in the bathtub. His chin was resting in water and his heavy breathing made ripples on the surface. His legs were splayed, his pale knees poking up like great, ugly knobs. One hand was clutching his genitals.

Yvonne threw a towel over his crotch. “It’s all right, dear. Just go right in.”

Michelle sat on the toilet, looking at her father, in particular the hand which clutched his genitals under the wet towel.

“Why’s he so still?”

“Because he’s drunk. Too drunk to wake up and get out of the tub. Don’t look at him. He’s repulsive.”

Antone's head had dropped so low in the water, his breath escaped in wet-sounding gurgles. Yvonne pulled the plug so the water in the tub would drain and then closed the door. A half-hour later, she heard him banging around in the bathroom, swearing because he couldn't find a fresh towel. She went to the bedroom and pretended to be reading. Finally, he appeared in the doorway.

"Don't think you're going to sleep in here," she told him. "There's a pillow and a blanket out on the living room floor. You can sleep out there."

"Maybe we should talk."

"Don't bother. You don't remember anything when you've been drinking all day."

She heard him milling around in the kitchen, fixing himself something to eat. For a long while she lay in darkness, wrapped in warm blankets, unable to roll over into the comforting arms of sleep. Later, when she got up to go to the bathroom, she saw him lying on the living room floor, drool hanging from his lips; and she envied him his drunken sleep, his total oblivion.

Their eyes were small, bright fires in the cantankerous folds of their canine faces. They danced and lunged all around him, clicking their teeth, growling. Fangs grazed his forearms, like whooshes of air passing over his skin. He was thirteen, pedaling his bicycle along the highway, delivering newspapers. Across the field, crows lifted into the air. Everything beyond the yapping periphery of the dogs was so quiet, so still. In an instant he came to understand his own mortality. He felt as though his bowels had turned to liquid. A warm trickle ran down his left pantleg. By now the sun had risen above the hill and, everywhere, mist was burning off the earth, unfurling in waves toward the sky. The moment the sun struck her cheek, Yvonne turned to glance at it in the kitchen window. Sylvia leaned toward her reflection in the mirror. With the pad of her fingertip, she added a streak of lavender above each eye:—this, while a family of rats scurried for safety into the blackberry vines, where they huddled in warmth below the roots of a tree.

"It's time for breakfast, girls. Come and eat."

Antone was alone on the hill, doomed to roam the bush, pursued by the barking of hounds. Squinting his right eye in the sunshine, his face grizzled and torn, he felt the breath of the beast on his nape: putrid, warm, and all-consuming. He willed himself to get down on all fours. He cocked his head so one ear seemed to be listening to voices up above him, in the sky. He wagged his phantom tail and growled in a low voice. Sylvia emerged from her bedroom and pirouetted across the kitchen floor to the table.

"How do I look?"

Yvonne shot back, "Is beauty all you think about, my dear?"

“What’s wrong with being beautiful?”

“Nothing. But alone, by itself, it’s terribly insubstantial, believe me.”

Yvonne put the plates on the table and called out to Michelle to come and eat.

“I’ll be there in a minute, Mom.”

“Not in a minute from now,” Yvonne yelled back at her. “Right now, right this very moment.”

Yvonne slid glasses of milk onto the table. “I’m going down to feed the animals,” she told Sylvia. “Have your breakfast eaten by the time I get back.”

Yvonne shoved her feet into gumboots and went downstairs to the basement. Pushing back the door, her nostrils pinched shut against the obnoxious odor she expected to find upon entering the subterranean confines. But the smell of death had gone—like a bad memory. She filled a plastic bucket with food pellets, turned on the hose and fled down the slope to the rabbit hutches. Vapor was rising as though from a myriad wounds in the tall grass of the meadow. She remembered the first time she had witnessed Antone skinning a rabbit. He cut the pelt free from around the head and tossed it, inside-out, onto the woodpile. Then he cut off the head and slit open the belly of the rabbit and plunged the whole of his large hand into the cavity, pulling out a messy knot of entrails. She had felt carved out, as though someone had reached into her, relieving her of the desire to live.

“Where’s Mom?” Michelle said.

“Down feeding the animals.”

Michelle climbed onto the stool at the end of the table and spread her drawing on the tiles beside her plate. “See the drawing I made for her?”

“Nice,” Sylvia told her. “What’s it supposed to be, anyway?”

“It started out being the cat, but it turned into a monster, instead.”

“What kind of monster has green eyes and a lavender face?”

Michelle shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“A frog who’s hopped into a paint can.”

“Hah-ha. This isn’t a frog, dodo brain. It’s the monster I saw devouring the sky.”

“I’m sure Mom will like it.”

Yvonne was now in the garden, pulling chard for the rabbits to eat. That was when she heard the lone howl rent the air. She stood absolutely still in the mist that was rising all around her. She felt a tepid breath on the back of her neck, and shuddered.

Be part of the **New Orphic** adventure!

Subscribe to
The New Orphic Review

706 Mill Street
Nelson, British Columbia
Canada V1L 4S5

Tel: 250-354-0494

SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

ONE YEAR:

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

TWO YEARS:

Individuals	Canada	\$60 (CAD)	Institutions	Canada	\$70 (CAD)
	USA	\$60 (USD)		USA	\$70 (USD)

Yes, please sign me up for a subscription to ***The New Orphic Review***. I have enclosed a cheque of:

\$_____ for a one year subscription

\$_____ for a two year subscription

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Province/State _____

Country _____ Postal Code _____