

# The New Orphic Review

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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.

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**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*.

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 40 books. The most recent are *The Collected Short Stories of Ernest Hekkanen: Naturalistic, Modern Gothic, Surreal and Postmodern*, *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*.

## Hubris

### Ernest Hekkanen

BY THE TIME you receive this issue of *The New Orphic Review*, I will have turned sixty-three years old. In other words, I'm well past my best-before date when it comes to being a writer, although, whenever this thought crosses my mind, I am quick to remind myself that Nikos Kazantzakis wrote all of his novels after the age of sixty-four. Rumor has it that he petitioned God to give him another ten years to complete his life's work, and apparently God heard his plea. So who knows? Maybe there is hope for me yet. However, I think I will tread rather lightly when it comes to achieving anything of lasting value at this late date, because I don't think it's wise to display too much hubris.

In Kazantzakis' colorful if not outright fictional biography, *Report to Greco*, there is a chapter in which he and a friend try, quite literally, to bring a dead companion back to life. I'm reminded of the description of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead in his novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. One is forced to wonder at the hubris involved in such a feat. The audacity, the unmitigated insolence! What Kazantzakis failed to do in life, he managed to carry off to great effect in his novel, which is one of the reasons I love fiction so much. It often flies in the face of plausibility.

Because Kazantzakis was Greek and had, moreover, steeped himself in the epics of Homer, he was by no means foreign to the notion of hubris. Homer's epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, are chockablock with it. It is the type of hubris displayed mainly by young men, but also by older men of power and position. It is the hubris of males who find excitement, honor and glory in laying siege to other city states, on what are pretty flimsy grounds for attack. And, of course, there's plenty of looting to be done, and women to be won.

I hate to admit this, but I only got around to reading *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in the past year and a half. I know, I know! How could I have

spent so many years thinking of myself as a man of literature, without having read Homer's epics? While battling my way through those tomes, it struck me that the heroes—protagonists like Agamemnon, Achilles and Odysseus—bear a striking resemblance to the protagonist in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. They are stamped with the same regal bearing, inherent nobility, and hubris, and, furthermore, the gods deal with them in the same sort of fashion: interfering here, chastening there, holding them close and then thrusting them far away and, of course, making certain that they perform plenty of sacrifices, both human and animal. Gilgamesh and the Ancient Greek heroes display the exact same kind of hubris—the type displayed by young men who, on every side in every battle, feel as though their actions are inevitable, sublime, right, just, honorable and, above all, choreographed by the gods.

While reading Homer's epics I came to realize that human beings have some well-established, ingrained habits when it comes to attitude, behavior and outlook. One is the habit of thinking that gods of every stripe and persuasion are looking down on us and, indeed, interfering in our lives—that they take a personal interest in us and our affairs. At this point, it occurred to me how Kazantzakis was able to write *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* and, later, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and, moreover, do so with the same underlying conviction! Both books are part of a greater continuum.

While I was steeping myself in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Taro Joy's piece, 'The River,' arrived in the mail. 'The River' is a memoir in which he and three friends decide to body-surf down the Thompson River and through Hell's Gate. What struck me was the hubris displayed by Taro and his companions. They acted as though they were the direct descendents of Agamemnon, Achilles and Odysseus, and, in many ways, their motivations for body-surfing down the river were the same as those of the Ancient Greek heroes.

Hubris is defined as excessive pride or self-confidence. In Greek tragedy, it results in defiance of the gods that leads to nemesis. Nemesis, with a capital N, is, of course, the agent of divine punishment for wrongdoing or presumption.

I think it could be argued that hubris has resulted in our present predicament on earth. Without it, we wouldn't have overspread the continents or have built as many empires as we have—all of which have the unfailing tendency to crumble back to dust. Without hubris, I wouldn't have had the self-confidence necessary to start *The New Orphic Review*, in spite of the fact that the world didn't need yet another literary journal or that I didn't have the sort of financial means to keep it going indefinitely. Indeed, hubris has, in many ways, come to define my life as a writer, and a largely self-published writer, at that.

Unless we choose to ignore what is so very obvious, I think we have

to admit that hubris has played an important role in human affairs, from Ancient Greek times to Napoleonic times, and right up to the present. However, rather than taking full responsibility for our hubris, we human beings prefer to think it is the result of some god choreographing our behavior—a habit of thinking I don't believe we will soon give up, judging from the number of feudal lords in high positions all around the world, ones who continue to act like Agamemnon and his wanton band of reckless, unthinking warriors.

As you drift through this issue of the *NOR*, I think you might spot a little hubris at work—in the lives of the characters, if not the authors themselves.

COURTNEY WALSH is a retired school teacher living in a village in upstate New York. His fiction has appeared in *Hunger Mountain*, *The Long Story* and *The New Orphic Review*. The publication of this story brings him one step closer to his goal of getting a collection out there. He thanks Ernest Hekkanen for accepting this story and for nominating an earlier one for the Pushcart Prize.

## Collateral Damage

Courtney Walsh

FRANK DROVE the van home over the Organ Mountains in New Mexico with his new laser man, Hoazos. In a few minutes, they would make the transition from hunting the enemy in the Mideast to reentering civilian life. He'd drop Hoazos off at his apartment in downtown Las Cruces and then go to his own house on the edge of the city and try to unwind before his wife Jane brought Billy home from soccer practice.

Hoazos had said hardly anything since the incident earlier this morning. He and Frank worked side by side in a windowless trailer at the new Air Force base in White Sands. When they took their headsets off, the only sounds were the air-conditioner and the hum of computers. Their job was flying by remote control a fifty-foot Raptor Drone 7000 miles away over Iraq, trying to spot terrorists with the drone's video camera. With his left hand, Frank operated a shifter that controlled the drone's speed; the pistol-grip stick on the right brought the drone up or down. By his console, Hoazos had a joystick with a red button on it.

Two hours earlier, Frank had guided the drone over a tiny village in Anbar Province, centering the target, an L-shaped brick house, in the monitor's cross hairs. When he gave the okay, Hoazos pressed the red button, releasing a 500-pound bomb. In less than five seconds, there was no more house. There were terrorists in there. That's what the marine on the ground told Frank over the headset. He hoped so. He didn't want to think about the noncombatants.

When Frank had come out of retirement four months ago to re-enlist with the Air Force, he had been sworn not to tell anyone about the drones, not Jane, certainly not his eight-year-old son. Even so, he needed to talk to someone. He tried again to get a response from Hoazos. "What did the chaplain say?"

"The chaplain?" Hoazos jerked up in the passenger's seat as if Frank had startled him out of a bad dream. An Apache from the reservation in

Dulce, Hoazos had been assigned to Frank's module just last week. He was a quick learner, already better than the other kid who had worked for three months with Frank with increasing reluctance before Frank had him transferred.

Hoazos had broad shoulders and the neck of a wrestler. He was only nineteen years old, but lines were already beginning to show on his forehead, and his tight lips curled down slightly around the edges. In a few years, Frank thought, he would look like one of those frowning Apache chiefs in the old army daguerreotypes.

"He said he'd help me pray. When I told him I didn't believe in his god, he got all bent out of shape. I didn't diss him or anything. He's an officer, right?"

"He's a major like me."

The chaplain had been sent from the Air Force Academy to handle the influx of young men who were rushed through sensor training and then sent to the drone center in White Sands. The Air Force kept adding more prefabricated modules until the place looked like a big trailer park that had metastasized in the middle of the desert. Two weeks ago, one of the new recruits, seeing the carnage his drone had caused 7000 miles away, walked out the door of the trailer he'd been assigned to, climbed the 8' high chain-link fence and disappeared into the white gypsum dunes. They'd had to use a helicopter to find him and then two med-techs to subdue him and strap him in a harness. Frank never found out where the kid went after that. He knew the Air Force Hospital had a psychiatric unit. If he had to see another horror like the one he and Hoazos had caused earlier this morning, he might have to talk to a shrink himself.

"It was like I was God, you know?" Hoazos said, glancing at Frank. "Or God's helper."

"Don't think like that. You can't take it personally." Frank looked away from the road for a few seconds to see if Hoazos had come back to reality. Why did the kid always avoid eye contact? It was unnerving, especially now.

"I'm going to invent a video game," Hoazos said. "God's Little Helper."

"They told you what you were getting into."

Just then, they felt a thump under the right front tire.

"What was that?" Hoazos said.

Frank said he didn't know, a rabbit maybe.

They got out of the van. A small clump of bloody fur was wedged in the hubcap, and from back up the road something howled in pain.

They jogged up the bend in the road. A brown dog lay on its side, watching them, blood trickling from the corners of its mouth, its right front paw twitching arhythmically. Hoazos got down on one knee, and the dog's tail wagged feebly as it moaned.



If he were by himself now, Frank would have taken out his Air Force-issued Glock from the van and put the thing out of its misery. But here was Hoazos, holding the dog in his arms like it was a sick baby.

When Frank was a kid in upstate New York, a pit bull had attacked him, and his father had come with his shotgun and put a deer slug through the dog's skull. Jane kept telling Frank his hatred of dogs was unreasonable, and their son kept pestering him about getting a dog. *Just a small one, Dad.*

"I had a dog," Hoazos said, and then went on about how his girlfriend, Rowena, called him one morning when he was still in sensor school to tell him the dog had disappeared. He and Rowena were going to be married some day. They used to make up stories together about how their children would raise the puppies of that dog. He smiled a little and then the smile disappeared. "Do you know a vet?"

"We'll find one," Frank said.

They got the bloody dog into the back of the van on an old blanket that Frank and Jane and Billy used when they were camping. Hoazos insisted on staying in back with the dog.

Frank put the van in gear and punched in Jane's work number on his cell phone. "Cut that out," she yelled at somebody in her seventh-period English class, the one she claimed was the worst she'd ever had. Did she know of a vet? he asked. They had hit a dog; it was in the back of the van, bleeding. She yelled at her class to be quiet and asked if anyone knew a good veterinarian. Several students answered at once. Finally, Jane said there was an animal hospital on Calle de Ninos.

They were off the mountain now, within the city limits. Frank looked in his rearview mirror. "What's on its tags?" he said.

No answer.

"Hoazos?"

"She's dead."

Then Frank saw once again what he'd been trying not to think about since he witnessed it on the video monitors this morning from their air-conditioned module. He had piloted the Raptor Drone within striking distance of the target house. *Al Qaeda holed up in there*, the Lieutenant on the ground had told him over the satellite phone. An officer in Central Command in the Green Zone had been listening to their conversation on the same line and watching the same video feed from the drone. Was he sure about the Al Qaeda? Frank asked the Lieutenant. *Affirmative, sir*: It was the safe house, they had just seen a terrorist enter it. The GO from Central Command was immediate, and Frank passed it on to Hoazos. It was his job to guide the bomb to target with his laser sensors.

Just like that, three white flowers bloomed, one on each of the 40" video monitors mounted high on the wall in front of Frank and Hoazos, engulfing the house. The static over the speaker phone mixed with the

cheering of marines a mile away from the village. He and Hoazos had spent the last four days watching the video stream from the drone's camera. And now Hoazos had his first strike. "Yeah," he shouted, holding his coffee in one hand and making a fist with the other, pumping his fist at the screens the way Billy did when he kicked a goal.

The next step was for Frank to pilot the drone back over the area for damage assessment. Through the same cross hairs they'd used to target the house, Frank and Hoazos now saw, as the smoke cleared, that the missile had not only demolished the target but ripped through the courtyards of the two houses adjacent to it. Three small bodies lay in the rubble, and there was a severed head on top of a pile of concrete blocks that had been the wall of one courtyard. In the other courtyard, a naked child sat in the packed dirt beside what was left of its parent. The camera didn't get close enough for Frank to see if it was a man or a woman, just a torso in half a black robe, trailing bloody intestines.

"Shit." The voice from the Green Zone drew out the word in a stunned whisper. Hoazos gagged and spat coffee into the Styrofoam cup he refilled every hour.

Frank hoped the lieutenant had been right about Al Qaeda. He tried to imagine what the enemy might have looked like, but the images that stuck in his head, even as he guided the drone away from the target, were the infant and the bloody torso. He could have sworn he saw the torso's fingers trying to clutch at something.

When he had been a real pilot in 1991, Frank flew an F-156 Strike Eagle over Iraq. One morning, he and his weapons man had just fired one of their Sidewinder missiles at an Iraq MIG which had been fleeing north to Iran. Will you look at that! his guy in the seat behind him said, as the MIG exploded in a fireball two miles away. No contest, Frank said. Then suddenly, the man shouted into the head set: "Coming at us from below."

Without thinking about it, Frank went into an evasive maneuver, rolling over sideways, scooting left, then right, then going into the sudden vertical climb the Strike Eagle had been designed for. He saw a small heat-seeking SAM missile pass right underneath him and explode on a hillside half a mile away. The Air Force hadn't lost a single plane to Saddam's poor-assed jets, but those hand-held SAMS had already destroyed three A-10 Thunderbolts, fighters that were larger than the Strike Eagles and slower, flying low enough to take out Iraqi tanks. Mitch Sanalarcci, a friend of Frank's, had been killed by a SAM in his Thunderbolt. Iraqis would fire missiles from shoulder launchers, and then run and hide in a ditch somewhere. There had been real danger in flying in the first Gulf War, and Frank had had to make quick decisions, as he had to for years afterwards when he was an air-traffic controller at Kennedy.

He caught Hoazos' eye in the rearview mirror. "Why don't you come home, stay for dinner?"

“I’d just be in the way.”

“Come on,” Franks said. After they had buried the dog, Frank would fire up the grill and cook steaks while they drank *cervezas*. Jane would whip up one of her salads with tomatillos Frank grew in his garden. His son Billy would be there. Great soccer player. “You ever play soccer?”

Hoazos said no, on the reservation the Jicarillas played a game with sticks and wooden hoops.

In the parking lot of a convenience store on South Main, Frank took a twenty from his wallet and told the kid to get a case of Corona.

\* \* \*

Frank sat there in the hot sun, with his arm out the window. When he flew jets in the Gulf War, he was stuck in the combat zone till the war was over. This new war was fucking crazy: You killed people from 7000 miles away in the morning, and then went home for dinner. Worse, there was no physical danger like he had faced 25 years ago. That he had been under fire once made him feel cowardly now. He’d heard the younger guys who were flying F-15s and F-16s in the same skies as his Raptor Drones called the new program the “Chair Force” and joked that the only danger for drone pilots was spilling hot coffee on themselves.

He’d never have thought about going back to the Air Force if his old wing leader, Pat Hogan, hadn’t called last spring. They were desperate for experienced pilots to fly drones, Pat said. Now that ground troops were being reassigned to Afghanistan, the Air Force was getting more of a role in Iraq. Frank could be pilot and teacher at the same time. Pat was authorized to offer him a promotion and a sizeable bonus on the spot, enough to buy that Cessna Frank always talked about. “Besides,” Pat said, “your country needs you.”

A Brigadier General now, Pat was stationed at Vandenberg Air Force Base, in charge of the task force on unmanned aerial systems. Frank wondered if Pat knew how it was to be flying, but not really flying—killing by remote control and then going home for a day or two to be a family man. Frank had little in common with the other twenty or so drone pilots at White Sands. Many of them had only recently joined the Air Force. Some had never flown a plane before. He hardly ever saw them, except for briefings every few days and a word or two when he passed them coming to or from their modules. Neither he nor Hoazos could breathe a word to anyone off the base about what they did with the Air Force: a trade-off for the three bedroom adobe ranch with the kidney-shaped swimming pool. A nice home in a new development where all the homes were adobe and each one had a quarter-acre backyard. And a trade-off, as well, for the real flying he was able to do on weekends, over the desert and the mountains in the used Cessna Skyhawk, a single-engine prop plane with leather seats that had cost him almost half as much as the house.

Jane liked their new home well enough, although when he got the Cessna a few weeks after they moved in, she said it was an extravagance. When Frank protested that his re-enlistment bonus had paid for her Persian rug as well as the plane, she asked him again what exactly he did at White Sands. “You’re not yourself lately,” she said.

“Neither are you.” He looked closely at her, remembering how when they started out together 15 years earlier, she let two wisps of hair trickle down over her cheeks. St. Jane, he used to call her in bed. But this summer, she had her hair cut short, and the make-up job didn’t quite erase the lines that were beginning to form on her face. She had taught English in Great Neck, and had been lucky to land a new position at Las Cruces Central High.

“What is the Air Force doing to you?” she said. “Will you *talk* to me for once?”

“Not about that. I can’t.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can take this.”

After that, she stopped asking. She avoided his eyes when they spoke, and some of the silences they sank into seemed bottomless. He retreated more often to his basement workroom where he took up his former hobby of building model airplanes. Frank thought Hoazos might enjoy seeing the models he had worked on over the years. He wondered how his wife would react to his bringing Hoazos home for dinner. He had told Billy about him last week, and Billy kept asking about the Apaches. Billy was a happy kid with a round, freckled face and a cowlick Jane kept telling him to comb down. His hair was red like Frank’s. Billy would take to Hoazos right away.

Things might be okay, Frank thought. First, though, they had to bury the dog.

\* \* \*

He chose a spot behind the shed, where he had let the weeds grow unchecked. Half a foot down, something clanked against Hoazos’ shovel. Then Frank hit something solid too. The whole area was full of rocks. Hoazos shoveled with the youthful energy Frank once had, and soon it became a silent competition. Frank wasn’t about to let some new recruit show him up in his own backyard. Harder and harder they worked until they had a grave, three feet by three feet and three feet deep, and Frank said okay, that was enough.

Hoazos picked up one of the stones. “We can build a cairn,” he said.

Hearing a car pull into the driveway, Frank checked his watch. They’d been at it for over an hour.

He hoped Billy hadn’t looked in the back of the van. The last time Billy had asked him about getting a dog, they’d been sitting by the pool sipping cocktails with their next-door neighbors. And when Frank had finally relented—he didn’t know why—and said maybe, Billy’s eyes lit

up. Now, he'd brought home a dog all right.

"Dad?" It was Billy in his smudged blue and green soccer uniform.

"This is Hoazos," Frank said.

Billy shook hands with Hoazos but didn't say anything. His face still had its share of baby fat, yet if you looked at him a certain way you could see the adult taking shape within it. One of the few things that made Frank happy since they had moved to New Mexico was seeing his son smile. Billy wasn't smiling now.

"We ran over a dog," Frank said.

"Mom said you were taking it to the vet's."

"We were. But it died."

"We couldn't help it," Hoazos said. "It ran out in front of us."

What were fathers supposed to do at times like this? His son had no understanding of death. He put his arm around Billy and started walking him back to the house, trying to remember a time when he himself had experienced the innocence he wanted his son to hold onto.

Jane was in the kitchen, slicing tomatillos. Her cigarette burned in the ashtray, and by the slicing board was a vodka and tonic. She was surprised to see Hoazos, but she managed a smile which disappeared before Frank got through introducing him.

"The dog died," Billy said.

"I told him we could get a new one," Frank said.

"We're going to bury it," Billy said.

"Why don't you stay and help your mother?"

"I'm fine," Jane said. She picked up one of Frank's tomatillos, making the steak knife flash as she chopped it into little pieces. "Let Billy help. We all have to learn at some point." She turned to Hoazos. "What has my husband been teaching you?"

Hoazos stood by the door, his service cap in both hands over his belt buckle, looking at his feet. "I can't tell you that, ma'am."

\* \* \*

Two hours later, the dog had been buried, and Frank had reassured Billy that they would find him a dog of his own before Frank went back to work Monday. Billy and Hoazos seemed to be hitting it off. At dinner, Billy asked him if he was related to Geronimo. No, Hoazos said, Geronimo was from the Chiricahua tribe in the western part of the state. Then Billy asked him if he was going to be a test pilot, too, but instead of answering, Hoazos started talking about video games. He'd played them since he was Billy's age, he said. Extreme Combat? Billy asked. That was ancient, Hoazos said, how about Call of Duty? Absolutely, Billy said, he was going to get Call of Duty IV. Jane excused herself, saying she had to correct a stack of essays, just as Hoazos was telling Billy he had created a few video games of his own. Don't tell him about God's Little Helper, Frank thought. But Hoazos spoke of a game he had invented about his

own tribe. He made a dour face as he assumed the character of Black Hectin, the Jicarilla God of creation, chanting in a low baritone. “Cool,” Billy said, clapping his hands.

Hoazos surprised Frank: This man from a totally different culture seemed to have more in common with his son than he did. Hoazos and Billy had grown up on video games, but did Hoazos know any more about the real world than Billy did? What the hell was reality anyway, a video game where you murdered people halfway across the world? He took another swig of beer, and then Jane called down from the upstairs landing, saying it was Billy’s bedtime.

After he’d cut up another lime for more Coronas, Frank took Hoazos down to the cellar and showed him his collection of model planes—P-32s, Sabre Jets, and just about everything the Air Force had flown since World War II, including a replica of the B-52 his father had flown over Viet Nam, perfectly-scaled models he had constructed over the years—most of them from scratch, out of balsa wood. Lately, he had been working on a special project. He opened the drawer of his metal file cabinet and took out the model he had carved from a solid block of balsa. Recognize this? he said. It was a model of their Raptor Drone, complete with miniature 500 lb. bombs. Hoazos nodded, but when Frank held it out he wouldn’t take it.

“Let’s go sit by the pool,” Frank said.

\* \* \*

The cool night had come on, and they sat with their beers at the glass patio table. Frank leaned back, resting his head on his hands, looking at the sky. It was clear, the flood of stars dazzling. “One of these days,” Frank said, “I’ll have to teach my kid the constellations.”

“You’ve got a nice family,” Hoazos said after a while. “I’d like to have a family some day.”

“So that’s what I’ve been teaching you?”

“I don’t know.” Hoazos seemed intent on squeezing a chunk of lime into his Corona. “That and the skill to kill, Sir?”

“Cut the ‘Sir’ shit. This is the brave new Air Force: Man to man.” Frank thought about that for a moment. “It was a whole different time when I flew real fighter planes: ‘Sir’ this, ‘Sir’ that. They even had an officer’s club in a big tent in the middle of the desert.” He stopped, scratching at the label on his bottle. “Now look at us. Shooting the shit by my swimming pool, downing *cervesas*.”

When Hoazos didn’t say anything, Frank stood up. His bottle clanked when he tried to set it down on the glass table. “Better take you home. I’ll need you hale and hearty day after tomorrow so we can go back in our air-conditioned trailer and kill the enemy.” He shook his head. “There’s no danger anymore. Except that you might go nuts. It’s fucking unreal.”

“It’s real enough for me, Sir.” Again, Hoazos looked away when Frank

tried to make eye contact.

“The only thing I fly these days is that old prop plane. Billy’s got it in his head that I’m testing the world’s fastest jets in White Sands. I just nod and try to change the subject. What can I say?”

Frank saw by Hoazos’ expression that he didn’t have an answer. “Hell, I don’t know if I’ve been teaching you anything. I mean, you’re a great laser operator, but the whole thing is...is.” He couldn’t think of the right word.

“Absurd?”

“Why don’t you ever look people in the eye?” Frank blurted out.

“It is an insult for Apaches to make eye contact or to stare.” This time he didn’t take his eyes away, and for a long moment they sized each other up. Then Hoazos asked if he could use the bathroom.

When Hoazos had gone into the house, Frank took his beer and walked out in the middle of the yard to get a better view of the stars. They were brilliant tonight and the bright gibbous moon gave the log ends projecting out of the walls and the faux adobe walls themselves a faint orange tint. Somehow, the whole property—his house, his pool, his factory-made shed with the Dutch roof—felt like a puny fabrication compared to the magnificent chaos above him. When he was very young, he had been awed by the heavens like this. But the memory, being so old, was hazy. There had been trees, big beautiful trees, framing the stars in his parents’ backyard in upstate New York. By now, someone had probably chopped them down.

A scratching noise came from behind the shed, and when Frank went to investigate, he found a lean, mangy animal digging furiously at the grave. When the creature bared its teeth and growled, Frank picked up the shovel and went at it. It made a snarl and scurried away into the brush beyond the property.

“I heard a coyote,” Hoazos said, appearing beside Frank. “Maybe now we could build the cairn.” If they put the rocks they’d dug up over the grave, he said, the animals wouldn’t be tempted to dig in it.

Why not, Frank said, it would sober him up. After they had covered the grave with a single layer of stones, Frank said, “Did your people build cairns?”

People all over the world made cairns, Hoazos said, not only to keep the animals out, but to honor the dead.

“What’s the name of your tribe again?”

Jicarilla, Hoazos said. Black Hectin was the name of the true creator in the story of how his people came to be. He made animals out of clay and blew wind into them so they were alive: sheep, goat, buffalo, and then the dog. It was the dog that asked the creator for a companion, and it was he who drew with his paw a sketch of what a man would look like. Hectin laughed at that, Hoazos said, and then he made a man, also out of

clay. “The man and the dog went off together—like best friends.”

“I better get my son a big dog,” Frank said.

“I could go with you while I’m still here.”

“Do we have enough rocks for this?” Frank said. And then abruptly,

“What do you mean, ‘still here?’”

“I can’t do this anymore. I’m going back to the reservation.”

“What? You can’t just walk out of a war.”

*Why are you doing this to me?* he thought. But then he realized Hoazos’ decision wasn’t about him, it was about Hoazos.

If only Frank could stop the lying—but what then? He couldn’t simply disappear like Hoazos. The service had been his life. “It’s those civilians we killed, isn’t it?”

When Hoazos nodded, Frank said, “Do you remember 9/11?” Hoazos had been only a few years older than Billy when the terrorists had struck.

That was very bad, Hoazos said. He thought for a minute. “But I don’t think they killed children.”

“They attacked our homeland!”

“How would you like it if they flew robot planes over here and destroyed your house and your wife and son with it?”

“We’ve always had to defend our country.”

“Your country, Sir.” Hoazos’ country was the reservation, he said. That was the place of his people. When terrorists came on the reservation, then he would fight.

“Why do you keep calling me Sir?”

“Because there is still some part of you that can think right.”

Frank yawned. He’d had too many beers. “Why don’t you stay here till tomorrow?” They had an inflatable mattress in the basement, he said. Then he asked Hoazos if there was an airport near Dulce. Yes, Hoazos said, the Jicarilla Nation had built their own airfield.

“I’ll bet they never put you in a real plane in sensor school.”

Hoazos said he had never been in an airplane. But then when he realized that Frank was offering to fly him home, his expression changed. “You could get in trouble because of me?”

“I’m a big boy now,” Frank said. He wondered how long it would take for the Air Force to get him another laser man.

\* \* \*

Next morning, Saturday, Frank and Hoazos were getting into the van when Billy ran out with directions to the animal shelter he’d got from Mapquest. In ten minutes they were there. Billy ran ahead of them to a long building behind a two-storey white clapboard house.

The ruckus started as soon as the lady who ran the kennel unlocked the door. Dogs everywhere, barking, yipping, whining, scratching and butting at the doors of their cages. The overwhelming odor of stale canine and dog shit and dog piss.



She could hardly keep up with her job these days, the lady said. Her husband had planned to build a new wing on the building, but then he had a stroke, and now she had to care for him too. She regarded Billy. “You’ll want a pup, I suppose?”

Billy nodded, looking at the long roomful of triple-stacked cages. There are a couple of real cute ones over here, the lady said, ushering Billy to the west end of the room. The place made Frank feel confined, as he felt confined at work. At least the trailer didn’t smell of dog shit. When he had finally gotten to sleep last night, he fell into a nightmare. He was trudging along a desert road. When he came to the village in Anbar Province, wild dogs were eating the corpses of the people he had killed.

He grimaced and went to the window of the kennel to assure himself the spring day was still there.

Hoazos had his nose against a cage at the other end of the room. When Frank walked up behind him, he was staring at the ugliest hunk of dog flesh Frank had ever seen.

“You look him in the eye, but you won’t look at me,” Frank said.

The pup’s face seemed bigger than its body. Hairless brown flesh bunched into folds around the neck and hindquarters, the lips merged into deep jowls. It didn’t protest at all when Hoazos opened the door of the cage and plucked it out by the scruff of the neck.

“Billy,” Hoazos called out, setting the dog on the concrete floor. The dog started to walk, then flopped over, and there was Billy picking it up. “Ooh,” he said, as he held it to his face and the dog licked it, gobs of drool gathering in his jowls.

For once, Frank didn’t have to make a decision. He had never seen his son so happy.

\* \* \*

They dropped Billy and the dog off at the house, and Jane, when she saw the dog, surprised Frank, taking it in her arms, saying it was adorable. What is it? she said. Hoazos didn’t answer right away, and Frank, anxious to be gone, told her he had to help Hoazos move out of his apartment.

The moving part was true at least, though it took less than ten minutes because Hoazos had brought only a duffle bag of clothes with him to Las Cruces. But when they got to the airfield, they had to wait over an hour for a mechanic to get the engine going on the fuel truck. It was afternoon by the time Frank leveled the plane off at 6,000 feet and headed northwest.

The two of them sat in the front seats, Frank in the pilot’s seat on the left. Hoazos, locked in his seat belt, brushed his hand against the leather seats, and gingerly touched the brake with the toe of his boot. Frank thought Hoazos said something about a car, but he couldn’t hear it all because the noise of the propeller filled the cabin. He pointed to his ear and shook his head.

“Does my steering wheel work?” Hoazos said, loud enough this time.

“It’s called a yoke,” Frank said.

Six feet directly in front of the cabin, the single propeller ran at 2,200 RPM. If it weren’t for the noise, Frank could have fallen asleep.

Frank wondered what he’d say when Hoazos failed to show up at work Monday. *Disappeared*, he could hear himself say when Pat Hogan called him to rag him out for losing the Air Force another laser man. One more lie. Still, he felt he was doing the right thing at this moment. Maybe you had to take life moment by moment, and if you made the right choices, things might turn out okay. Maybe not. Maybe your choices were a trap you set for yourself without knowing it.

“What will you do now?” Frank said.

“A comic book.”

It would be an online comic, Hoazos said. “Kids need to know what our country is doing.” Not just Apache kids, he added. The people they killed would be in it. And the dog they ran over. And the cairn. And coyote.

“You won’t put me in it, will you?”

“No.” Hoazos laughed softly. He would change the names. To protect the innocent, he said.

The bottom of the windshield started to fog up, and Frank adjusted the cabin air control. The fresh air brought more noise with it. He imagined Billy reading the comic online, emailing it to his friends. So much for innocence. Maybe kids did need to know.

He remembered when he finally edged into bed last night, trying not to wake his wife. But she wasn’t asleep. He told her about the coyote he had scared away, and then he described how Hoazos and he had built a proper cairn over the burial site. Jane said she thought Hoazos was a little crazy. “He looks away when you talk to him.”

He told her what Jicarillas thought about eye contact. He found himself rubbing her shoulder as he explained the tribal customs Hoazos had told him about. When Frank said Hoazos hit it off with Billy, Jane said she wasn’t sure she liked Hoazos talking to Billy. “The man has a lot of wisdom for his age,” Frank said.

“Maybe you’re just naive,” she said, as he ran his hand softly down her side. “What are you doing?”

“You don’t have to teach tomorrow.”

A little while later, he told her he’d let Hoazos sleep in the basement because they’d had too many beers to drive. What he hadn’t told her was that Hoazos was going AWOL and that he was going to fly him to the reservation.

Shouting over the noise of the propeller, Hoazos jarred Frank out of the memory of last night. “You could quit too.”

“I’m not as brave as you.”

He could hear Pat Hogan now. *What the hell's wrong with you, Frank? You used to be a leader.* Well, Sir, he'd say, it used to be a different world. *Since you and the USAF don't seem to realize that, I fucking quit!*

He was shocked to hear himself think like that.

He shivered. The fresh air had made the cabin cold, and he turned the dial on the heat vent, letting in heated air from the engine.

They were flying diagonally across a pass in the Sangre de Christos. The mountains, stretching out under both wings as far as the eye could see, still had considerable snow above the treeline. Ahead of them, the mud-brown line of the Rio Grande came into view. The river had cut its way 800 feet down, leaving steep limestone embankments. The land around it was red and beige, dotted with sagebrush and junipers.

"Do you think the coyotes will come back?" Frank said.

Hoazos said that he wasn't sure. But there were more of them lately all over the southwest, and they could be dangerous. When Frank turned to see what was on Hoazos' face, he thought of Geronimo again. The light up here clarified the dark lines on Hoazos' forehead, the way it lit up the creases of the land below them. A little girl on the reservation had been mauled by a coyote this winter, Hoazos said. Coyotes killed house cats and sometimes even dogs. Hoazos gave Frank a nod when he said this, and Frank thought the nod was accompanied by an odd smile. What the hell was so funny about killing dogs? Hoazos went on about the coyotes. Jicarilla children were forbidden to touch even the pelt of a coyote. Coyotes were bad luck and made you crazy. In Apache stories, Coyote was deceitful. He was more foolish than wise, more evil than good. One time Coyote envied the pretty spots on Deer, and then Deer tricked Coyote into putting his children in the fire so that they too would acquire pretty spots. "But the fire burned them to death."

"Was the coyote sorry?"

Hoazos shook his head.

A while later, Hoazos said they were coming over Apache country. Frank picked up the microphone and announced his position over the UNICOM Frequency. A gruff voice over the radio laughed when Frank said he wanted to land on the reservation. Why didn't he go the extra fifteen minutes to Dulce Airport? the man said. They were civilized there, instrument landings and all. Hoazos shook his head in disgust, and Frank told the man he would proceed as he had said. "Your funeral," the man said. Frank switched off the set.

"It is the Jicarilla Apache Nation Airport," Hoazos said with some pride. It was spring and the cactus flowers would be out, yellow and orange and pale blue. He went on about the names his tribe had given the places on their land, *Stream Breaks Rock in Two* and *Agave Grows in Shit*.

"Agave Grows in Shit?"

“You’ll have to read my comic book.” Hoazos had his hands around the yoke in front of him, but his head was tilted looking down under the wing strut. “There’s my village.”

“Do you want to take over?”

“Me?” He looked at Frank incredulously, but he didn’t take his hands off the yoke.

Letting go of his yoke, Frank nodded yes and sat back.

Hoazos looked horrified and exhilarated at the same time. He inched the training yoke a little to the left and the plane turned. “Tell me what to do. Please.”

“We need to lose some altitude.” Frank adjusted the carburetor heat control. This was a crucial step. If the carburetor froze, they could crash. He showed Hoazos where the throttle was and told him to pull it. When the engine began to slow, Frank pointed out the RPM gauge and told him how it should fall during the descent. “Now pull back on the yoke.”

Hoazos jerked it back, and the plane nosed down precariously.

“Not that hard. Pull up!”

When they were flying level again, Hoazos was gripping his yoke so tightly Frank had to tell him to relax. He waited till the plane had dropped to a thousand feet. The shadows on the brown land were deepening, and there were patches of pink and mauve where the light hit just right. Then, a mile ahead, he saw the airport, not an airport really, but a single runway. He told Hoazos to fly directly over it, and when he’d done that to drop another 200 feet and he’d tell him how to circle it. “You’re doing fine,” Frank said.

He knew the FAA could revoke his license for letting a man who had never been in an airplane before fly one. Frank could have taken over the controls at any time, but somehow he was reluctant to do that, even now when it would soon be too late.

There was no control tower, no other buildings on the landing strip. When they were down to 1000 feet, he guided Hoazos through a go-around of the runway. It was paved but cracked in several places. At the near end a yellow windsock luffed fitfully. Not a lot of wind, Frank thought. Fuck it, let the man finish what he started.

“The propeller is going backwards,” Hoazos yelled, alarmed.

No it isn’t, Frank said, just seems that way. The air speed indicator showed they had slowed to 80 knots. So far so good. He turned the carburetor heat back on and, tapping on the dial in front of him, told Hoazos to power back up to 1500 RPMs. The runway was coming up fast. “Watch the glidescope,” he said. “Keep that bubble level. Okay, now pull the power back. Gently.”

You were supposed to touch down on the numbers, but there were none, not even a center line. The wheels hit with a jolt and when the plane caromed and touched down again, Frank saw one of the wheel

fairings break loose and bounce after them.

“How do I stop?”

“Like a car,” Frank said, laughing. He took over, slowed the plane with the toe-brakes, left the runway to turn around on the grassy field, and taxied back to where the aluminum fairing had come to rest next to a patch of weeds growing out of a fissure in the runway.

They climbed out of the plane. The rough landing had popped the rivets on the fairing, merely a decorative wheel cover. It could have been a lot worse. Frank took a deep breath of fresh air. Patches of brightly colored cactus flowers dotted the fields, and mountains loomed all around them. Odd that the mountains hadn’t seemed that big when he flew over them.

As Frank shook hands with him, Hoazos said that now he would be able to tell his girlfriend that he was a real pilot for a little while. And then he said maybe his old dog would show up.

Frank remembered Jane asking what kind of dog Billy had brought home. “That puppy...” he said.

Hoazos smiled. “It is a Neapolitan Mastiff.”

“Mastiff? You never said mastiff. Mastiffs are fucking huge.”

“He will grow to love your son.” Hoazos laughed quietly. “Soon you won’t have to worry about coyote.”

Then he turned and walked toward the mountains.

\* \* \*

Next morning, Frank woke suddenly from a deep sleep to loud barking. It took him a minute to get his bearings. He was in his own bed. The barking continued, shrill and staccato, as sunlight came through the window.

It had been dark for an hour or more when he’d touched down in Las Cruces last night. Jane was asleep when he got home, and this time he was careful not to wake her. Where was she this morning?

He said her name, and then called it again, louder. Had she left him, taken Billy with her? No, her clothes were still hanging in the closet.

He slipped on a pair of sweat pants and a polo shirt. The alarm clock on the dresser said ten o’clock. It came to him that today was Sunday. Jane and Billy had gone to mass at Santa Rosa de Lima. She had insisted Billy be brought up Catholic, saying that when he was old enough, he could make up his own mind to keep going to church—or stop as Frank had stopped.

He opened the drapes on the sliding glass door. There, in the corner of the yard, partly hidden by the shed, was the cairn he and Hoazos had built. It looked like a little pyramid, missing its apex. *Rock Covers Dog*. That was what Hoazos had said Frank should call this place. Tell Billy to say the name over and over so he holds it in his mind, he told Frank yesterday as they waited by the plane for the fuel truck. The backyard

would be part of their family story, as places on the reservation were in the stories of the Jicarillas.

Hoazos and his stories.

When the barking continued, Frank shouted down the stairs, "All right, I'm coming." The barking ceased for a few seconds and then resumed more urgently, with yips added to it. So that was what a puppy sounded like. He had never heard one before. Neapolitan Mastiff! It had probably doubled in size overnight.

It was still a little pup, though, and when Frank tried to cross the living room, it climbed all over his feet, nipping at the bottom of his sweats. On the floor under the arch leading to the kitchen, the miniature drone lay tipped to one side; the dog must have carried it up from the basement. He picked it up and sat in the reclining lounge chair while the little dog tried to climb in his lap. There were tooth marks on the fuselage of the drone and one of the miniature bombs was missing. Frank shivered. Again, he heard the cheering from the marines on the ground in Iraq as the fireball engulfed the L-shaped house in the middle of the village.

The puppy was walking around in circles, sniffing the rug. Before Frank could react, it squatted over a cream-colored diamond-shaped pattern and shat. Frank had been trying to erase from his conscience the image of the horror he had caused, but it came back with the odor from the rug: the bodies strewn in the dirt, the head in the rubble that had been a courtyard wall, the crying baby, the fingers twitching on the bloody torso.

He rushed to the kitchen to vomit in the sink, but all he could do was gag while the dog kept nipping at his heels. "Cut that out, damn it."

He pictured the dog a year from now, the size of a friggling mountain lion. It sat by his feet, looking up at him. It whined. Someone had left a salad bowl on the floor in the corner of the room. "Water?" Frank said. "You want water?"

After it slurped its fill, the puppy followed him back and forth between the kitchen and the living room, as he tried to clean the soiled rug. Jane would have a fit when she saw it. The carpet was genuine Persian, handmade.

It was Billy's dog and he would have to learn to take care of it. He hoped Hoazos had been right about the dog and the boy bonding as they grew together.

Frank remembered how suddenly alone he had felt when he reached cruising altitude on his return flight, as if he had lost a best friend. There had been an incompleteness about their parting; he hadn't confided in the younger man as he wanted to. Now, he couldn't think of anyone he could talk to about what really mattered.

He set the miniature drone on the arm of the lounge and picked the dog up by the scruff of the neck. There was scruff all over it, as if its skin

were a sweater four sizes too large. The chestnut-colored flesh had a sheen to it and darkened to brown in the loose folds on its back, in its wrinkled stubby legs, in its over-sized ears, and especially in the jowls. When its pink tongue darted out and licked Frank's fingers, moisture seeped down the jowls onto his lap. In a minute, it fell fast asleep, and Frank kept petting it, amazed that the skin felt so soft.

Could he quit the Air Force? There might be a court martial, disgrace. Maybe he could just refuse to fly the drones any more, ask for a transfer, a desk job somewhere.

When Frank picked up the drone, the dog woke up and lunged for it. Frank tossed it off the chair and the dog leapt after it. Then, when the electric motor on the garage door sounded, the puppy's ears perked up and it streaked to the kitchen.

If Frank could talk his way out of the Air Force, he might go back to being an air traffic controller. There were guys retiring all the time. Before he left Kennedy, an executive from an air taxi company had told him to look him up any time he wanted a job as a commercial pilot. Could Jane get her old job back? They'd have to sell the house and the plane too. So many things to think about; he couldn't figure it out all by himself.

It was time to tell his wife the truth.

Jane came into the room, followed by Billy, the dog nipping at his feet. He looked like such a little grown-up in his brown Sunday suit with the string tie. "Where's Hoazos?"

"Good Lord." Jane had found the stain on the carpet.

"That's your dog," Frank told Billy. "You'll have to learn to house-break it."

When Billy asked again about Hoazos, Frank said, "He went back to the reservation."

The dog had pounced on the drone again and was shaking it back and forth. Billy tugged it out of the puppy's jaws and studied it. He seemed confused—where a jet would have a cockpit for the pilot, the drone had a windowless bubble. "Who flies this, dad?"

"No one. Now go play with your dog. Figure out what you're going to call it. A dog needs to have a name."

Jane took the broken drone from Billy. "What *is* this thing?"

Frank patted his son on the shoulder. "Go on now. I out-rank you."

After Billy had gone out into the yard with the dog at his heels, Jane said, "I thought you were helping Hoazos move across town."

"We need to talk," Frank said. He told her the Air Force was changing, and he wasn't sure he could change with it. Then he said Hoazos had gone AWOL. "Matter of fact, I flew him home in the Cessna." He remembered the peace at 6,000 feet, the colors of the land below, the thrill of letting Hoazos take the controls. "It was a beautiful day. You should have seen the mountains."

JOANNA M. WESTON lives on Vancouver Island, B.C.; married, 3 sons, two cats. Is a full-time writer of poetry, short stories, children's books and poetry reviews. Has published internationally for many years in journals and anthologies. Has a middle-reader, *Those Blue Shoes*; also poetry, *A Summer Father*, the latter published by Frontenac House of Calgary.

## Joanna M. Weston / Three Poems

### Outside a Museum

an unwritten postcard  
falls out of a book  
while I wait for my son  
to finish chasing  
the fame of Alexander G. Bell

researched and ticketed  
wife and children sketched  
while his machines  
communicated through air  
did he forget to write  
to his family?

photos of him  
edges gilded and framed  
for glassy-eyed tourists  
who write postcards  
while waiting ...



## How Speak to the Rain?

Do I rant of goldenrod and roses  
broken by thunderous clouds?  
And will rain answer with whispers  
dripped from bare twigs?

rather I bend into a shout of wind  
catch the string of words on my skin  
run for the shelter of a wall

where I murmur to a coming shower  
of green and rising flowers  
that know the urgency of April  
and the weep of winter's end

no answer cries from falling skies  
I am left to hold fallen petals  
nurse broken stems  
and ask for gentler rain

## A Roadside Sign:

salt fish tomatoes

late August  
mackerel running off the coast  
caught in nets beyond the point

fish cooked in butter  
with lemon and basil  
served on a plate

salted savoury  
fish raises its head  
sucks air  
ripe with the smell of garden  
and fresh tomatoes

TARO JOY recently returned to make his home in Canada after many years in South East Asia. He is currently involved in compiling a 'catalogue raissonne' about the life and a specific exhibition of the artist William Allister. Will, recently deceased, was a close friend of his family. The exhibition is entitled *East Weds West* and was inspired by Will's return to Japan after forty years to face and heal his demons from being a POW in Japan.

## The River

Taro Joy

SOME STORIES remain fresh forever. They are of the flesh, flow in the blood and bind to the soul as tight as woven steel. This story, as brief as it may be (or as long as it lasts) is one of those. I have been thinking about writing it for almost twenty years, but every time I got close it started to burn under my skin; my blood boiled and hard noises filled my ears. It brought a weight to my chest as if I was drowning, and tears to my eyes as if I had drowned a friend. It's not a story of courage nor one of stupidity (no matter how you measure it). It's a story of wanting to be greater than is rightfully fair, to grow and move in ways that we mostly only dream. It is about a turning point on a razor's edge in a mighty storm, it is about stacking the odds against oneself to try to prove the existence of god. It is not my story alone. It belongs to Justin, Raine, Coal and the Thompson River, main tributary to the Fraser, precursor to the famous Hell's Gate.

First, I recommend anyone who is in the area, or has the means to get there, to explore this majestic river. I imagine it has been built up along the shores a little since I last saw it on the day of this story, but much of it is protected because of its sheer, stark beauty and because of its fearsome hostility to all who would intrude upon it.

That year we had taken a few trips to raft the river's famous rapids; we had a friend who knew a guy who ran a rafting outfit down through eighteen rapids along its twisting length. Class 3, 4 and 5 rapids will do everything from entertaining to scaring the shit out of you when eight man crews, with one rafting master, paddle their way through some of the most beautiful and heaviest rapids in Canada, and no doubt the world. Those trips were great but, at our age and with our high capacity for adrenaline, we were not entirely satisfied with the action. We (meaning mostly me) took to jumping out of the boat at particularly hairy points in

order to ‘free style’ the rapids. To this we added some LSD perhaps mixed with mescaline and found that the ‘action’ improved significantly. With our thick life preservers firmly attached we had only to remember, as much as possible, to keep our heads above water and our feet pointed down river so as to avoid having our skulls cracked on any of the many rocks that pepper some segments of the river. This antic as fun eventually lost even its ‘rush.’ It also made the boat master none too happy.

Around that time “The Prayer to the River” came to me; it was part poem, part prayer and part prophecy. It was a homage to the Thompson’s mighty power and a call to the spirits of whatever gods may or may not exist, to protect my brothers and myself as we entered what would surely be a life-changing experience. It implied acceptance—that the day would be unlike any other one—and, if we should be allowed to sit together at the end of it, we would be unlike what we had previously been. I will continue to look for the original copy of “The Prayer,” but I believe, like that day, and all of our lives, it belongs to the river and only the river can give it up.

I remember the drive up in Raine’s blue Mustang GT with the white racing stripe down the center, the stereo blasting *Rage Against the Machine*: “Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me! Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me! Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me,” three lines that summed things up for an entire generation and hit particularly close to the four of our hearts. We stopped a couple of times to sit with hundreds of other tourists watching the rapids move thousands of tons of water at breakneck speed between high stone cliffs and 200-ton boulders. We listened to the raft crews screaming as they plunged headlong into the mist and bubbles that boiled on the surface of an underwater current that, in one spot, had held a train car and eight people spinning inside it for a week.

We sat in silence, imagining our route, kinesthetically training for the swim we were about to make, repeating our mantra from Frank Herbert’s novel, *Dune*, namely that “Fear is a mind killer.” We could do this. We were all fit with ample water experience (except for Justin who, in that respect, was perhaps the most courageous or dumbest of us all). Raine was, in effect, a type of fish, having been a swim instructor with as powerful an arsenal of swim strokes as any I have seen to this day. Coal, who was frighteningly handsome and looked every bit the name he had chosen, appeared, in the right light, to be carved of the compound; he enjoyed, as we all did, surfing the freezing Canadian waves whenever he got a chance (which was not often for any of us). Then there was yours truly, at a peak of fitness and awareness though not with the intuitive raw capability for violence or the understanding of how to wield it that the grinding gears of time would gift me with in the not too distant future. I was fit, nevertheless, at a level few people ever experience, martially trained,

limber from years of dance and deep into the idea that the mind could overcome whatever matter it encountered.

In the trunk of the GT we all had wet suits: five point five millimeter with hoods and seven-millimeter booties and gloves. More than enough to bring you to the surface after a crashing fall off a huge wave in the salt-saturated oceans of B.C. We had spent days in the ocean, during snowfall in the winter, and walked out steaming from exertion at sunset. We were convinced that we would have the necessary bounce to stay afloat and sufficient insulation to stay warm for at least five hours in the much warmer river water.

We drove until there were no more tourist stops and no more river-tour outlets and no more homes of any consequence. We found a dirt road that led to a little-used entrance to the river's calm waters. We came to the end of the road (the metaphor is not lost on us even to this day) and discovered, adjacent to what seemed to be a public access to the river, a small farmhouse. After a few minutes spent standing around staring at the far-from-intimidating water as it whisked hypnotically by, we were approached by a kindly-looking old man. He asked about our intentions and we told him we had come to swim the Thompson. He gave a laugh to indicate how crazy we were, but said it was done all the time and asked us if we'd like to borrow some life vests that he would happily lend us. We explained to him that the buoyancy of our wet suits would be fine and how we wanted to move with the water, not bob like fishing lures. He laughed again, wished us luck and went on his way. Bolstered by the knowledge that this had been done before, and encouraged by the lightness of this old man's observations, we suited up.

Before we entered the water we gathered for a prayer and each one of us committed some part of himself to the journey. We absolved each other of what was about to happen should it go badly for any particular one of us. We then took communion which, in this case, was a high dose of LSD mixed with a concoction a chemist friend had come up with called 'Fusion.' Years later while watching an antidrug show I noticed that Fusion had a lot of the nicer-sounding side effects of PCP, without the cop-car flipping, blood-drooling, handcuff-snapping nasty stuff that seems to be, in the government's eyes, the inevitable outcome of any drug use from weed to heroin. We received the holy flesh, as it were, and then we drank the blood of Christ, which, in this case, was a good chug of Wild Turkey. Then we entered the water.

The first couple of hours were great. The water was pristine and, as our minds expanded, its beauty became overwhelming. Here the river was wide, the shore mostly rocky beach or farmland punctuated by the occasional house or river-tour operation. While passing the latter we would go low into the water, black hoods up on our wet suits. We believed that we would appear to be four silent buoys floating past, lost jetsam from

some overturned canoe or, at worst, garbage illegally dumped upriver by some moron. We did this partly to conceal our journey and partly because we were far too high to try to explain ourselves to anyone.

At this point along the river, the class-2 and -3 rapids were as fun as any water we had ever swum. Rough currents in relatively shallow water spat us airborne if we paddled at the right speed and angle. We were becoming masters of the river water, learning to chase lines through rapids that would give back to us the greatest value for our efforts. On the few occasions when rafts passed by on their way to the big stuff, we would bark like seals and fling ourselves off the top of some small rapid wave near the boat. I can only imagine what the people in those boats must have thought. River seals are a rare sight in the Thompson and no seal in its right mind would put itself in harm's way, in the manner that we were doing.

A few hours later, we arrived at the first class-5 rapid, along the part of the Thompson known as 'The Frog,' because of a house-sized rock that splits the river down the centre and sends waterfalls off to either side a good 40 feet down to the mayhem far below. Having pretty much breezed through class-4 rapids, and having enjoyed them as dolphins might enjoy riding the wake of a large ferry, we figured that the big boys couldn't be much worse. We were quickly to learn that none of these rapids were boys; these rapids were men, ancient men.

We first heard it far off in the distance: a rumbling that caused the surface of the flat and now very deep water to permanently ripple, then we felt the increased speed of water-flow and watched as the flat edges of the river grew upwards into unclimbable walls of rock. We huddled together, arms linked, tried to control our breathing and heart rates and hyper-oxygenate ourselves for what was obviously going to be a rough ride. We were all hallucinating, but no amount of psychedelics could overwhelm the vast majesty of nature at its full, screaming pinnacle of violence. This was water fighting rock for control of eternity.

Then came the clouds, not clouds risen from oceans to block the sun on this crystal-clear day, but a micro-weather pattern created solely by the violence and volume of the water churning up ahead of us. We saw tourists at the top of lookouts pointing and training their cameras on us as we moved inescapably towards the beast before us. We clung tightly to each other and reminded one another that the boats broke for the right side of 'The Frog,' informing us that the left had too many boulders below it. We expressed our love for one another and tried to comfort each other as our speed picked up and the noise grew so loud that speech was impossible. We then broke apart and began to swim towards the right side of the giant stone that had glass-smooth waterfalls descending off each side into god-only-knew what form of vicious, screaming nightmare below. We tried to swim lightly, but to imagine we were swimming at all

would imply that, at this point, we had some form of control over our trajectory, which we didn't; it would have been comparable to skydiving upwards against gravity's unquestionable pull.

From what I remember, Justin was first to go over. The volume of his scream sticks forever in my memory—"Oh, god, no!!!"—or something to that effect. The fact that I heard it from meters away when only moments before we couldn't shout loud enough into one another's ears to hear a word bears testimony to the volume and weight of his fear. Raine and Coal went silently into oblivion and I, somewhere in between, went about the business of meeting god on my own. I will never forget the sensation of pouring over a cliff with tons of water on my back and shooting first through the surface of chaos below and then deep, deep below all that screaming mayhem. It was silent and peaceful as it grew steadily darker. Once, my sense of peace was interrupted by impact with some unseen boulder, merely a brief distraction as I went about the process of dying. It is said that drowning is, after the initial violence, quite a peaceful way to die. To this I can testify. At first, of course, there was the fear and regret of going before my time, but then, as my lungs began to fill, in utero memories of breathing liquid. The brain starts to shut down its panic response, a beautiful peace comes over the soul and quick acceptance that one's final moments have come. The light I was moving towards seemed so predictable and yet sanctified. Then, the sound of a million angels clapping at my arrival brought me back from my perfect ascent to heaven. I was spat from the womb of this godlike river and quickly realized that the light was the surface and the clapping the sound of rapids tearing deep wounds in any notion of peace around me. I was alive, a kilometer or so down the river, having traveled this distance deep under water out of sight of even the light of day and was still in the frothing liquid centre of this madness, now alone and searching for my friends. In my heart I believed they must be dead. I pulled left and right with all my strength in an attempt to imitate swimming where no swimming was possible.

From thirty yards away I saw him, moving like a great fish charging amongst the rapids; it was more like a lunge from one freestanding wave to the next than a swim technique. Raine was piercing this river over and over as he filled the distance between us. I was paralyzed, redeemed, transfixed and barely aware of what mortal danger we were all in. Raine's ability to maneuver inside this cauldron was beyond conceiving, his grace a testament to his martial-arts commitment and physical ability. He reached me in seconds and, looking into my terrified eyes, grabbed my head with both hands and shouted, "Not you, Taro, not now, not you." This was all the time we had before the chaotic torrents tore us apart, but it was the trigger that brought me back from the frozen end of fear and reminded me that I was still living and still had fight in me. I was allowed again to try to save my own life. For a second, I was swimming.

All of a sudden, floating for a second on the edge of a vortex before descending as if into pure air, elemental and breathable and merely a prelude to the murderous engine awaiting me at the bottom, I got caught in a whirlpool. Vague memories of an 8-man boat, with the whole crew fighting to get out of one of the pools, flashed across my mind as I was sucked into the hole in the water, churned around and spat back to the surface for the third time. It was to be my last. I felt strength sap from my limbs as water again filled my lungs; there was no fighting my way out of this beast, only violence followed by infinity.

Even as I had these thoughts I remembered an orange pouch, followed by trailing blue, flying down the hole beside me. I reached out for it if only because it was foreign, solid and tangible in a world that would melt around fingers if you tried to hang onto it. A memory of river guides showing us how to use safety ropes flashed into disjointed, half-dead areas deep in my brain. Some unseen boat above the water was pulling me. Again, I managed to live. Every ounce of strength left in me focused, adrenaline centers fired, secretions I thought all but gone ripped out of glands and fed pure fire into burnt-out muscles. I reached the boat and pulled myself into it, puking again and again till my lungs gave up their aquatic dividends and once again took air. Then a reconnoiter. I looked around at the staring, wide eyes of Sunday tourists on a thrill ride, people who had just pulled a puking body from a screaming whirlpool, an incident which, I imagine now, had put their particular boat in danger. A hand on my back, a boat guide asking me where the hell I had come from and why didn't I have a life jacket on?

"My friends, my friends, where are my friends?" was the answer to any and all questions as we cruised out of the danger zone and approached, compared to where I had just been, comparatively peaceful waters. I stood and thanked the guide for saving me, and then said, "I cannot go home without them," and stepped out of the boat into the turbulent melee that had just been denied my life. I would search and find my friends, or die with them. It was my idea to do this because to live with their loss was no choice at all. I remember stepping out of the boat like I was stepping off a curb. I disappeared from the boat's view within seconds.

There was more of the same as I passed from rising wave to whirlpool like so much flotsam moving on a tide. I learned to pull against the water only when I needed to get results. I learned to breathe deeply when there was air and vomit underwater so as not to miss any chance to breathe. It became organic to move like this, to stay just on the edge of drowned, and yet still be alive. Euphoria may not be quite the best description, but it was akin to it. I became aware that for all its violence it was beautiful in the sad way that dying can be. Then I saw him, up on the cliff ahead, perched like a falcon, a hand held visor-like over eyes. Raine had made it to shore and was searching for us. Seeing me, he waved and I swam again



with a strength that was beyond any conscious knowledge of how tired I thought I was. There was a rock dividing the rapid, on the far side of the river, the highway looming somewhere above. A tiny beach had been carved in amongst 200-foot-high cliff walls of sheer stone. I swam with all my life and, having once made shore, I looked back to see Cole, spread like a crucified Christ on the backside of a rock in the centre of the river and Justin sprawled on the narrow strip of sand, choking the last vestiges of water from his lungs. I had found them, we were alive, together, sitting on the far side of hell trying to figure out how we could possibly get out of the river anywhere within the next few miles. The rapid that sat before us was called the *Jaws of Death*. This was the spot that had held down the train car and eight drowned men for a week before rescuers could get to whatever was left of their bodies.

Across from our little sanctuary, separated by what looked like a series of bus-sized whirlpools, was an area of broken cliff and rocks that tumbled into the river. The rocks could be climbed to the highway far above. We were all hurt and beyond our capacity to go on, but Justin was nearing critical condition and, though I have never articulated it, I will always remember that it was he who jumped first, untrained and out of shape, head first into this river, and survived. He was the strongest among us that day because he could admit first that he had to get out. It was decided that we needed to get him out fast. Mapping our route across an impossible, ever-changing liquid terrain we (after seriously gathering as much strength as we could muster) re-entered the river and worked as a team to get Justin and ourselves to the other side as fast as possible. We operated on the strength of our love for each other, our happiness at us all being together again and our knowledge that our dear brother Justin could not survive the river any further. How we got across to the far shore is a blur, a memory from inside a washing machine, but we did it. Justin got onto the rocks and we gave him the car key. He now had to climb a huge rocky cliff in a wet suit, in the noonday sun, find the highway, hitch a ride back to the car and meet us at river's end where there was a parking lot adjacent to the water. Justin was six feet five inches, bald, heavy-set bordering on massive, covered in tattoos, and half dead. He had no easy task before him. (He has reminded me since that he was also barefoot, having lost his booties—and with toenails painted pink! Back then, we were an odd mixture of cyber biker, raver punk, and our fashion-style completely subjective.)

We continued down the river, imagining that we had been through the worst, could swim our way to our final destination and survive, in the process, the last two rapids that were not as large as those we had already survived. There were a few moments of peaceful floating, then some hairy areas where we were again fighting to breathe and to stay above water. Then we saw what we knew was our end. It stretched like a highway

of whirlpools out across miles of glass-smooth water. Deep, impossible holes spiraling in opposing directions and punctuated by fast, moving but serenely flat water. It would be an impossible task, for passing each whirlpool is like swimming against a dozen rip tides pulling in different directions. Once one is conquered, you are almost immediately fighting to clear another. We had passed three or four to get Justin out. I had nearly died in one. Now we looked at possibly hundreds of them stretched before us, but finally we made it, exhausted and bruised.

The shore, at this point, was quite accessible. But above the shore rose a steep cliff face. It was time for us to begin our climb. We had been in the water for six hours and were shaking with the stress our bodies and souls had suffered, but we were happy as we struggled out of the river, peeled off the top half of our suits and allowed the sun to dry and heat our soaked bodies. The climb was brutal; along the way we passed the train tracks that had tipped the car full of bodies to its death so many decades before. We prayed on so many spots that day, to so many gods for so many things, most of all we had prayed to the mighty river, for sparing our lives, for showing us the majesty of its strength and for, in a few brief hours, changing us all forever.

On the highway, we managed to hitch a ride with a very large, silent Indian who merely asked us if we had come from the river. We told him we had. He motioned us to get in the back of his pickup, drove till we spotted Raine's car, and he pulled over.

We found Justin by the river, piling stones atop each other as markers for the friends he was sure he had lost that day. He was drinking whisky from a flask and crying out loud to the river, to god, to himself. His hands softened by hours in the water were now cracked and bleeding, and I remember the sheen of blood drying on the metal surface of the flask. Again we were reunited, and now, finally, we all allowed ourselves some measure of tears. I still well up today, almost twenty years later, when I remember how much love I saw in Justin's face as he worked his hands bloody building memorials to us on the edge of the river. If you are ever lucky enough to have one friend like that, then god is great and you are blessed. I stood with three great friends that day, beautiful, alive and smiling. That day will count, for all my years, as a moment when life is as good as it gets.

PAUL J. HEALY'S poems have appeared in previous issues of *The New Orphic Review*, *JAMA (The Journal of the American Medical Association)*, *The Neovictorian/Cochlea*, *Horsefly* and *Bellowing Ark*.

## Paul J. Healy / Five Poems

### Come Are Those Last Days That the Sibyl Sang

From the cracked back  
stone step,  
old farm fallow,  
overgrown,  
rippling and pulsing  
along the wind's  
hard line of march,  
tick infested grasses wave,  
wingless arachnids,  
parasitic dipterous  
Ixodoidea insects,  
swaying in ambush,  
menacingly along the blade's  
new green edge,  
awaiting warm blood,  
and not infrequently  
delivering a twisting worm  
of bacterium, an inoculation  
of infectious disease vectors,  
drilling corkscrew spirochetes of Lyme.  
I seldom walk out there in the spring,  
not wanting to go through that all again,  
body aches of debilitating fatigue,  
arthritic knees. To think we once  
thought of raising hogs on this land,  
with guinea hens to peck the ticks,  
chickens for eggs and a small productive field.  
Then she packed her bags and wouldn't stay.  
The only pig was butchered,  
but I couldn't eat her,  
just gave the meat away.

## Machiasport

Among the wind-scoured houses  
of the outer peninsulas,  
  
an American flag in the dusty window  
of an abandoned train station:  
  
not all of it visible,  
some of the stars missing,  
  
the red and white stripes truncated,  
colors fading.

## The Occult Face of Desire

The cracked marble fountain  
Spoke its clearest word,  
When the water feed decayed.  
  
It was always to the most silent,  
That mute things wished to whisper.  
Companions turned away.  
  
In twilight shadows,  
Her mouth was the mouth of a ravenous spirit.  
On a bench nearby a man was trying to sleep,  
  
His worn greasy clothes were the color of grey soot.

## The Moon Above the Boroughs

When the nocturnal thirst to know  
Becomes itself a new way of knowing,  
The moon above the boroughs  
Recedes further into deep space.

Do not ask what the purpose of this life is.  
There is a place behind purpose,  
Where the far receding moon resides,  
A golden orbicular of unspeakable strangeness,

Basking in a sweet sea of stars.

## Oh, What is a Woman?

Rain upon the leaves,  
splattering where the dogs  
lived behind a wire fence;  
a wild growth of weeds,  
nourished on decayed waste.

Oh, what is a woman?  
Creature perturbed without  
finding the comfort of lonely places,  
without knowing that  
being alone *is* the rain,  
the splattering leaves,  
the wire fence.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*.

## Homicide Survivors Picnic: A Review

Ernest Hekkanen

*Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories*

by Lorraine M. López

BkMk Press 263 pages, \$16.95

ISBN 978-1-886157-72-9

AN EXTREMELY good book will often affect the way one sees the world and, for me, there is no better example of this than *Homicide Survivors Picnic and Other Stories* by Lorraine M. López, a Nashville, Tennessee resident who teaches at Vanderbilt University.

Admittedly, I read López's collection during the days leading up to Christmas, 2009, when North America was in the grip of seasonally sanctioned hysteria. That might have had something to do with the impression that *Homicide Survivors Picnic* left me with, but I don't think it can be attributed to that in full.

Many of the characters in this collection are gripped by hysteria, but it isn't a strictly personal hysteria. One gets the impression that the characters are in the grip of an all-pervasive hysteria distinct to American society, from west to east and from north to south.

In the title story, two characters who attend a support-group picnic for survivors of homicide close their eyes before venturing across a four-lane highway in what is tantamount to attempted suicide. In the second story, entitled "Sugar Boots," named after the family cat, "As he bathes three-year-old Beau, Leo Garza thinks about murder," one of the most provocative first sentences I have ever encountered in a short story. It made me feel so squeamish I nearly put the story down, and I might very well have done exactly that, if not for the equally provocative second and third sentences:

Not about killing anyone himself, and certainly never

harming this solemn toddler in his care. Instead Leo reconsiders his lifelong belief that it is wrong to take another's life, and how he never questioned this until his wife Stella's daughter was incarcerated for killing her husband in late spring.

The toddler in Leo's care is the child of his wife's daughter, Micki, who now resides behind bars. In a conversation with Stella, he tells her:

“Wait, let me get this straight. You took Howie [a gay friend] to the women's prison [where Micki now resides] *to cheer him up?*” Leo struggles to keep his voice modulated.

Many of the protagonists in *Homicide Survivors Picnic* are mediators or lawyers who find themselves in situations where they have to modulate their voices, so as not to contribute to the prevailing hysteria. Many of the secondary characters are downright dysfunctional, but in a distinctly American fashion. They are being frenetically rendered down in America's ethnic melting pot, where every precept and value seems to have flown out the window. This results in:

Leo experienc[ing] a sense of unreality, of being thrust into a nightmare world where all children are imperiled, and he is powerless to save any of them.

The above passage might very well serve as the operative *raison d'être* of López's collection of ten stories, for nearly all the children are in peril of growing up to be as dysfunctional as their parents, many of whom seem to be stuck in a kind of extended adolescence, the type we see paraded across daytime television, on shows similar to Oprah's.

Later on, in “Sugar Boots,” in a supermarket where Stella and Leo have gone to buy groceries, “Beau twists free, nearly upsetting [Stella's] balance, and he runs toward Leo. ‘Mama,’ he says, pumping his arms as he begs to be lifted. ‘Mama, Mama!’”

If until this time we have had some doubts, we are now certain that the gender, familial and generational confusion we've been experiencing is absolute—at least in this child's mind.

The stories in *Homicide Survivors Picnic* are so edgy with hysteria they made me fear for the safety of the characters, even as I was laughing aloud. We would like to seize them by their shoulders and shake some sense into them, an effect that Lorraine M. López has meticulously created with a fine eye for detail and an exacting psychological portrayal of each character. López is working in a modern Gothic tradition that she has refined for her own particular purposes and, in so doing, she has managed to capture the zeitgeist of America in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Homicide Survivors Picnic* is bracketed by two stories entitled “The Flood” and “The Landscape.” Lydia and her multi-racial niece, Roxanne, appear in both of them. They provide us with the moral and emotional

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compass we need to navigate the rough, choppy waters of this collection. “The Flood” might very well be viewed as a prelude to the dysfunctional tsunami that washes over “The Landscape” that is so distinctly American, with all of the strains and stresses typical of our present era.

In closing, I would like to say that I survived the *Homicide Survivors Picnic* and came away immensely rewarded by it—with my eyes open to all the hysteria around me.



*Featured Poet*

**Daniela Elza**



photo by Frank Lee

**There is Still Light**



DANIELA ELZA is currently contemplating her doctoral thesis in Philosophy of Education. To date she has released more than 120 poems into the world. Most recently her work has appeared in *4 poets* (Mother Tongue Publishing, 2009), *Matrix, educational insights, BluePrintReview, Vallum*, and was featured on *ditch*. Daniela just completed her first full-length manuscript (in which the crows have a lot of say) and is looking for a publisher. She lives and writes in Vancouver.

*between a rock and a hard place*  
there is still light

Daniela Elza

~i~

A POEM is the path a leaf takes when it falls, lands where I do not expect it. A poem is a pebble dropped in the mirror of a lake, leaves me at the center of the ripples. I used to think I do not write love poems, now every poem I write is a love poem.

~ii~

Poems were taught to me fragmented, dissected, the excitement drained out of them. Somewhere along the clinical hallways of school they had lost their soul. They were broken down into metaphors, arguments, meter, image, simile, dates, names, concepts, enjambments, interpretations, summaries.

This type of breaking down is reminiscent of what Michael Pollan observes we do with food: break it down into nutrients. Instead of a carrot we need *carotenoids* in our diet. Once we render food into invisible nutrients we need an expert to tell us what to eat. Despite all the efforts to understand food by breaking it down, he says, *we still cannot understand what goes on deep down in the soul of a carrot*. Pollan goes on to say: “You do not need to fathom a carrot’s complexity in order to reap its benefits.”<sup>1</sup> This echoes my experience with poetry. It may be difficult to understand what goes on deep down in the soul of a poem, but we do not need to fathom a poem’s complexity in order to reap its benefits.

Robert Bringhurst reminds us that poetry is everywhere and it was here before us. “Poetry is knowing, but verse is a form, a technique, a device. At worst it is merely a grate through which language is pushed.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pollan, M. *In defence of food: An eater’s manifesto*. (New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2008) p. 66

<sup>2</sup> Bringhurst, R. *Everywhere being is dancing: Twenty Pieces of thinking*. (Nova Scotia, Canada: Gaspereau Press, 2007) p.28

The practice of yoga appears to be about the poses and shapes the body moves into, but if we remain on this superficial level we are likely missing the essence of yoga which is in the movement of breath, in the unmediated direct experience. One that should be savoured, sipped as nourishment. Poetry can be that.

~iii~

“Every life lived, is also an inner life, a life created.”

—Margaret Atwood

The writing occupation is multifaceted. On the one hand, we emerge through it. On the other, we are socialized into it: stand at the mercy of inherited beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices, opinions, which in turn can affect our growth as writers. It is hard to remain oblivious: it is embedded into how we treat the writer/poet. If I end up paying too much attention to this environment I may end up crippled, hurt, stunted. I may form impressions, models, habits that are destructive to the writing task ahead of me. Conversely, I could be inspired, spurred forward, nurtured with the support of a community.

In her book *Negotiating with the Dead*<sup>3</sup> Margaret Atwood delves with grace, honesty and humour, into the nature of this (pre)occupation. As I read, I felt a growing resentment welling up in me. Is this a disease? For sure dis-ease gets me writing. But what about the places we can go to when we suspend judgement? Where we are *awe, wonder*. Where a radical curiosity brings us close to the beginner’s mind. Where poetry thrives.

Enough with the dim and dismal pictures of the troubled writer, the poet as potential suicide. What about the joy of writing, the sheer delight of attending, playing, and dwelling with wor(l)ds. “The mere act of writing” says Atwood, “splits the self in two.” Can we really distinguish between who does the living and who does the writing? I refuse to inherit such dichotomies. Detritus left in the wake of trying to *conceptualize* writing. The writer’s fault? Or is it a statement on society: how it chews up its creative people and spits them out on the refuse heap?

They say *curiosity killed the cat*, but that’s nothing compared to what *lack of curiosity* will do.

~iv~

“The main battlefield for good is not  
the open ground of the public arena,  
but the small clearing of each heart.”

—Yann Martel (*The Life of Pi*)

Poetry is a way of life. Is how I think, how I make sense. It is a way of knowing I practice in our violently dichotomized world. A world that

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<sup>3</sup> Atwood, M. *Negotiating the dead: A writer on writing*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

*needs* to heal. It is a philosophy of the unsayable. Still, only a pointing. It is the means through which *I* connect with the mystery of the wor(l)d and with another. This is hardly a splitting. More like growing beyond the shrunken self which functions in our calculating and practical world. Instead of splitting infinities and selves, can we not speak of the poetic consciousness as expanding beyond the limits of the ego-self?

Writing is like looking for a needle in a haystack without knowing what a needle looks like. Writing is a transformative act, where *we become what we attend to* (Tim Lilburn), where *poetry forms the dreamer and his world at the same time*<sup>4</sup>. As I write my poem, my poem is writing me. Each poem becomes a piece of a continuous conversation I have with the world. In this sense, a poem has no beginning or end. Writing plays havoc with time. Creates a hole one can dive into. A place where time stops, and *we* flow.

~v~

There are many awkward, uneasy places: the rub between writing for money or for its own sake, the writer between the inherited past and the difficulty of the present, the writer's moral and social responsibility, the publishing game, the role of the reader, relevance to humanity etc.. Amidst all this I try not to forget how writing is its own reward, a practice which benefits the writer first. Publishing then becomes a nice side effect.

Maybe this difficulty in defining *writing* and *writer* should be seen as a blessing. A conundrum that contains its own salvation.

~vi~

Even though the conflicts and paradoxes are numerous, I am left with the hope that somewhere there is a way, we can walk a path that keeps us whole. Discard what is toxic, what plagues you, does not advance you in your practice. When you get stuck do not fall into the *writer's block* trap. Think of it as the block on which the writers live. In other words, think of yourself as part of a community, which is what writing is. We do not write in isolation, without the camaraderie of other writers, dead or alive. If you feel stuck, redirect your attention. If you can't write, read. If writing gets too serious and daunting, play. If you do not have the focus to read or write, consider sending out a few submissions. When you feel empty, fill up. Do not expect you can pour wine out of an empty barrel. Find a mentor who can guide you through some of these labyrinths. And don't forget to breathe and be kind to yourself. Embrace that which delights, brings joy and contentment to you and your writing process. After all, that is what it is: *a process* of discovery, and an exhilarating one.

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<sup>4</sup>Bachelard, G. *The poetics of reverie: Childhood, language, and the cosmos*. Trans. M. Jolas. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1969)

:poetics:

Open them. Open the three fists clinging to the world.

—Robert Bringhurst<sup>5</sup>

The sea has no end, in spite of its edges....

The seed is the tree thinking and speaking its knowledge of trees.

—Robert Bringhurst<sup>6</sup>

this is not this poem	the beginning was begun	of the poem. like the future
long ago. threshold	a visitor of sky.	on the blue enters
my words someThing—	and is (round and	looking for rounding
while to <i>open</i>	it makes <i>the three fists</i>	its attempt <i>clinging to</i>
<i>the world.</i>		
where	let go of with every	these mountains poem
<i>the seed</i> <i>thinking</i> <i>of trees.</i>	<i>is</i> <i>and speaking</i>	<i>the tree</i> <i>its knowledge</i>
this poem	you will) wrapped in	recognize its <i>is</i>
in its mind	questioning in its heart of	mountain attempting sky.
it wants its hands	to hold. for you.	it cups to catch.
to drink.	but only	enough

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<sup>5</sup>Bringhurst, R. *Pieces of map, pieces of music*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

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for a few	sips.	only enough
for you touch	to remember of being	the cool to your lips.
then		seeps
through that gap	the attempting. you almost	through crossed—
that shiver thought	that almost but escaped	turned while we were
busy (in time.	assigning	words.
<i>the sea has its edges.</i>	<i>no end</i> forgive)	<i>in spite of</i>
if this I will)	isn't the end try again.	of the poem

**listening to the CBC on the way to Jasper**

breaking open

    a promise  
        you were born with.

in a land where      the stones have grown

        silent.

where once            they spoke      new winds  
the trees      have lost      their tongues.

falling

        in the embrace      of the grove  
some hang by the thin songs      of birds.

across the side of the hill      a word  
burrows through                    to the bone  
to wield      its own quiet      grammar

in the marrow of                    intent.

        this War—

someone is terminally trying  
        to put into words.

saluting its bystanders.

        a War

so far away            you can mistake it  
for the flutter        between two  
strong beats          of heart.

my voice

        in the throat  
                        of a crow.



*...the flag on the Peace Tower of the Parliament Building at Ottawa is flown at half-mast:  
on the death of a Lieutenant Governor;  
on the death of a Canadian Privy Councillor, a Senator, or a Member of the House of Commons;  
on the death of a person whom it is desired to honour.*

**on the death of a person whom it is desired to honour**

do-we-lower-the-flag?

discussions rage in parliament.

four caskets arrive home

today.

do we or do we not

lower the flag on the peace tower?

this debate over the treatment of dead  
soldiers was heated today

over their cold bodies.

a private affair (they say)

their remains.

keep the public away (so we can play)  
pin-the-flag-on-the-casket. (of senate affairs  
the prime minister makes the call.)

so prime minister

who should *we* desire to honour?

of course: what's remembrance day for?  
that glorious day when our eyes turn to poppies

*lest we forget?*

well? haven't we?

“It takes bricks and wood to build a house  
But, the emptiness inside  
Is where people live.”  
Lao Tzu

**echoes in clay**

for Nevena

in this place of dusty shelves      tools and glaze  
you give shape to      a need you cradle

in your palms.      clay completes your hands  
fills the gaps between      fingers      with what is

taken out.      as the wheel turns      (now fast  
now slow) you mold—      the lip of vase slanted

the sides of bowl      pinched  
the pitcher      a bit lopsided.

seeking      never feeling      you have found  
the perfect      (imperfect shape.

and then      the fissure      the crackle  
you did not put there      but in the process

(found itself.

who says that nothing lives in      emptiness

we form.      a pot      is poem  
is a vessel      is a hollow      to fill.

fragile walls      of thoughts      we press  
into the curve of      our every      day.

smooth the edges      sponge the cracks and creases  
prepare their hollows      to be

fired.      your spirit  
tenderly held      in the curve of clay.

**of jewels**

I pluck dandelions            show  
my daughter how to make

a w r e a t h

*(underground the mine  
works overtime digging up  
diamonds*

she dances    in the grass  
dreaming of

*(the earth.    is nursing  
to perfection*

what she will become.

a r i n g.

my son  
already        learning to be tough  
with tiny daisies    in his hands

a b r a c e l e t.

## The New Orphic Review

Time is urban sprawl: the hours go on forever. You wait out your thoughts.

—Sue Sinclair

Everything drifts toward money's unintended telos of placelessness.

—Tim Lilburn

### servicing time (in the burbs)

*time is urban sprawl*  
the streets badly lit empty.  
there is no pavement here—

no common strip— between  
the street and someone's lawn  
you are caught in a car's headlights  
the neighbour's suspicious gaze.

time is broken street lamps—  
a longing toward leaving.  
because saying is too much

to explain— high fences trailers  
tarps covering stuff that is  
(useless

still too good to throw out.  
*everything drifts toward money's*  
*unintended telos.*

and the empty space is limited  
to lawns where thoughts are  
regularly zapped with mowers

poisoned with weed-  
kill *the hours go on forever.*  
until you cannot distinguish your

needs from wants.  
(*you wait out your thoughts*

among the pink flamingos  
in the flower bed the stone rabbits  
the little gnomes.

Pretend we haven't been here before.  
Pretend we don't know.  
—Sue Sinclair

**alternate grammars**

walk off the asphalt            into  
the grammar of                this acreage

into the tenses                of wild grasses  
as high as                      your thigh

and into the scattered light            of trees.  
no step here is                defined.

in the tension                between  
shadow and sun lit spots    the wind

shifts the borders            of my nouns  
teeming with the small life of prepositions.

in the definite article of                this place  
“knowledge” is always                being

revised.            and the trees are            not lost  
in the punctuation.            their leaves

such yellow they could be their own source  
of light.                step into the present

tense of ghost logs            and grow dumb  
while your ears search            for new words.

in the conditionals of storms            lightning  
and drought                (a fact is

a dead bird                a crack in the earth  
a perfectly charred tree.

boulders marked by the past tense of  
ancient moss.                its delicate new tendrils  
embrace white skulls and bones.

*The New Orphic Review*

wade through the under brush pushing up  
and closing in on once hacked out paths.

what breaks the light here            is not what  
stands in its way.    what breaks the light

is that I walk here    (thinking            I know

this place like my own name  
in the perfect tense            of *having learned*.

yet    every step questions            where I stop  
and where the sky            begins.

the asphalt still only runs            two ways  
from there the trees are points  
    of reference—

a stylized calligraphy.

I have come to learn how the wind can  
whisper    no-words  
and the boughs listen            with trepidation.

how the rain            can tap out a message on  
my bare skin.    I have come to learn

how the grass rises            after I have sat here  
straightening each letter    each curve

of my name            until            (I am

only  
          eleven  
                 stalks  
                         of  
                                 grass.

JOSHUA COPELAND grew up in Pittsburgh, attended the University of Pittsburgh, majored in English Writing and minored in Film. Then drove to LA to try and make it in show business as a screenwriter. He got nowhere. Afterward, he worked for three years in a shipping room back in Pittsburgh. Upon quitting that job, he decided to try writing again. He's never written anything before except for classes, and is still trying to get the hang of it.

## How to Get to Sesame Street

Joshua Copeland

*BUT*: WHAT HAPPENED to Pluto? The numero uno question. He couldn't have been kidnapped. That happened to children, not to teens. And he managed his drug intake well, so there was no way he overdosed. Some of the kids said he ran away; while it was no secret Pluto hated this lazy, dusty, dirt road town, where the highest building—Highland Plaza—was three stories tall, he didn't have the balls to run away. It wasn't like him. Pluto left nothing, no clues in his wake, just question marks.

The speakers leaked out a sad-sack Waylon Jennings tune and Travis Klebold floated away toward endless horizons, teetering on ethereal stilts, totally above anyone or anything in the room. He hovered at eye level with the ceiling lights, a holocaust of dead moths heaped about the bulbs. Below, a black, viscous lava oozed out the speakers (all this thanks to Lexus Kane's mushrooms) and, as if to say everything would be okay—which was as far from the truth as one could get—a rainbow arched high above the living room, where furniture was moved aside for dance space.

"You better get it in gear, Trav!" Haas yelled. "Finals will be here before you know it! Soon it'll be too late!" Travis smelled Haas's beer breath and felt the drizzle of his spit. Haas's red hair was turning into embers and melting down his cheeks. Flaming drops of it landed on his ebony black T-shirt.

Travis glanced at the muted TV under the rainbow's shadow. *The Glen Campbell Variety Hour* was on. Glen, as always, was dressed like he was headed to church, sterling and somber. Paisley shapes swam and spiraled the breadth of his Scully Mountain Man shirt like two-dimensional fish. Travis pulled himself back to Haas.

"I can barely hear you!" Travis yelled, his eyes darting back and forth between Haas and the TV. "Let's go in the kitchen!" The kitchen would be a relief from the slow dancing of that living room: Those kids would

be going home as twos, not as ones.

In the kitchen Haas kept at it: “Did you hear anything I said? You got to hustle, man. You’re going to end up going to a third-rate school with your GPA—fucking Lewis and Clark Community College—unless you ace the finals. And *that* ain’t happening. Trav, I am not trying to lecture you. Not at all. I’m trying to drill into that skull of yours that there’s nothing worse than regret.”

Travis deflated. He looked down at the white kitchen tiles, grimy with boot prints, reminding him of his poem “My Life is of the Floor,” and shook his head. “Nobody appreciates me or what my brain can do. Read my poems, dude. And you’ve seen my paintings. Yeah, keep coming at me... I will devour your planet whole and pluck from my teeth the bones of your dead. Ha.”

“You see, there you go again.” Haas smiled. “Not to be mean, but keep talking like that and you’ll be chickless and uneducated the rest of your life.”

Life... “But wait,” Travis said, eyebrows raised and pleading. “Whatever happened to Pluto? He’s gone and nobody cares. He was ready to kick ass as a filmmaker.”

“What? Get that loser out of your head. He was a little delinquent nothing. Let’s be honest: You were the only one who thought he had any talent. His videos were dull and pretentious and craptastic. He ran away, and believe you me, that’s no loss.”

“But it doesn’t make sense. He didn’t have the balls to escape. There’s no way he ran away.”

“He was a druggie, Holmes. That’s what druggies do. They run away. He’s probably passed out in some condemned building in the Big Apple, choking on his own vomit.”

“Ah ah. Morris Ogul said he saw Pluto in a car with some old man. And then he was gone. No one saw him again.”

“Yeah. That ‘old man’ was probably his future sugar daddy. But don’t think about the dead. Think about the living. Think about yourself. Your parents teach at the Pitt Butler branch. You got a free education there *if* your grades are up to par, a free ride. Don’t blow it. Please.”

Travis remembered the days before the monolith of college loomed, before his arm veins were tattooed sky blue, before he got his nose pierced. It hit him now that those were angry actions, the rage and protests of being called an academic degenerate. He saw too late he wanted to belong, to be a thread in a cloth, a cloth in a quilt. Now his own personal thunderhead rained constantly, twenty-four seven. He only had himself to blame.

For freshmen year, every day after school, he had hung out at Milt’s Shake Shop with Haas and Morris Ogul and company. As a sophomore he stopped hanging at Milt’s, instead choosing to listen to Gwar and GG



Alin and Joy Division for hours in his room. During his junior year, Uncle Jesse and Cousin Merle turned themselves in, telling Sheriff Bullard that they had molested Travis when he was three months old. Everyone at school found out via the grapevine. Travis's senior year he quit going out weekends, drove to Pittsburgh to get tattooed, and painted Do Not Enter with his slit radial artery on his bedroom door. After Pluto vanished, Haas was the only former bud he kept in touch with.

"I got to go, man," Travis said. "I'm not doing anyone any good staying here."

Haas stood back a bit facially. "I didn't mean to ruin your mood, Trav."

"Haas, you didn't ruin anything."

Haas put his hand on Travis's shoulder. "Are you okay to drive?"

The room reeled. "Yeah."

"Haas!" a girl called from the living room. "Come dance with me, sugarpie!"

Haas laughed. "That's my cue. I'm being called. Flo's getting lonely. See you Monday, Trav." Haas walked out. Travis chugged some more of his Coors, threw the bottle against the kitchen wall, put his hand to his face as it shattered, and watched the beer drool down the wall.

He stumbled out the front door and sat inside his parents' Camry, not going anywhere, pondering: "Back to Butler. Back to my upright-speck-of-flesh existence." He looked back to Haas's house, winced, started the car, and drove off into the night.

Haas lived on the outskirts of Butler. Travis thought he knew his way home, back to Butler, but after a few turns and dead ends he was lost. No landmarks looked right: Pilfer Square or the City County Building or Emmerdale Park were nowhere to be seen. He made lefts, rights, U-turns, all helplessly. A yellow-lined and paved street led him out into the woods. Then the street became a dirt road, the bumps jiggling his head lazily. He made a blind left onto gravel, a cacophony of pebbles exploding as he leaned into his wheel trying to get any sense as to where he was or where he was going. A velvety darkness blanketed him. There was nothing to his sides. He was the only one in a stadium, with huge, yawning spaces stretched out before him, spaces receding into a moonless night.

He pulled over, parked, and froze. Yes, that was Butler to his right, miles away, the city lights tiny embers in coal black, sparkling and twinkling. He was farther away now than when he was at Haas's. He sighed, shut off the car, and looked up through the windshield. The stars were spread out across the sky as if neon could be splashed and scattered. Better to wait for daylight. He leaned the chair back, all boozed up, and fell asleep fast.

Distant carnival music woke him. He weakly opened his eyes and saw the night sky flicker a slight pink. Far away, where Butler should have

been, a monstrously huge Ferris wheel turned, lit up like a Christmas tree: Amber, green and red scintillated on its girders and hub. The wheel stretched up to the clouds, coloring them and hiding the top cars. Travis rubbed his eyes. Mushroom trips were too greasy and foggy to be mistaken for reality, but this here was no 'shroom trip: too much detail and no pixelization. A maroon circus tent was stationed across whole city blocks. A skyscraper-sized rollercoaster—the clouds hid the crests—broke the night air with heavy thunder and high-pitched screams. A merry-go-round spun, perched atop a tall vertical edifice, sending spokes of light twirling into the night, UFO-like. Three orange search lights traced arcs and ovals in the clouds. Through all the distance, Travis heard muffled laughter and smelled cotton candy. “Ah ah,” he said. “No way.” He closed his hands over his ears, shut his eyes tight as a pinch, and fell back asleep.

\* \* \*

The orange of bright sunlight through closed eyes. The sour, limp swirls and spirals of a hangover. The cramping of limbs stuck in one position for hours. Travis woke and looked at the dashboard clock: six o' five a.m. A cruel hour. He fingered the sleep from his eyes and squinted out the window. The car was perched on a cliff, woods and rocky terrain to his left, the distant city of Butler to his right. The budding sunrise silhouetted the tiny buildings and houses. No carnivalesque melody, no Ferris wheel, no roller coaster, no merry-go-round, no cotton candied fragrance. Travis yawned and rubbed his temples, feeling the quake of a massive headache. He drove back to Butler by himself—a lone, typed minus sign on a blank sheet of paper.

His brain scolded him: “How many times have I told you not to mix alcohol and illicit narcotics. So why did you do it?” Haas's Coors and Lexus's mushrooms had coalesced into a vortex of inebriation in his head. Did Lexus spike the mushrooms? He was known to douse his pot with PCP. Travis would have to ask him on Monday. Right now he only ached for bed.

“Grow up,” his dad had said. “Stop being so self-destructive.”

Now that there was daylight he was able to make it back onto I-30 and drive home. He parked in his driveway, stumbled to the front door, pushed it open—no one kept their doors locked in this city—took a quick leak, and drank a glass of water. His parents had taped a note to his bedroom door. Without reading it, he folded it up into a paper airplane, sent it gliding down the hall, got undressed, and collapsed back to bed, the carnival music still tinkling and humming in his head.

He dreamt he was in Lexus's living room. Lexus was robed and hooded in black. His teeth were chiseled into tiny, sharp triangles. “Snort this powdered Clorox, Trav. It'll do wonders for your health.” Lexus exhaled a green smoke as he talked. It coiled and spun up to the ceiling, collecting as a green smog.

“It’ll burn my nose,” Travis said. Then a doorbell chimed. “Get the door, Lex. Leave me alone.”

“Does it look like there’s a door in this house? That’s your door, T, not mine.”

And so Lexus was right. Travis woke up to someone ringing his doorbell with impolite persistence. He waited for his parents to get it until he remembered they were at school; both kept Saturday office hours. Travis heaved himself out of bed, stepped into his navy blue Pitt Panthers sweatpants, threw on a Pitt T-shirt, and stumbled downstairs. He pushed his bushy hair into place and swung the door open.

A white-haired fat man in an apron stood there. A half-circled grin creased his face. “Hello, there. No intros needed. You are Travis Klebold. Looks like I just woke ya.”

“Well, yeah, you kinda did.”

“It’s past two. No offense, my friend, but it’s time to get up anyway.”

“Waking times are relative. But no, um, that’s okay. How do you know who I am?”

“You’re too young to remember me, kid. Mr. Hooper’s the name. Scouting for genius, my game.” He giggled. “Sorry. I’m not much good with rhymes.”

Travis stared. Smudges of brown, red, yellow (mustard?) stained Mr. Hooper’s apron—echoes of mishandled food. Behind the apron was a button-down shirt, vertically striped pink and white and stretched tight over an unhealthily large gut. Below the shirt, faded jeans and dull brown loafers.

Mr. Hooper. Where had he heard the name? Travis knitted his brows.

“I got two words for ya, kid: *Sesame Street*.”

“Mr. Hooper... Mr. Hooper... Oh. Okay. Uncle Ritche mentioned you. Aren’t you supposed to be dead? In the seventies you owned a store or something on the show, and then—in real life—you died, I think, of a heart attack.”

“Heh. Well, kind of.”

“Rich even said they did an episode on your death, to help kids deal with dying and shit like that.” Travis shook his head. “Did you just escape from Mayview?”

Mr. Hooper chuckled and said, “You are the author of a poem—a ten pager, I might add—entitled “Sadomasochists Running Through a Field of Daises.” You painted a masterpiece called *Esoterica* that was an eye with different colored numbers all over it, a blue zero in the right lower corner and a pink nine by the pupil, if my homework’s on the mark.”

Homework? “Hey! I never showed those to anyone!”

Mr. Hooper leaned against the door frame, folded his arms, and crossed his ankles. “My hired eyes have been watchin’ ya. Doin’ a little sneakin’ and peekin’. No need to look alarmed, son. I’m here to take you away.”

He leaned closer. “Right now you’re trapped in a corner, with all these hicks clawing at you. The square peg in the round hole story. But your rainy days are over. I’ll take you to a place where you’ll blend in like a tree in a forest, so to speak.” He looked left and right. “But it’s dangerous to talk here.” He looked at his watch. “Your folks’ll be home soon. So cool it with the questions. For now. I’ll explain on the plane.”

“The plane?”

\* \* \*

The clouds floated under and away. Mr. Hooper sat in the cockpit of the Single Engine Piston, occasionally glancing at the myriad dials and taking swigs off a hanging oxygen mask. Travis sat next to him. No other pilots, no passengers.

“Will you tell me where we’re going now, Mr. Hooper?”

“Let’s just say, your talent is needed.”

“And how can you fly yourself anyway? Where’s your pilot?”

“Risky venture, kid, risky venture, kid. Got to have as few people in on it as possible.” He elbowed Travis lightly.

“So wait... Why did *Sesame Street* do a show on your death if you weren’t dead?”

Mr. Hooper laughed the laugh of an old man. “My death, ah yes. It was faked, as phony as your bud Haas. The producers wanted me to work in the cartoons department. Working for the ’toons means ya gotta disappear. So everyone—all the parents, all the kids—had to believe I kicked the bucket. We had a double in the coffin, if you know what I mean. Poor sap...” He shook his head. “Like me down to the toenails. Okay, buckle up, we’re coming into New York.” The clean white clouds parted to reveal little blocks of buildings and a long strand of runway.

“Anyway, my squad’ll do the same for you. It’s looking like we might pull a suicide. Travis Klebold painted and wrote, painted and wrote, and still no one appreciated him or his outlook on life. He was surrounded by Garth Brooks lookalikes. He thought high school was just an assembly line—which, by the way, it is; they all are—so we’ll either pull a suicide or a runaway. But that’s *our* problem. For now, take your foot off the gas pedal, my friend, and hit cruise. You’re going on the ride of your life.”

“Why, what’s going—”

“We’re touching down. Got your seatbelt on? Get in crash position. Put your head between your knees. I ain’t too good at this part.” Mr. Hooper slowly raised the U-shaped gearshift. A loud crash sounded from below, followed by an ellipsis of skidding. “Whoops. Wasn’t so bad. I done worse. You can pick your head up now.”

Mr. Hooper slowed the plane, parked it, and looked out the window. “Transport ain’t here yet.” He removed his glasses and rubbed them on his apron. “You see, *Sesame Street* alternates between three segments. There are the Real Life segments—that’s where I used to be, the Puppetry

segments, and the Cartoon segments. Your job will be workin' with the 'toons. You got talent, kid. It's spillin' out your ears."

A limousine pulled up, black and shiny as a country night. "Wow!" Travis said. "A friggin' limo! I can't believe this is a real operation."

They stepped off the plane and into the limo. It screeched off.

"Help yourself to the mini-bar, my boy," Mr. Hooper said.

Travis poured himself a shot of bourbon. "Christ, I've never had an adult push alcohol on me."

Mr. Hooper laughed hard at that, smacking Travis's thigh. "Just you wait, kid, just you wait..."

Travis gulped it down and cleared his throat. "You want me to pour you one, Mr. Hooper?"

"Heh, no thanks, kid. I'm sweet and clean. Don't do alcohol, don't do drugs. Christ, I won't even take Benedryl."

Travis stared, open-mouthed, out the window as the city skyline became real and material, as the highway countryside flew past and grew like beanstalks into skyscrapers. Yellow checkered cabs and honking cars stopped up the streets like bad plumbing. Newsstands and restaurants and herds of people, rivers of bobbing heads, all lined the sidewalks.

"I'm not used to the big city," Travis said. "I don't think Butler even had any sidewalks, except on Main Street." He paused. "Why do you look so serious all of a sudden?"

Mr. Hooper sighed and said, "Now I got something important to tell you. So I need you to listen, and listen carefully." He was not smiling. "The dorm I'm taking you to is twenty-six blocks from where *Sesame Street* is taped. There's no cafeteria or McDonald's or nothing there, just four vending machines. You guys never eat right anyways. So no going out to eat or ordering in pizzas. You are not, I repeat, *not*, to leave the building under any circumstances, not even during a fire. Food and toiletries get shipped in. No clocks, watches, newspapers, TVs, radios, phones, cell phones, Blackberries, web access. You get the idea. You'll have to create in a vacuum. All this you see now," Mr. Hooper opened his hands to the passing cityscape and its crowds, "all the sidewalks and shops and people, they won't exist once you're in there."

Butterflies fluttered in Travis's stomach. "That's more than fine with me. I never much needed them anyway. But about not being able to go outside, I might get all cramped up. I'm like that."

"Trust me. You won't. It'll be like open fields in there." Mr. Hooper put his hand on Travis's shoulder and shook him lightly and in a friendly fashion. "You'll be replacing Eugene, who OD'd on morphine last month. Now, my friend, his job is yours."

Finally the limousine parked and they both stepped out. A headstone-gray dormitory stood before them, five stories high. The windowless husk of a building leaned slightly to the right and appeared to have the structural

reliability of a house of cards. The front face was sooty and smoked over. It stood in the middle of a block of weeds and trash. The fire escape had been torn down, the pile of jutting black staircases and railings sat heaped on the right side of the building. To the left a wrecking ball hung from a crane attached to a trellis car with Cookie Monster Wrecking painted on it in rainbow colors. Mr. Hooper wrapped his arm around Travis and said, "Say hello to your new casa. Just wait till you get inside. It's a bit large for only nine people, but a little elbow room never hurt no one."

Travis's eyebrows angled up and his eyes darted below and around. "I don't know..." he said. "This whole place, this whole deal, seems kind of shady."

"What? You want to go back to your old life?"

They walked down a dark and rickety hall vaguely shaped like a trapezoid. The floor creaked. Travis stumbled a few times. "This damn thing is too tilted," Mr. Hooper said. "We got to get a new place. It's the goddamn *Sesame Street* bureaucracy. You got to go through hell just to get anything done." He shook his head. "No matter, you'll like it here."

At the end of the hall they came to a door with a Do Not Disturb sign hanging off the knob. Conversation sounded from behind it: A distinctly girlish voice slurred, "It means, 'We came. We saw. We conquered.' That's V. And as for Z, I'm looking here in Webster's, how about Zenith, Zeno of Citium, Zeno of Elea, Zephaniah, zephyr, zeppelin, zero, zero gravity..."

Mr. Hooper opened the door to reveal—like curtains drawn back—a corporately sterile conference room with fluorescent lights, bright orange carpet, and an oval mahogany table spotted with glass ashtrays. A leathery brown wheelchair lay folded up in the corner. Above that a painting hung of train tracks going over a desert cliff, like a Road Runner cartoon still.

Eight kids sat around the table. None could have been older than twenty. Mr. Hooper threw an arm around Travis. "My precious and precocious artists, meet Travis. The cherry. The new guy."

He chauffeured Travis from kid to kid.

"First, this is Brock." Brock was a skinhead with a massive wound tattooed to his scalp, complete with bright red blood mid-drip, white skull, and gray brain matter.

"Next, this here is Terry, our youngest member at the moment." Terry looked about eight. He was shirtless, with a spiked dog collar around his neck, three earrings in each ear, a chin ring, a nose ring, and a thick gold nipple ring on his baby-bare chest. A joint was tucked behind his left ear.

"And here we have Larry, our resident hippie."

"It's Lonnie, man." He wore an extra long and kaleidoscope-stained, tie-dyed Grateful Dead T-shirt. The bright light spangled his long, blonde, greasy hair.

"And right here, this young man with the bubble gum lipstick on is Jamey." Jamey, skinny to the point of anemia, looked about thirteen. His

crew cut hair was colored neon orange. A white fur stole was wrapped around his neck. He was shivering, his hands pressed together between his thighs, his nose running. He told the story how he had been a former prostitute in LA until Mr. Hooper “collected” him after getting a look at his spray-painted façades.

“Next, *the* one and only Francis Bean Cobain.” Francis sported a green Mohawk. Her face was flat down on the table. She didn’t stand up for Travis—everyone else had—she just weakly lifted her head and mumbled, “What’s up?” and fell back to the table. Travis saw a tight red necklace for the quick second she looked at him.

“This pumped-up fella here is Mark. He just got out—”

“Mookie, man. It’s Mookie.”

“Right. Mookie. He just got out the Pen.” Mookie’s biceps cracked open the sleeves of his pink Izod. Prison tattoos were inked all over his arms, face and neck.

“And, we come to Davidito...” The kid looked and smelled like Pig Pen from *Charlie Brown*. His faded, black, holey T-shirt read Redemption Through Death and showcased a smoking Glock under the foreshortened words. A thin and immature mustache lined his upper lip. A noose sliced off at the slip knot hung around his neck like a scarf.

“At last, we have Spandella, the house nympho.” The girl was scrawny—even thinner than the boy hooker—with a Plasmatics T-shirt and thickly scarred arms. She looked about fifteen. Like Travis, she had a nose ring.

Spandella laughed and lightly goosed Mr. Hooper and said, “Don’t believe him, Travis.”

Travis was dazed. He greeted each co-worker with a heavy handshake and wide-eyed smile. Life-affirming blood ran rapids through his veins. Mr. Hooper patted him on the back, said, “I’m sure you’ll treat him well, kids. Give him your best,” and walked out.

Travis sat down in the one empty chair. Drawings with different-colored magic markers were everywhere: a golden N with wings, a light red, tubular five, a green G with mouth and beard, a blue thirteen squared by multicolored light bulbs. He grimaced at a white, gooey, South America-shaped stain on the table before him.

“That was Eug’s puke,” the boy hooker said. “We tried to clean it off for you.”

“No problem. I guess I can deal with it.”

“You got no choice. Deal with it,” Francis Bean Cobain said, her face still pressed against the table.

“Don’t mind her,” the skinhead said. “She’s just hung over.”

A shaggy bald man with a protruding gut, a jean jacket, and faded bell-bottoms walked in. He looked hung on a coat rack and bent low to the floor, as if gravity pulled strongest at his feet.

“It’s about time, man,” the hippie said.

“So you’re this new fellow,” the slouched man said to Travis. He spoke with an impatient British dialect, his eyes half-closed. “My name’s Sid Barret. Whatever drug or drugs you want for the day, I will get you, through my connections.”

“Bullshit! We name whatever drug we want, and you’ll bring it here?”

“What did I just say? And try to make the majority of your order hallucinogens. Here we are concerned with *mind power*.”

“Order away,” the skinhead said, smiling.

“Okay, I’ll take two dime bags of...” After Travis was through ordering, Sid went on to the ex-con, and Travis’s stomach squeezed itself in anticipatory spasms. “This is not happening.”

“Oh, yes it is,” the supposed house nympho next to him said. “But it won’t last forever.”

Travis perked up. “Why not?”

“It just won’t. And remember this: Whenever you fly too high and hit a bad trip, that’s what the Thorazine is for, the pills in the mug there at the center of the table.” She pointed to a white mug with MOM painted on it in ocean blue. It brimmed with green and white capsules.

Travis awkwardly raised his hand to “hi” position. “Um, what’s your name again?” he asked.

“Spandella.”

“Right. How were you, uh, recruited?”

She grinned. “Mr. Hooper found me on an Eating Disorders unit in Detroit about two weeks ago. See all these scars on my arms? They’re words and pictures. I drew them with a corkscrew like a decade ago, when I was five. These are what got his attention.”

Travis peered. Transversals of bulbous, dead tissue spanned her pale arms: one swastika, two lightning bolts, a fish skeleton, and—hard to make out—*Leni Reifenstahl Rules*.

“I used to be racist. But not no more.” She sighed. “I was stupid. Very stupid.”

Travis gave her the once-over. She was stick-figure skinny, enough so that it looked like she had to hold onto something every time the wind blew. Black bangs hung off her obviously dyed crimson hair. Her red-veined eyes didn’t mesh well with her pale face, but she was still pretty.

“Those are pretty neat scars,” he said. “You’re talented. Seems inspired by Da Vinci’s sketches. Do we get to meet any of the characters from *Sesame Street*? I want to meet Elmo. And Bert.”

“Nope.” She shook her head jerkily. “We can have absolutely NO contact with anyone involved in the show. Nada, nein, zip. Except for Hooper and Sid. No one can know we exist, none of the kids, none of the parents. Don’t worry about getting to meet anybody. Be content you’re here. At least you’re not a prop in someone’s background scenery anymore.”



He was nodding before she was done talking. “Yeah. Totally true. And a good metaphor.”

Spandella went over the rules and etiquette. They work from twelve noon to two a.m. Lights out at six a.m. Since the whole building is windowless and clockless, they relied on Sid to tell them the time. No interrupting others while in the conference room. No wandering the halls when high (a safety precaution). Mr. Hooper’s sub rosa goons “took care of” anyone who wandered out or purposely left. If word ever got out about the operation, the wrecking ball outside would kick into life, and the kids were not allowed to leave during the demolition. No diatribes about a co-worker’s paintings, writings, or music. Anti-smoking comments were forbidden. And finally, no moral judgments about any member—living or dead—were allowed.

Soon Sid lumbered back in with a shopping bag chock-full of predominantly illegal pharmaceuticals. “Here’s another order for the day, kids.” He dumped the contents out and the artists lunged at the pile. They sifted through orange medication bottles, stamp-sized squares of paper, tubes of paint, cans of wood finish, tiny vials of purple liquid, tiny vials of clear liquid, crumpled tinfoil, belts, syringes, spoons, spray cans of *Easy Off* oven cleaner, cigarettes, joints, eye droppers, pipes, water bonges, chunks of white crystal, many lighters, and dime bags filled with either purple, white, or yellow.

Sid left and the workday began. After an hour the Quaaludes had sunk in and Travis felt comfortable enough to participate, his head swirling in eddies of calming mist. “Yeah, I think that’s a good idea,” he said. “The F could start singing in opera format. Oh, yeah, and in a falsetto, too. Get it? ‘Falsetto’ starts with F.” He sat back, pleased with his first contribution. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Spandella staring at him.

The hippie was slouched so low only his head was visible. “But we got to get that alliteration down,” he said. “Check this out: Fee Fi Fo Fum.”

“No...way...” the boy hooker mumbled, wiping drool from his mouth. “We can think...of something...better than that.” His eyes were thin slits, like his eyelids weighed a ton.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” the hippie said.

Francis Bean Cobain was now up and looking chipper, playing a balancing game with her chair. Travis winced: He liked her green Mohawk, but that tacky red necklace, what kind of artistic statement was that? Then it hit: That was no necklace. It was a tattoo of a slit throat, a lip of unzipped flesh with bloody rivulets dripping.

Francis Bean Cobain said, “The screen could keep changing colors, like from blue to white, back and forth, those two go well together. And the F could, like, throb like a heart, and it could dance around the top and bottom of the screen and do somersaults and cartwheels and shit.”

“But about the singing,” the ex-con said. “The F could form a mouth between its upper and lower ridge when it sang falsetto.” He lit up. “And then it could disintegrate into baby Fs.”

The boy hooker laughed. “That’s pretty funny. A gang banger and a bumblebee. Ha ha.”

“What?” Travis said. He looked to his co-workers.

“Don’t mind Jamey,” the hippie said. “He’s off in his own world.”

“But that’s a good idea,” the teen with the noosed neck said. “What Mookie said. So write that down. But we can get to the visual aspects later. Let’s get back to that alliteration. It’s got to be something that will stay with the kids.”

“I have one for S,” Spandella said, smiling flirtatiously at no one. “Suffer silently while unsewn wounds sequester your soul.”

Travis threw his pipe to the table, lit matches for eyes. “Did you just make that up?”

“Yep,” she said with a self-satisfied smile.

“Stop showing off for the new guy,” the skinhead said. “You know we can’t use that. Get on track. This is twelve-to-two time.” He ran his hand over his scalp and tattoo. Travis thought it looked like someone spilled spaghetti on his head.

“Hey, all of you, chill for a second,” Francis Bean Cobain said. “Look at Jamey.” The boy hooker, asleep or dead, was slumped in his chair like there wasn’t a single bone in his body, two dainty quarters of white for eyes. His cigarette smoldered in its glass ashtray, tendrils of smoke dissolving into the air.

“Jamey!” the hippie yelled. “Jamey!” He walked over, shook him by the shoulders—almost knocking him over—and felt for his pulse on his wrist. “He’s history. Shot up way too much H. We’ll let Hooper know tomorrow.” He sat back down. “Come on, guys. This isn’t hard. Think F.” Francis Bean Cobain trotted over to the corpse, delicately unwrapped the stole from his neck, placed it with a flourish around her own neck, and trotted back to her seat.

“His cigarette smoke as his soul, coiling and billowing itself into heaven,” Spandella said, not unhappily.

At two a.m. Sid dragged himself in like someone had attached a ball and chain to his ankles to let the artists know it was quitting time. They slowly stood up—with little stability—and stretched, working out the soreness that came with sitting for hours doped up. “Does anyone need the wheelchair?” Sid asked the room. “No one needs the wheelchair?”

Travis got to his feet, withstood a head rush, saw stars, and looked at the table in front of him. “Holy shit. I did not smoke all that crack and down all those ’ludes.”

“Yeah, it goes fast, doesn’t it,” the skinhead said, seriously nodding his head. “It’s going to be a pleasure working with ya, man.” They shook

hands with gusto.

“Hey, you,” Spandella said, taking Travis by the hand and leading him away. “Before you see your room, I want you to come see mine. I have a surprise.”

Francis Bean Cobain rolled her eyes and said, “That was fast.”

The ex-con smiled and fake-coughed the words, “Loose! She’s loose!”

The Hippie shook his head at him. “Mookie, don’t. Francis, you too. That counts as a moral judgment.”

In Spandella’s room the bed was unmade. Elmer Fudds chased Buggs Bunnies all over the sheet. The walls were chlorophyll green. Two posters were taped above the bed, one of Lenny Bruce and the other of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. A make-up kit with a mirror sat on top of a dilapidated brown dresser. The top drawer was missing. A glass jar with roaches nibbling on a chunk of a Hershey’s chocolate bar rested against the wall by the door. “Helps me not eat so much,” Spandella offered.

“What happened to your stereo?” Travis asked. “What’s with all the wires hanging out?”

“Oh, they just fiddled with it so it couldn’t pick up any radio. It can still play tapes and CDs, though.”

He paced around. “Cool room, cool room.”

“Thank you.” She approached him and delicately fondled his nose ring. He blushed and looked away. “And let me show you my surprise.” She knelt down and pulled an old-fashioned alarm clock out from under her bed. Its silver body was rusted over and the white face was stained and crinkled. The hands pointed to two o’ eight.

“Now how about that? How about them apples? It even glows in the dark. As you’ll see. Sid smuggled it to me when I was having a bad day. I think someone spiked my crank. Probably Fancy Francis, that cunt. The bitch thinks her shit don’t stink. Such a daddy’s girl.” Spandella placed the clock on the dresser. “Now let me go brush my teeth, so my breath is clean.” She left down the hall. Travis sat down on the bed, trying to massage the tension out of his neck.

After a few minutes she was back, sitting next to him, smiling at his arms, gently tracing his tattooed arm veins with her pinkie finger. Travis tensed, negative thoughts sucking up his confidence. He spouted off: “That was a good alliteration. Earlier, I mean. You really look like you’re from the streets. It’s bad for me because my parents are so rich I’d put on this image of, uh, uh, breast-beating machismo, but you, *you* are from the streets you know how I can tell you let it flow up out of you you don’t billboard it but I swagger so much I wouldn’t last two seconds in prison people know I’m a joke it’s not the—” She pulled him to her by his nose ring and shoved her tongue into his mouth with deeply plush punker chick passion.

\* \* \*

The warmth of two bodies. Hers contoured to his. He felt this. They lay in bed under the covers, his arm wrapped around her tight-skinned stomach. The lights were off and a GG Alin cassette was playing at low hum. The two teens spoke in whispers.

“You know, there’s this Puddle Theory,” he said. “Everyman is trudging through the desert, thirsty for water. He stumbles across a damp spot in the sand. That’s a one-night stand with an ugly chick. Then there’s an oasis. That’s an average, loyal girlfriend. The ocean, there’s so much of it, but it’s all salty, so that’s an extremely beautiful dick tease. This man is searching for that infinitely deep lake where he can live forever. You, Spandella, are that lake.”

She laughed. “Sounds like you weren’t friends with many girls at your high school.” Her mouth was so close, he felt each syllable on his neck.

“No, I guess I wasn’t. Girls made me nervous. Only hung with guys. And most of them weren’t friends. I have a best buddy, though. Pluto. I do miss him.”

“Well, you’ll never see him again. You know we’re not allowed to call or write or text or e-mail anyone.”

“Doesn’t matter. He was gone long before I came here.” He looked off. “To a much better place than that shit town. R.I.P., bud.”

She lifted her head and glanced at the clock. “Oh, shit. We have to be up in four hours.”

“No problem. We’ll just order a lot of uppers tomorrow. Today, I mean.” He felt his stomach bulge with hunger pangs. It let out a low, embarrassing, bass growl. He looked at her nervously. “Excuse me. This is the only time I’m ever hungry. After sex. Well, for me it was never sex per se, but, like, after jerking off.”

She giggled and he ran his hands down her ribs like they were piano keys. “Hear that honking outside? Hear all that hustle and bustle?” she asked. “Those losers are going to their nine-to-five jobs. We, on the other hand, are not part of the rat race anymore. We’re doing important things.”

He drummed his fingers on her flat stomach. “You don’t know how important those sounds are to me now, the honking, the sirens, the buses. In that hick town I grew up in, you could hear a pin drop. Fucking Sputnik. No traffic, except when Grover’s cows got loose on I-75, no noise, just Merle’s roosters at like six fucking a.m., waking you up way too early. But that’s all over.”

“Well, I have to say you’re a much better screw than Brock.”

Travis lifted his head. “Which one is he again?”

“The numbskull with the bullet wound tattooed to his scalp.”

“Oh, yeah. I like him. He’s cool.”

She fondled his hair in the darkness. He felt her long obsidian-black fingernails brush across his forehead. That he could touch and be touched, that there was the assurance of reciprocity... now he was one of the many.

“You understand we’re on borrowed time,” she said. “You, me, Brock, Francis Bean Cobain, all of us. I almost got a stroke last week off the crystal meth, I think.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. My eyes went up into my head and I had a seizure.”

Travis turned to the clock. “But you know what? That doesn’t bother me. My death, I mean. Time was just sucking me bone dry. My whole life was a hoard of minus signs. They kept subtracting every year. I was at negative eighteen when I met you. But right now, at this moment, let’s just say a positive one hundred got added to my life. That’s what? Negative eighteen plus a hundred equals... eighty-two. Without you, I would have died a miserable old man with nuts down to my ankles and a score in the negative eighties. But that ain’t happening. So fuck everything else. Fuck death. Soon enough we will feel the relish of the rise, the relief of the risen. How’s that for R?”

She looked to the web of cracks and dents in the ceiling, yawned, rubbed her hands over her face, and mumbled, “You want to make a pact? It will end us.”

He was fingering her nipple. “These bumps on your areolae are pretty cool. But yeah. No problem. What kind of pact? What do you mean?”

“You have to agree to it first.”

“Okay. You got it. I agree.”

She turned to face him, her flesh vague. “Whoever goes first, the other will off themselves.”

“Deal,” he said, not missing a beat.

“We’re pretty much already dust and bones anyway.”

“Amen to that.”

She draped an arm across his chest and said. “Odds are I’ll probably go first since I’ve been here longer. If that happens, OD on the Thorazine. Take, like, fifty of them.”

He grasped her hand. “Won’t the others try and stop me?”

“Nope.”

Spandella stepped out of bed naked, walked to the stereo, and reached down to lower the volume. Her side was to him, and Travis noticed she was so skinny she basically disappeared. Then she walked back toward him, her form full again, and settled back in, slipping an arm under his neck.

“Sweet dreams,” she said.

“Sleep tight,” Travis mumbled against her bare shoulder.

JOHN WHEATCROFT has published seven novels and a collection of stories in hardback and a novella and a long story in paperback. Nine volumes of his poetry have been published, most recently *The Fugitive Self: New and Selected Poems* by Etruscan Press. A play of his, which won an Alcoa Playwriting Award, has twice been produced and shown by Public Television in the U.S. It has also been shown on the Disney Channel and Canadian TV.

## John Wheatcroft / Three Poems

### Complacencies of *La Baignoire*

Consider this anonymous  
*civis Romanus* as he lounges  
in his bath in Herculaneum.  
Ogling a pair of lovers frozen  
into tiles of luscious colors,  
he's working up an appetite  
for a feast he'll never enjoy.

He had no notion the earsplitting belch,  
he's just heard, emitted from the maw  
of the mountain looming above him,  
is spewing a river of scalding vomit  
that will petrify what will never peter out.  
While robbing him of his anticipated  
pleasure, it will immortalize him.

## Requiem for a Shakespearean Actor

Hands rolled some rocks onstage,  
papier-mâché, and he  
enthralled an island. Sometimes  
he dallied in a forest  
where leaves never fall  
and beauty's always virgin.  
A gilded chair proclaimed  
his majesty, a tinplate sword  
his prowess, a cap with bells  
and a bladder on a stick  
the absurdity of it all.

Transported, how we gasped  
and sighed and trembled, laughed  
till the tears came, cried with delight!  
For him we beat our hands.

In the last act his head was crowned  
with laurel, or was it wisps of tow?  
Strobe lights flashed lightning, pans  
banged thunder in the wings.  
Just before the final curtain  
he stumbled, segued into a pratfall,  
his consummate improvisation.

When the houselights came up—  
they always must—he was spotted  
front and center on the apron,  
caught between here and there,  
now and hereafter.  
With all his playing done,  
everyman turned into no one.

## Elegy for a Collateral Child

A possum, his lumbering dash cut short  
by whoever couldn't brake in time  
or wouldn't swerve, stops me dead.  
The bloody guts I see as I approach  
are proof he's not just playing possum.

My eyes ricochet across a sullen sky  
and light on a sycamore, skeleton-white  
in winter. Angling across the road,  
I pass by on the other side. Haydn  
wrote no requiems for road kills.

Later, baffled by the mysteries of love,  
I hold the point of my pen midair,  
where it freezes. Still alive in mind's eye,  
the flattened fur and gore the possum  
was reduced to call up a news clip  
I caught last evening on the TV screen—  
the mangle of a child who happened  
to be there when a missile struck,  
halfway around the world. I click the button  
of memory on and drop my pen.

Sixty-three years ago my hand,  
now disabled, was sending coded messages  
of death by fluttering the shutter of  
a lamp on the deck of a battleship.

After we'd cremated two citiesful  
of our kind in two blinding blinks,  
still all night we bombarded  
with broadsides of sixteen-inch shells  
those unable to defend themselves.

The man that boy, who served aboard  
the U. S. S. *Destruction of Japan*,  
became, what right has he to indict?  
to whom can he, whose knees refuse  
to bend, appeal? And oh, the futility  
of babbling lamentations.



JULIE ZUCKERMAN was born and raised in Connecticut. She is a graduate of Barnard College and Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. She moved to Israel in 1995, and works as a strategic consultant and marketing executive for high technology companies. When not at work on her writing, she can be found swimming, biking, running or chasing after her four children. "Baby Steps" is her first published story.

## Baby Steps

Julie Zuckerman

AS THE PILOT came over the loudspeaker announcing they would be landing at Logan in approximately ten minutes, Doris felt at once both relieved the flight was almost over, and saddened that each minute on the plane was carrying her farther away from her baby boy. She wished she could package his newborn smell and soft skin into something tangible to hold on to until Jeffrey and Maryann brought him north for Thanksgiving. *Arthur, Arthur*; she had gone over it many times in her head and cooed to him. *Hello Arthur, it's your Nanny*, trying out her new name when no one else was around. She smiled as she closed her eyes and pictured him and his funny facial contortions, wide-eyed, staring up at her, his tiny mouth puckered like a guppy.

Such a heavy, adult name for a baby, she thought. But the choice had been her son and daughter-in-law's to make, not hers, so she said nothing. She was ecstatic over her first grandchild, a beautiful, healthy boy who, in her opinion, was most definitely an exact replica of his uncle Alex at that age. She asked them if she could stay for a month—a bit of a long visit, she knew—but as Maryann's own mother was long deceased, there was no one else in a position to help. And—this part she hadn't told them—it would make finding summer renters much easier if she could vacate her home for a full month. To Doris' pleasant surprise, and now eternal gratitude—because holding that baby made her happier than she had been in a long time—the young couple had accepted gratefully. She enjoyed watching Jeffrey as a new father, but mostly, she cherished the time spent alone with Arthur, holding his tiny frame on her plump chest as he slept peacefully. She happily snatched him away from his parents whenever she thought he needed a diaper change. By the end of her stay he was recognizing her voice, she was sure of it. He seemed to have grown and changed so much in just a few weeks! She could hardly imagine what he

would be like in three months.

While she hated saying goodbye to the baby, it was time for her to leave. She had done her best, trying not to be an overbearing mother or mother-in-law, literally folding her lips inward so as not to speak when she sensed her suggestions would not be welcome, but she could tell that the new parents were ready to have their home back to themselves. As the trip wore on, there had only been little exasperations of annoyance from her son, the kind that surely every mother of grown children experiences, and she was certain she had done the same thing to her own mother. With Maryann, she had tried to tread even more carefully, at first pitying her to be without her own mother at such a time, but later in the trip growing slightly weary of her daughter-in-law's incompetence at certain basic household duties, such as when to run the washer on hot, warm or cold. In a departure from her typical southern, genteel nature, Maryann had even snapped at her a few times, but then later apologized, blaming it on hormones and lack of sleep. Maryann at 28 was a full four years older than Doris had been when Jeffrey was born, and yet she seemed to Doris a mere child.

She felt an aching in her heart and was unsure if it should be attributed to missing her grandson already or to physical fatigue. She worried about the conversations she was certain Jeffrey and Maryann were having about her, now that they had their house back to themselves. She had only caught snippets of their hushed voices after she had returned winded from a simple 30-minute walk with the baby. Words and phrases such as "overweight" and "at risk" and "hasn't had the happiest life" could only be referring to one person. Doris had not always been this out of shape; when the kids were growing up, she swam regularly. But in the last eight years, and particularly in the last five since her divorce, she had let herself go. In fact, she had even rationalized that this was partially a conscious, defiant decision, as if it were some feminist statement that she was beyond the need to impress a man. She wore shapeless, flowery dresses and blouses purchased in the plus-size section of Marshalls.

Retrieving her old but reliable hatchback from long-term parking, Doris turned her thoughts to the present during the drive home to West Dennis: all of the household chores that awaited her. She hoped the renters had left her house in decent condition. She was looking forward to getting back to her beloved Cape, and grateful that she lived, year-round, in a destination to which the entire northeast gravitated each summer. She was even more grateful that high season was nearly over, and that she had escaped the crush of the tourists and traffic by conveniently visiting Jeffrey in his quiet Atlanta suburb.

The agent had seen to it that her house was cleaned after the renters vacated it two days previously, and Doris was pleased that she was returning to a spotless, sandless home, looking better than she had left it.

Renting out the house was well worth it, she decided, and if Jeffrey and Maryann would agree, perhaps she would make a habit out of it every summer. She was already imagining sitting in Jeffrey's air-conditioned condo next year, reading stories to a one-year-old Arthur and, perhaps, being present for his first steps.

She did not know anything about the renters, only that they were a family of four from New Hampshire, with two teenagers. All of the arrangements had been made through the rental agency. The young, over-bubbly, bright-fingernailed agent who had come to inspect the house assured Doris that she would have no problem finding renters, and even encouraged a slight increase in the asking price. Prior to leaving, Doris typed up a detailed account of things the family would need to know about the house, asking only that they made sure her indoor and outdoor plants were getting enough water. And, although she knew she would not be meeting them in person, wanting to model herself after a helpful bed-and-breakfast innkeeper, she had drawn a few maps of the town, indicating where the best shopping could be found, the fastest route to the beach, where to get beach passes, and so on.

On her night table Doris found a handwritten note from the mother of the family, thanking her for the use of her home. She assured Doris that their stay had been wonderful and, in the case of the house, completely uneventful. A postscript indicated that they had purchased a few things for the beach during their stay which could not fit in the car, thus they had left them in the backyard shed, and Doris should please feel free to use them, discard them, or give them away as she saw fit. Doris assumed that she would find a beach chair or two, perhaps a sun umbrella, but not much else. The chairs would come in handy, she decided, when Jeffrey and Maryann came for their pre-summer visit.

In the days that followed, Doris busied herself with paying the bills, going through the mail, visiting her few friends, and getting reacquainted with the solitude—self-imposed, she knew—of her daily life. It had been her choice to move here after the divorce; to give up her work as a French and Spanish teacher on the South Shore and to set up her own translation business working from home. She was through being subservient to anyone—to her ex-husband Ken, to the board of education and the know-it-all parents, and to the oppressive, shallow life in the suburbs, filled with too many fake, cheerful people from whom she felt increasingly alienated.

Her transition to becoming a freelance translator had gone well. Thanks to a few of her former colleagues, her contacts in the language departments at a number of the Boston universities ensured a steady stream of work, and Doris enjoyed having the freedom to simply say “no” to a project if it did not suit her. After years of working in the school system, it was wonderful to be able to make her own schedule, take a nap in the middle of the day if she felt like it, or curl up with a good book if she did not

have a pressing deadline.

She had thought, when she first decided to move to the Cape, that she would take a long walk on the beach every morning, searching for unusual shells or pretty pieces of blue and green glass shards that had been smoothed by the ocean. But it hadn't happened—she couldn't find the motivation—and whenever she visited her doctor, she felt ashamed of her sedentary lifestyle and her weakness at not being able to change. Each time, he gently reminded her that it was imperative for her to lose weight and to get out and exercise. With a BMI clearly in the obese category, she was at great risk for diabetes. When she was in a philosophical, introspective mood, she thought of herself as the opposite of those glass shards washed up by the ocean: in her earlier years she had been full of life, colorful, soft and, to some men, pretty, whereas now she was more like an ordinary piece of shattered glass.

After the month with Jeffrey, Maryann and the baby, she worried that her house would seem too quiet and that it would be difficult to make the transition back to the life she had chosen. A few of her first nights back, she woke often, thinking she was hearing the hungry cries of a newborn, but of course it was only the wind.

A week after her return, Doris was looking for her old gardening gloves in the shed, and that's when she saw it: a powder-blue bicycle, with a wide basket, leaning against the wall. She stared in disbelief. How could such a thing have gotten onto her property? Only when she saw two new beach chairs did she remember the renters' note. What had it said? She unfolded one of the chairs and sat down heavily just outside the shed. Certainly she had never, in her wildest imagination, thought that they had meant a bicycle, and she tried not to let the sight of it shake her. There was no way the renters could have known, after all. She reminded herself that she was staring at a relatively new bicycle, not a mangled one. Not *the* high-speed road bike that Alex had cared for with the same love a mother shows a child, and yet for all his trouble had betrayed him. For some reason which she did not fully comprehend or even want to understand, she had misplaced all of her anger on the bicycle, not at Alex, not at the sharp curve in the road which he clearly should have taken slower, and strangest of all, not at the driver of the oncoming car. The police and EMT workers called to the scene had all testified that the driver had not veered from his lane; it had been Alex and his bike that had swerved out of control. She cursed the day she had taught the boys how to ride bikes, and cursed her ex for encouraging in Alex what she considered to be an unhealthy obsession with cycling. *Why couldn't you have encouraged him to play a team sport?* she had raged at Ken in the days that followed, though she knew he was not really to blame.

Her baby would forever be 19. Never finish college, never find comfort in the arms of a wife, and never experience the joys of parenthood. In a

single instant, of which she had not even been aware when it was happening, her life had been shattered. Her ex-husband's and Jeffrey's too, of course. But they had each found ways to move on, whereas Doris, though she had made some substantial changes—the divorce, the move to the Cape, the change of careers—felt like she was just treading water. Unlike some couples who grow closer after losing a child, it quickly became apparent to Doris that she and Ken grieved in opposite ways. She wanted to shut out the world; he needed to be constantly surrounded by people. She took solace in books; he in trying to emulate Alex by becoming obsessed with extreme sports, mountain climbing and the like. She harbored no real bitterness towards him, even as she knew that her withdrawal from the world would drive him to another woman.

She felt nothing towards Ken now, only numbness, though they had shared nearly thirty years together, and still shared a son, and now a grandson. They had spoken on brief occasions since the divorce; she was rather proud of the time that she wished him well when he called to say he was getting remarried. "I'm happy for you, Ken. Truly," and she meant it. Only a month or so later did she realize that she had nearly forgotten about the whole thing. There had been none of the dwelling or over-analyzing or feelings of despair that she would have expected from such news.

It was slightly awkward when he and his new wife came to Jeffrey's to see the baby, but they all managed to be cordial. Though she couldn't completely hide her flabbiness under the pale yellow dress with tiny flowers, a belt loosely tied around her waist, she reprimanded herself for not having had the foresight to bring eyeliner, blush and eye cream. *My God, he looks like Alex*, she could see the words form in Ken's mind as he held the baby, the look of wistfulness in his eyes giving her pause. He looked up at her. "I know," she said, "I know."

Now, as she sat slumped in the chair, staring in disbelief at the bicycle, she thought of Ken with more tenderness than she had in years, and of Alex, and all that she had lost. The regrets and the grief began to swell in her bosom and despite the *Don't think about it* admonitions going off in her head, tears washed over her. She gave in to the intense sobbing that in recent years only happened on Alex's birthday or on the anniversary of his death. She had certainly seen bicycles in the last eight years, but something about seeing one now, in her shed, took her completely off guard.

After the tears subsided, but the post-crying jag headache was setting in, Doris locked the shed and walked back to the house looking for the cordless. She tried to remind herself that she had something good in her life now, a new baby grandson, even if she wouldn't see him for another few months. She felt an intense need to speak to her living son, someone that she hoped would understand the audacity of the gift of a bike. Although

it wasn't outrage she felt per se—she could hardly blame the renters for a lack of sensitivity; it was more of a feeling that some unseen power was mocking her.

"They left a bike. In my shed! Can you believe it?" she asked.

"Slow down, Ma. What are you talking about?" Jeffrey said.

"The summer renters. When I got home I found a note saying they had left a few things that they couldn't bring back with them, so I should feel free to use them. I completely forgot about the note, until just now, when I opened the shed. A bicycle—of all things!" Her voice was high-pitched, close to hysteria again.

"A bike! Really?" Jeffrey sounded calm. More curious than irked. "That's quite a thing to throw away. What kind?"

"I don't know! Although it doesn't look like the kind that Alex used to ride. This one has a big basket, wide handlebars—the kind people ride around here carrying their vegetables or small purchases. Maybe one of my neighbors could use it."

"Ma, don't be silly. You should keep it!"

"Me? Are you kidding? Jeff, you saw how I was when I took the baby for a walk. I can't ride a bicycle!"

"I am definitely not kidding, Mom. This is the perfect gift for you. Help you get back in shape."

"Thank you, Jeffrey. I don't need a lecture."

"You've got to take better care of yourself. I know you don't like to hear it, but you know I'm right."

She winced, but said nothing.

"I'm only saying this because I worry about you sometimes."

She was close to tears again, precisely because it seemed a bit unfair that he should bring this up now. And though she knew he didn't mean it in a malicious way, it pained her to know that this is how he thought of his mother, even if deep down she knew he was right. She wouldn't admit to it out loud, to him. "I'm not going to get into this with you now, Jeffrey. But I don't think I can stand to look at the damn thing without crying."

He sighed. Once the initial shock wore off, she would feel differently, he told her. This bicycle had nothing to do with Alex, or his death, or any of the dangers of riding on roads where cars drove too fast. Besides, Cape Cod was relatively flat, with easy riding conditions, wide shoulders and bike lanes in many places. He made her promise that she would leave the bike in the shed for now and not give it away to anyone. Then he turned the conversation to the more comfortable subject of Arthur, how he was sleeping and eating, and all that could be said about a five-week-old baby. Doris felt her heart gladdening at the change of topic. How she missed him! She didn't know if she could stand the wait until Thanksgiving to see Arthur. Jeff promised he would upload new pictures soon.

She felt weary, a dull pain spreading across her lower back, though

that was minor compared to the loud throbbing in her temples. She wanted nothing more than to curl up under a warm afghan and fall into a deep slumber, but if she fell asleep without eating dinner, she was sure to awaken in the middle of the night, hungry and grabbing the first junky food that caught her fancy—handfuls of chocolate chips, the pint of Ben & Jerry's, or the salt and vinegar potato chips—and that would be no good. Instead, she put a pot of water on to boil, and found some comfort in her favorite childhood meal of warm pasta and cottage cheese.

Doris stayed away from the shed for another week, trying to ignore what was inside, and getting back into the rhythm of work. Her lilacs were in desperate need of a trim, and though she put it off for a few more days, she needed her gardening shears and gloves and there was no avoiding the shed.

She shuddered again when she saw the bike, but it no longer surprised her, or caused a pit in her stomach as it had the first day. She simply moved it aside, took out her gardening equipment and set to work. Pulling out the weeds and grabbing handfuls of dirt to make sure she was getting the roots was satisfying. Pruning her rose bushes and lilacs, she felt productive, and when she stepped back to survey her work when she was finished, she sighed with pleasure. *Good work, Doris.* She almost didn't notice the bicycle as she stored away her gloves and shears. Jeffrey had been right, it had taken a little while, but now she could look at the bike without her heart starting to race. Soon it would be too cold to ride anyway.

Whenever her thoughts turned to her grandson, as they did often, she felt a slight stirring of motivation. Perhaps Jeffrey was right. She *knew* her doctor was right. She didn't want Arthur to remember his only grandmother as an obese, dumpy woman who was not in good enough health to play with him, or worse yet, who had died in his childhood. Not that she was sick. But she knew that if she didn't make a change soon, it would be too late. If she stayed the same weight, or gained more, she was at major risk for heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and probably a long list of other things she didn't want to think about. In fact, her doctor told her she was lucky, "very lucky indeed," to have avoided these diagnoses thus far. But someday soon, he assured her, her luck would run out.

She would have to start slowly. Her neighbor Barbara had invited her on many occasions to go for a walk, but Doris had always found a reason to decline. She mustered up her courage by looking at pictures of the baby, and rang Barbara's doorbell. "Welcome back!" Barbara exclaimed when she saw her. "How was your trip?"

"I brought pictures! He's delicious! Oh, but I miss him so much."

Barbara invited her inside, put on the kettle for tea, and they exchanged pictures and stories of their grandchildren.

"So, I have a confession to make," Doris started. "I'm feeling bad

that I never took you up on your suggestion to go walking together. If your offer still stands, I'd like to do it."

"Of course, it does! And don't feel bad. I'd be very happy for the company."

"Oh, good. Because if I'm going to do this... you know, this trying to get into shape a bit, I'm going to need some help. Sometimes you may need to push me, but know that I want to do it."

"That's wonderful, Doris. I think you'll feel a lot better. I was the same way about six years ago, and Frank and my kids and my doctor all ganged up on me and made me start walking. That's when they got me the dog. So I would have a reason to get out of the house and walk him a couple times a day."

"You're kidding! I had no idea!" Although they were neighbors, Doris had admittedly not made much of an effort to get to know Barbara, which she was beginning to regret. Thankfully, though, on one occasion a few years go, Doris had explained to Barbara the basic outline of her family history, and was grateful that now she wouldn't have to repeat the most painful parts.

Fortunately, Barbara had not seemed to take offense at Doris' earlier rejections or unfriendliness. She welcomed Doris' newfound interest in walking and seemed genuinely happy to have more than just her German Shepherd for company. They began by discussing the safe topics—grandchildren, careers, and the local arts scene. But as they got to know each other, Doris found it easier to open up to her new friend, sharing with her the more private details of her life, her hopes and disappointments, triumphs and failures.

Each day they would walk a little farther. Barbara was patient with her. And, Doris admitted to herself, she was able to get more out of her day, having started it with some exercise. She knew these were just baby steps. To make a real difference, she would have to go for a round of appointments to a dietician and her doctor, and then take their recommendations seriously. She was not yet sure she would ever graduate from the daily walks to riding the bicycle. That would take more than just strengthening of her leg muscles, but it was beginning to seem possible.



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## Barry Benson / Three Poems

### Class Reunion

I gather 17 photos you've mailed in recent years  
to select my favorites from our 40-year past  
of changing cloth colors of social relations:

your statuesque twirler grace with formal family  
fronting the 12-windowed bungalow porch, blocks  
from my blue-color blindness as a football prep.

EAI academic-music sorority honors and pose,  
then candid indoors wearing a slip and pledge  
sign—fringed touch of poetry, drama and art.

White-gloved, with roommates in pumps, full-  
bodice, mulberry, raised-hem dress, angled pose  
(could ravish my Pacific Navy deployed mind).

ISU family graduate grouping—Dad with bowtie,  
Mom with pearls, your sleeveless, pink, horizontal-  
striped-top (would welcome me into your home).

Lithe-shadowed portrait in Tahitian Trader chair,  
dust jacket back-cover portrait eliciting praise for  
publication of *Nehemiah*, *Builder*, *Friend of Ezra*.

Now our class reunion reconsiders our choices:  
Coventry preaching, my teaching, our writing,  
wondering about another life we might have lived.

## Cryptic Words from the Tavern Man

At nine inside I sensed that world of men:  
stale draught beer and sounds of pool hall  
pin ball, punchboards along one wall and then

pool sticks click against those colored balls  
of stripes and solids under an August sky  
ricocheted beaded rawhide, grey-blue walls

and fingering pinball flippers snapping I  
careened steel ball bearings off polished glassed  
big-breasted women flashing rouge-powdered eyes

across wood floors with sawdust around brass  
missed spittoons and beer spilled midst new cheers  
over glaring games declaimed as gross and crass

through shade in concentrated cones and fears  
of loss at billiards, cribbage, games of the day.  
In a shadowed corner a man who reeked of beers

declared at work he heard Dad reciting poetry  
of Richard Lion Heart, Ulysses, Idols of Kings  
and other classics from England and Norway.

Now years since Dad had memorized ancient rhymes  
I begin to comprehend his message in these lines.

**Prisoner of Sex—Aren't We All?**  
(found poem)

Professor Robley Wilson, award-winning novelist, poet and screenwriter, writes about a former colleague and fellow poet:

I remember him saying to me once, “You know, the trouble is that you cannot have every pretty girl you see.” I sometimes think that is why

he killed himself. He could intellectually realize that it's true—you can't go through life like a satyr, for God's sake. But he so much wished it

could be the other way that he simply couldn't cope with it. I do think that at the back of every man's mind is the wistful sense of,

“Gee, wouldn't it be nice if you could?”

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 12

DAWN HAD BEGUN to crack the horizon when Tomas nudged Ulyssa awake. She would have to hurry, he said. Weren't they going to be picked up at six? Tomas moved to the window and opened the shutters. In the rectangle between the partially drawn curtains she could see stars, although they were pale. A myriad stars, abnormally large.

"We had too much fun, last night." Tomas, still at the window, grumbled something about a headache that seemed to be digging its claws into his eye socket, a detail that struck her as much too graphic, given the ungodliness of the hour.

Outside, a rooster crowed, the sound startlingly close, as if the animal were crouched directly below their window of the guesthouse.

"Too many liqueurs at the *Ramona*." Tomas sighed. "And the sweltering heat—" He rubbed his eyes. "It's merciless."

Ulyssa threw off the single bed-sheet. The night had been far too short, the air in the room so hot they had slept naked. "Not merciless," she corrected him. "*Unmerciful*." She was in a dire mood. "Let's blame Walter; he's the one who suggested the early start."

Tomas moved beyond her field of vision. "Walter listens to the radio every day," he said, standing in the bathroom doorway. "The weatherman predicted soaring temperatures, all weekend long. Walter says we'll have to expect line-ups at the gondolas, and such."

"Line-ups—in a remote valley like this?" The thought struck her as absurd.

"Walter's the expert." Tomas must be brushing his teeth; she heard him spit out toothpaste. "Walter likes to take advantage of the early hours

of the day. He does the uphill portion of the hike before noon, saves the downhill portion for when he's run out of steam. That would be my guess, anyway—"

"Spare me the details." Ulyssa slid out of bed with a groan. She reached for her shorts and flung on her favorite T-shirt featuring a rendition of Alberto Giacometti's bronze, *Walking Man*. Tomas had picked up the shirt for her at the train station in Chur, bought on a whim at a small gift shop on the way to another platform.

She went to join Tomas in the bathroom. "I won't do anything without a cup of coffee, first," she said decisively, vying for space in front of the bathroom mirror to comb her hair. In the mirror, next to Tomas's face, hers looked crumpled.

He smiled. "But you *will* accept Nescafé in a pinch, if I remember correctly."

She remembered his ingenuity, on the second or third day after arriving in Switzerland, at the hotel in St. Moritz, when her fatigue had threatened to put a stop to all further explorations. He had resorted to stirring instant coffee granules directly into hot water drawn from the tap. He had presented the cup to her in bed, a white terry towel draped over his forearm. She had come upon the scattered granules later on; dark brown rivulets had coursed down the sides of the sink.

"Your eyes look puffy." Tomas stared at her face in the mirror. "You haven't been crying in your sleep again—have you?"

Ulyssa had woken around midnight, the atmosphere in the room dull and oppressive, as if from an impending storm, her heart filled with inexplicable sadness. She had been overcome by the urge to cry, yet her eyes had remained dry, as if they had forgotten how to weep. She had woken from a dream; a fountain had been plunked down in close proximity to their bed at the *Trais Fluors* guesthouse, where she and Tomas lay sleeping. Water had been splashing ceaselessly in the receiving vessel for hours, it seemed. She had panicked at the thought that in a matter of mere seconds, water would start to overflow the rim and spill onto the bedroom floor.

Even as the dream was fading away, she continued to feel a lingering ache, a strong mixture of longing and of loss.

"Ulyssa?" Tomas was looking at her, askance.

"It's Miss Janutin," she stammered, her mind filled again with the image of the fountain, retrieved with the uncanny certainty of a dreamer and emblematic of an entire week of summer holidays dating back to 1964, the year she had started grade school. She recalled the long journey by train with her mother and her aunt, sitting next to her cousin, Maria Teresa, who later threw up into a paper bag on the postal bus as it wound its way through mountainous terrain, the mountains growing steadily taller around them.

“If it hadn’t been for Duri mentioning that Miss Janutin’s mother was blind—” She faltered. The impact of what she had learned from the owner of the village store, where she had gone to buy alpine cheese for their hike, now struck her with renewed force.

Tomas gave her a quizzical look. “You’re not making much sense,” he told her. He opened the bathroom window and stood looking out at the far-off mountain range. The white peaks were becoming more discernible now across the layered, dusky blue. “Did we bring any Tylenol?” he asked.

“There might be some in the bag of toiletries.”

He searched the bag. “A funny name, Duri,” he mused, washing down the tablet with some water. “It makes me think of the grandfather—of *Heidi* book fame. Am I right?”

Ulyssa shook her head. “According to Duri—” The story was complex. She wasn’t sure she would be able to unravel it in a logical manner.

“Miss Janutin sold her house,” she tried. “On the very day of her mother’s death.”

Tomas didn’t seem to follow. “Who bought the house, then?”

“A doctor from Zürich.” Ulyssa, unable to restrain her bitterness, felt tears stinging her eyes. “Some crazy *insomniac*.”

“And so?” Tomas stared at her. “What did the dear Doctor do? Take to laudanum?”

Ulyssa shook her head. “He claimed the murmur of the fountain kept him awake at night.” Anger reared up in her voice and buckled against her will. “Human voices were constantly mingling with the babble of the water, he maintained. He would lie in bed, listening to an endless stream of whispered complaints and sing-song questions all through the night and apparently, it drove him crazy.” *Stark, raving mad*. Ulyssa remembered the precise words Duri had used at the village store, his glance of pity as he handed her the brown paper bag full of groceries across the counter, telling her not to cry.

Tomas splashed water on his face; Ulyssa stood wordlessly, held out a small towel for him. A wave of sadness had reared up in front of her all night long—as tall and insurmountable as a mountain—and now it threatened to engulf her. It had precious little to do with the absinthe she had indulged in the previous evening. What the Doctor had done was unforgivable.

“Ulyssa—?”

Tomas dried his face with the towel. Looking up briefly, his eyes came to rest on her face, where he instantly recognized the shadow of sadness. “Oh, please, don’t cry,” he said, echoing Duri. His hand reached out to touch her face. “Tell you what—” He caressed her cheek. “We’ll talk, downstairs, in the breakfast room. I promise you a quick cup of steaming coffee, but you’ll have to hurry. It’s nearing six o’clock.” By now he had

flung his daypack over one shoulder and snatched up the walking stick he had carved for Walter. He urged her along, waited for her by the door while she gathered her things together, and pulled the door shut after she finally joined him in the hallway.

The breakfast room downstairs was deserted. Coffee had yet to be prepared. Ulyssa turned away, dispirited. Tomas had just opened the front door and was offering to put their daypacks outside when they heard the honking of a car horn.

Tomas checked his watch, incredulous. “Six o’clock, sharp. My God, the Swiss are amazing. They’re as punctual as their damn trains.”

A blue Renault Kangoo cut across the gravel driveway and zipped into the guesthouse parking lot just as the morning sun began to alight on the mountain peaks. The occupants of the car flung back the front doors and jumped out—with a show of enthusiasm that was daunting to observe.

“Walter! Maria Teresa!” Ulyssa put a welcoming smile on her face. “It’s so good to see you. But I thought Walter’s toe—”

Walter, who was wearing sunglasses, hailed them in a hardy, Swiss-German manner. He didn’t appear to be limping, anymore. “*Yah*, my toe is much better,” he declared, his robust voice puncturing the hush of early morning. “I’m practically a newborn man.” He beamed. “Thanks to my angel, here; she’s been treating me with *schnapps* compresses.”

Maria Teresa looked tired. Walter was her second husband. A decade earlier, Ulyssa had received the announcement of her cousin’s upcoming marriage to the recently retired goat farmer from Saanen. There had been mention of the possibility of him moving to the *Ticino*. Enclosed in the letter had been a photograph of a tall, wiry figure surrounded by a herd of goats. Upon seeing the massive crest of a mountain ridge towering in the background of the photograph, Ulyssa, who by then had been living in Canada for more than twenty years, was smitten by a sudden, inexplicable bout of homesickness. *Walter likes to ascend to higher ground*, Maria Teresa had remarked in meticulous Italian penciled on the back of the photograph, leaving Ulyssa mystified as to what she might be alluding to. Was it perhaps a mystical transcendence of some kind? What, Ulyssa had been led to wonder, was Walter trying to rise above?

“It’s so nice that you could come—all the way from *Kanada*, too,” Walter told Ulyssa, pronouncing the ‘k’ in an exaggerated, guttural fashion. The laughing lines at the corners of his mouth, which had been hardly noticeable in the photograph, now broadened. Energetic and of lean build, he appeared to be a good match for Maria Teresa, who was fifteen years his junior. Ulyssa was left to wonder, however, about the abrupt change in her cousin’s hair style; it was disconcerting to see her hair cropped every bit as short as her husband’s.

Buoyed by a surge of inexplicable happiness upon finally meeting her cousin face to face after so many years, Ulyssa scooped Maria Teresa

up in her arms and spun her round and round in a spontaneous stomping dance that recalled their greeting ritual when they were still quite young. Everything around her dissolved in a blur; the intervening decades of her absence from Switzerland suddenly fell away and ceased to matter. She and her cousin found themselves giggling together like schoolgirls and for an instant Ulyssa felt herself transported, thought she glimpsed in the sudden redness of Maria Teresa's cheeks and laughing mouth the sheer abandon of their play together, long ago, on the alpine meadows of Radons. Memories were lighting up in her mind, of satiated colors, the green of alpine grasses and the cerulean blue of the sky, heaven and earth united in a tumultuous swirl, and all the while, Maria Teresa performing her dizzying cartwheels, a feat Ulyssa would be eager to imitate, but would never perfect.

"Welcome to the Old World," Walter said, making a bee-line for Tomas and giving his hand a good squeeze. His face lit up as he pushed his sunglasses up into his short-cropped hair. "I'm glad you could come," he added in an easy way, his English sounding leisurely—veering off, it seemed, into dialect—the intonation that of his native canton of Bern. "The drive from Maloja, close to the lake, was spectacular," he raved. "Too bad you couldn't have seen it."

Tomas was curious. "What lake was that?"

"You're the writer," Walter said. "Surely, you've heard of Sils-Maria? If not, then of the great Friedrich Nietzsche? Unfortunately, the Nietzsche *Haus* was closed when we drove by, early this morning. But I could imagine the philosopher on one of his walks along the lake—deep in contemplation. Nietzsche was rather fond of that little corner of the world. He said it was among the loveliest, combining the best features of Finland and of Italy."

"Finland and Italy—both?" Tomas wasn't sure that that was possible. "Are we talking landscape, or sensibility?"

Walter gave it some thought. "In Sils-Maria, you get a whiff of Nordic melancholy along the lake shore—the mauve light that sits in the trees at dawn, for instance. And then, of course, the lovely reflections—"

"Of Italian cheerfulness?" Tomas tried to complete his thought.

Walter nodded. "You hit the nail on the head—perfectly."

The local rooster had started crowing again. Walter looked off across the gravel path, somewhat dismayed, as though feeling upstaged by the creature whose home seemed to be the hay loft of a barn across the way.

"We'll be catching the first chairlift to Tigignas," he announced, trying to be heard above the voices of Ulyssa and Maria Teresa, who seemed utterly engrossed in their banter.

"It's a gondola, no?" Maria Teresa countered. She gave Walter a challenging look.

"And from there, we'll follow a network of well-marked trails," he



continued. He tapped his breast pocket. “What was the name of that alpine pasture, again?”

“The alpine meadow of Radons?” Ulyssa, overjoyed, was filled with anticipation; returning to that childhood haunt had been a dream of hers for many years.

“Leave it to me to get us there,” Walter answered with certitude, holding up the topographical map he had produced from the inside pocket of his jacket. “It’s an exact version of our Swiss military map,” he told Tomas, not without pride.

“Speaking of our hike—” Tomas had to run off to fetch the carved walking stick he had left leaning against the wall by the entrance to the guesthouse. Upon returning, he offered it to Walter as a gift. “Ponderosa pine, from the Similkameen valley,” he said, explaining that Ulyssa had come upon the tree limb on one of their camping trips, the summer before last. “Carving the wood was a real challenge,” he added.

Walter accepted the gift with an air of authority, like a chieftain taking possession of a ceremonial staff. He struck the ground to test its resilience. “A wild stick for a wild man,” he said, his weathered fingers closing around the notched handgrip below the feathered jowls of the mystical beast that crowned the top of the stick. “Bags to the rear, bags to the rear,” he urged, suddenly full of haste, pretending to herd them in the direction of the car. “I’ve done this hike several times,” he mentioned casually as he lifted the hatchback of the Kangoo and gestured for Tomas and Ulyssa to put their packs inside. “It will be stupendous,” he added with a cursory glance at Tomas and Ulyssa’s simple walking shoes, as if unsure whether their footwear would stand up to the demands of the rugged territory that lay ahead.

Ulyssa noticed that Walter wore the old-fashioned trousers of mountaineers who had crossed glaciers in the long-ago past, made of rugged, olive corduroy gathered with a small buckle just below the knee. He and Maria Teresa appeared to be wearing identical hiking boots—like twins, Ulyssa thought. The wave of exuberance that had buoyed her spirits upon first meeting Walter and Maria Teresa was starting to recede; she felt drained, all of a sudden.

“There will be a few rough sections along the trail,” Maria Teresa mentioned, “but I think your walking shoes will stand up to the test. Isn’t that right, Walter?”

“*Ach.*” Walter, who had rearranged their packs, now slammed the hatchback shut. “Really, it’s nothing—nothing at all. Any novice could do it.”

Still, Ulyssa was beset with doubts. The prospect of a strenuous foray into rugged territory, especially when carried out in the searing midday sun, held little appeal; without a proper cup of coffee to get her inner pressure up, it was even more daunting. “How long is this expedition

going to take?" she finally asked.

Walter, who was now consulting the map he had spread upon the hood of the Kangoo, tried to reassure her. "Four or five hours, at the very most," he said, tracing the route he intended to take with his finger. "It all depends on how many breaks we take, of course. We'll be starting out from here, after we get off the chairlift," he added, tapping a finger on the map. "And then, off we go, in this general direction—"

Tomas was intrigued. "Does the military make maps of this sort available to ordinary Swiss citizens?"

"One can get them if one really wants to," Walter said, now folding the map. "Ordinarily, the trails are so well posted, one doesn't require a map—except, perhaps, in the wintertime."

"You hike in the wintertime, too?"

"I hike all year round." Walter gave his thigh a quick slap. "I'm in good shape, huh?" he added, telling them that he had acquired a taste for rising at the crack of dawn and watching the stars fade when he was only twenty years old. "It was a happy time for me. I did my initial stint of military training in the Italian part of Switzerland, near Ascona." He gave Tomas a winning smile. "Is it any wonder that I fell in love with Maria Teresa?"

"But you didn't meet me until much, much later," Maria Teresa protested. She gave Walter a playful jab in the ribs. "The *Ticino* was his first, real love," she told Tomas. "That's where he learned to conduct maneuvers." She lowered her voice. "To this day, Walter loves to be in command," she told Ulyssa, impulsively linking arms with her. "Walter loves to play First Lieutenant. Of course, I refuse to obey nearly all of his orders," she added, now laughing openly.

"Love and the military—aren't they a heady mix," Ulyssa said, laconic. She thought back to the Swiss propaganda film produced during WWII, one that had been a favorite with her parents' generation. *Oh, Marguerite, my dear sweet*—"The lyrics of the slow waltz with its sentimental lyrics were utter nonsense, glorifying as they did the valiant efforts of a greenhorn—a private in the military—smitten by a waitress who ended up teaching him a thing or two about morale, motivation and patriotism. The song had continued to crop up in bars and at drunken parties long after the war was over.

"If the Swiss military were run by women, progress would go forward and backward at the same time," Walter cut in, feigning annoyance.

"Walter still does his military calisthenics every morning," Maria Teresa went on gleefully, further teasing her husband. "Thirty push-ups, as soon as he's out of bed."

"Usually, I play writer in my office first thing in the morning," Tomas told her. "Later, when Ulyssa wakes up, I play *barrista*." He put his arm around Ulyssa's shoulder. "Your cousin likes having coffee in bed," he

said, pulling her close.

Ulyssa made a face. “My *barrista* failed quite miserably, this morning.”

Maria Teresa, full of sympathy, suggested solving the problem by having coffee at a nearby restaurant, but it fell on deaf ears. “We’ll have breakfast at the top,” Walter said abruptly. “A little Continental breakfast on the terrace sounds not too bad, huh?” He flung open the car doors and gestured for Tomas and Ulyssa to take the backseat. “You pay very little for the mountain air and you get the view for free.”

“Nice car,” Tomas remarked in an attempt to help matters along in a civil manner. “Are you happy with it?”

Walter shrugged. “It’s a rental,” he said, adjusting the rear-view mirror as he prepared to back out of the parking spot. “I had my eye on the model with the panoramic sunroof, but none were available.”

“Can you believe it?” Maria Teresa twisted around in her seat to face Ulyssa. “Someone else managed to put in a reservation before us.”

Walter threw the gearshift into first. “Maria ordered me to leave our *Cabriolet* at home,” he explained, accelerating upon leaving the parking lot. “Only two Steam-Horses worth of power?” he cried, affecting an Italian fish wife’s accent. “They will never, ever get us up the mountain.”

“I’m happy to say, for once, he followed my advice,” Maria Teresa tittered.

The Kangoo zoomed along an access road and out onto a narrow, two-lane highway. Walter drove somewhat recklessly, his elbow stuck out the open window. “Not only that,” he laughed. “Being the perfect husband that I am, I allowed my wife to decide between the yellow and the blue Kangoo.”

“My, how civilized of you,” Ulyssa remarked.

The car followed a small, paved road obliquely across the hillside and then swerved onto a dirt road. Ulyssa sat huddled against Tomas, now silent and impassive. Cool morning air streamed in through the open windows, sending shivers across her shoulders. The landscape, it seemed, was sliding by of its own accord. It afforded her occasional glimpses of the Julia River and of planted fields along the hillsides, all of which flashed by in hypnotic succession, to be supplanted by further shapes and patterns: the dark foliage of trees pitted against the yellow light of dawn, their leafy boughs touching, as if to suggest a gate of sorts.

“There it is,” Tomas said, interrupting Ulyssa’s reverie. He took her hand. “Your beloved castle—don’t miss it.”

Ulyssa caught sight of it through the window, a smallish, medieval fortress not far from the Baroque church of Riom, positioned attractively on a hillock, set apart from the village houses. The jackdaws, which could ordinarily be seen circling its massive keep, were curiously absent this morning. The view of the castle was disappointing. It was hardly more than a small fort, if truth be told. In the early morning light, the ancient

stone walls—arid gray—appeared to be drained of all color, stripped of the magic they had held the night before, when she and Tomas had walked back from the restaurant. She remembered being struck by the formidable sight of the castle towering above a splatter of village lights, glorious in the floodlights.

Tomas, leaning forward, tapped Maria Teresa on the shoulder. “Ulyssa told me that the two of you visited the castle together, in the long-ago past. How old would you have been—seven or eight?”

“That *castello*?” Maria Teresa had lapsed back into her mother tongue. She cast a perplexed glance at Ulyssa. “I’ve never set foot in the place.”

“Yes, you have,” Ulyssa remonstrated. “How is it possible that you don’t remember?” She stared at her cousin, flummoxed. Granted, she thought. Some thirty years had gone by since they had last set foot in Riom. The castle, she knew, had undergone a series of restorations since that time. Take the roof, for example—

“The castles in Switzerland,” Walter said slowly, interrupting her train of thought. His accent was broad and deliberate, and his tone mollifying, as if he had been asked to settle a dispute. “They are so numerous, you know—” There was a long silence as his eyes sought Ulyssa’s in the rear-view mirror. “It’s easy to forget which is which. They all blend into one, after a while.”

On the contrary, Ulyssa wanted to tell him, but chose to hold her tongue. There was no point in arguing. She suddenly felt alone with her memories. Later, perhaps, when she would have a chance to show her cousin the old postcard she had received from Duri at the village store, everything might change. The crisp black-and-white view dating back to the 1950’s was bound to stir up lingering memories; images might rise once more from the mist of hazy recollections.

The vehicle was gradually climbing the sparsely forested hillside. Although the surrounding mountains lacked the vertical impact Ulyssa seemed to remember from her long-ago visit to the area, the view down through the trees to the valley below was enticing—the outskirts of the village extending to the left and, visible in the centre, seemingly set apart from the Julia River, the small, glinting presence of a lake.

“*Lai Bargnan*, the bathing lake,” Walter announced, sticking his hand out the window and pointing with his thumb. “Man-made. Constructed with the tourists in mind.”

Ulyssa, leaning into the curve, admired the look of tiny silver specks, like miniature marbles riding on the crinkled surface of the lake.

“The tourist brochure claims it’s as translucent as glass,” Tomas put in.

“As if the Julia River wouldn’t sufficiently fill the bill,” Ulyssa countered. However, it was a moot point, given the inevitability of progress, the onslaught of development that even the remotest of Swiss

valleys would be unable to withstand.

The car had climbed higher; it was now following an unpaved switchback road. Ulyssa found the swerving motion of the car unsettling. The sweetish scent of after-shave that wafted back from the driver's seat only increased her growing sense of nausea, made even worse by the odor that the new vinyl seats gave off. She whispered to Tomas that she might be sick.

"Ulyssa had a very bad night," Tomas said, piping up to get everyone's attention. "We dined at the Ramona. The proprietor insisted on us partaking of the complimentary absinthe—"

"Sure, blame it on the Green Fairy." Maria Teresa was clearly amused. She had noticed the rash on Ulyssa's chin and now wagged a finger at Tomas. "I can see you got rather close to her last night—unless, of course, that's a case of carpet burn on her face."

"It happened so late, I can't remember," Ulyssa said, trying to keep from blushing. The *Trais Fluors* guest house had lain in darkness upon their return from the restaurant. She remembered tiptoeing up the wooden stairs to their room, and the ominous creaking every time Tomas had stopped to kiss her. Admittedly, they had both been rather tipsy. He had stood outside the door to their guest room for the longest time while fumbling with the key, kissing her again and again, the stubble on his face rubbing against her cheeks.

"A troublesome cricket contributed to making our night a rather rough one," Tomas rejoined.

"A cricket?" Maria Teresa's interest had been piqued. "No—don't tell me—don't say anything." She was laughing as she turned to face Ulyssa. "This is some sort of bookish reference, isn't it? Does Tomas turn into a cricket at midnight?"

"Ulyssa thinks a cricket might have hitched a ride on her pant leg while we were walking back through the long grass," he told her.

"A likely story." Maria Teresa was clearly amused. "Whoever heard of a hitch-hiking cricket?" she giggled, unable to contain herself.

"It made a whirring sound every time we turned off the light," Tomas went on. "Ulyssa and I searched for him everywhere, even under the bed. Finally, she came up with the bright idea of luring him outside—by leaving a trail of alpine cheese. However, he wasn't a Swiss cricket, I guess. He didn't much care for the cheese."

"Mmh—you're beginning to make me hungry." Walter had been in such a hurry to get to Savognin, Maria Teresa said, they hadn't had a chance to eat, yet.

"There will be plenty to eat at the top." Walter had increased the speed of the car. It was now spitting up gravel under the rear fenders.

"We have a sensible saying in Italian," Maria Teresa said. "*He who moves at breakneck speed is sure to end up dawdling.*"

“We have a similar saying in English,” Tomas told her. “*Hurrying is a waste of time, practiced mainly by impatient people.*”

“Unfortunately, we have a chairlift to catch.” Walter, upon rounding a bend in the road, suddenly found himself in back of a tractor and trailer that took up the entire width of the one-lane road and was, moreover, moving at a snail’s pace.

“Darned peasants—” Walter was furious. “They’re always slowing things down.”

“You were a farmer not too long ago. Remember?” Maria Teresa cooed. “Back then, you had a lot more patience.”

Walter honked the horn repeatedly. The tractor and trailer, as if in response, slowed to a crawl.

Tomas leaned forward in his seat. “Do you think the farmer in front of us plans on catching the chairlift, too?”

Walter, reverting back to his native tongue, let out a string of terse, German swearwords. Maria Teresa made clucking sounds in an attempt to mollify him.

“I was wondering,” Tomas said. “How did the two of you meet, anyway?”

Walter, his hands firmly on the steering wheel, continued to look straight ahead. He had been a junior officer in the military, he told Tomas. “We were conducting maneuvers in the Ticino at the time. One evening, when my comrades and I visited the local tavern overlooking Ascona, Maria Teresa was there, working as a waitress.” He took his hands off the steering wheel, offered them up to heaven. “The rest is history.”

The road in front of them had widened unexpectedly. It afforded them an unimpeded view of the chairlift terminal situated further up the hill, a squat, gray building that pressed against a sparsely wooded slope, not far from where the tractor and trailer finally veered off. Walter parked the car in a pull-out area, smack-dab against the side of a mammoth rock that shouldered out of the hillside.

“We’ve got five minutes,” he said, full of urgency now. He opened the hatchback and retrieved his walking stick. “Everyone, shoulder your packs and follow me.” They gathered their belongings and watched as he headed off on his own, scrambling up the grassy incline in the direction of the chairlift station, defying the gentler switchback trail.

“You have a mountain goat for a husband,” Tomas remarked, walking beside Maria Teresa toward the terminal.

“Walter loves to hike,” she told him. “He’s also a great skier. From the time he was very young he would help out, working weekends at the local ski lift. They paid him with a free season’s pass.” But Walter’s knees—how should she put it?—“they give him trouble, sometimes.”

The chairlift terminal seemed to grow in stature as they strolled up over the brow of the hill. Ulyssa was first to notice that none of the chairs

seemed to be moving; suspended from the cable at regular intervals, they appeared to be frozen in the air. Maria Teresa, who had caught up to Walter, read aloud from the schedule posted at the foot of the concrete steps leading to the terminal entrance. "It runs every day." She gave Walter a look of reproof. "But it starts at nine-thirty in the morning."

"Over two hours from now!" Walter was testy. "But that's impossible. Why couldn't they have posted the correct time on the internet?" he said, looking from the schedule to the chairlift and back again. Had they made an error by consulting the winter schedule? No, indeed, it was the summer schedule.

Tomas, who had sidled up to Walter, adopted a conciliatory tone. "I guess we'll have to hoof it, huh?"

Ulyssa surveyed the terrain. "Not me," she said, eyeing the rather steep, wooded slope that rose up behind the chairlift terminal, together with its complex geometry of near-vertical cables and towers that disappeared from sight above a stand of firs at the top of the ridge. She shivered, all of a sudden. "Not me," she repeated, stalling for time. "Not without some coffee, first."

"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade," Maria Teresa said, pulling from her brown canvas backpack the items necessary for setting up a rudimentary outdoor kitchen. She began to spoon heaps of instant coffee into four small, red enamel cups she had set out on the concrete steps.

Walter divested himself of his much heavier pack. "Adages won't help us out of this folly," he told his wife as he set to work. He emptied the contents of his water bottle into a saucepan. "If you ask me," he said, fastening a light blue cartridge to his portable one-burner stove, "such platitudes sour everything."

"Walter is my *sherpa*," Maria Teresa informed Ulyssa. "We've gone on numerous bicycle tours, to France and to Germany. Here in Switzerland, he's been lugging our gear up and down the mountains ever since we first met."

"I hear the Swiss military has accounted for every valley and every ridge in your country," Tomas observed. "Is that true?"

"Ours is a very small country," Walter told him. "The ones responsible for making maps have to do something with their time, huh?" He struck a wooden match against his belt buckle. "Butane and propane, a special mixture," he informed Tomas as he lit the stove. "Even on Mount Everest, it boils a liter of water in seven minutes flat."

They hunkered down on the concrete steps next to their packs, waiting for the water to boil. Tomas pulled something out of his pack that was wrapped in a pair of long-johns. "Anyone interested in partaking of some hardtack?" he asked, divesting the wheel of Finnish rye crisp of its covering.

Ulyssa gave him a smile. “Tomas lugs along his hardtack wherever we go,” she told Maria Teresa. She sat with her arms crossed tightly over her chest and faced the sun. Although the high-altitude air had lost some its crispness, her hands felt cold. “Unfortunately,” she said, watching Walter remove the saucepan from the burner and pour the heated water into the small cups, “I can’t eat it, due to my allergies.” She accepted a cup of coffee and took a small sip, finding it on the lukewarm side. She was certain she hadn’t seen the water come to a boil.

“Ah—*kahvi*—the fuel of the western world.” Tomas took a deep breath and leaned back against the guard rail of the landing. “The great outdoors,” he added, slurping appreciatively from the cup Maria Teresa had passed him. “It has a way of making everything taste much sweeter, in my estimation.”

Walter helped himself to a piece of the hardtack. The air pockets reminded him of Swiss cheese, he said, although he couldn’t sink his teeth into it as with cheese. “Quite honestly,” he said, chewing it and washing it down with a large gulp of coffee, “the taste is rather disgusting, if you ask me.”

“It’s crunchy, anyway.” Maria Teresa nibbled at her piece of hardtack. “Tastes a little bit like cardboard that’s been left out in the desert too long.”

“Hardtack is a Finnish staple,” Tomas explained. “It has sustained armies and school children for centuries. The original recipe required the addition of crushed-up glacier ice prior to the baking, which in turn gave rise to the air pockets.”

Still, Walter was baffled by the presence of the large hole in the middle of the wheel. It seemed utterly superfluous, he said.

“It’s traditional,” Tomas informed him, quite calmly, while sipping at his coffee. “The hole in the center is actually quite useful. They used to shove a dowel through it, you see. The dowel was hung from the rafters.” He smiled. “That way, it was safe from the vermin.”

“Vermin?” Maria Teresa looked at him, wide-eyed. She smoothed her skirt down over her knees. “Rats, you mean?”

Tomas nodded. In his mid-twenties, he told her, while working as a naturalist north of the Arctic Circle in Finland, where he was conducting some research for the government, he had forgotten to properly store his hardtack and it had become infested. “I had to drop the hardtack into my *kahvi* each morning,” he added. “I would wait for the insects to float to the top. Then, I would skim off the bugs before consuming it. I experienced the same thing later on, when I did my stint in the army.”

“You got your military training in Finland?” Walter asked. “What rank did you rise to?”

“I was a man without rank,” Tomas told him. “I stubbornly resisted rising above the position of private. It was a matter of principle with



me.”

“A matter of principle?” Walter didn’t quite believe him.

“I feared I might find the military too much to my liking and, you see, playing soldier isn’t good if one intends to become a writer.”

Walter shook his head. “I don’t see how one could possibly interfere with the other.”

“A writer must claim his independence,” Tomas said, seemingly taken by the view of grassy slopes studded here and there with firs and larches. “In the military, it’s nothing but teamwork.”

“*Ach*, yes, but where would we be without teamwork? Where would Switzerland be? Where would your own country be? It would be under the thumb of the Russians.” Walter laughed, quite forcefully. “That’s where it would be, my friend.”

“I am speaking personally, as someone who wanted to become a writer,” Tomas said. “I found I didn’t have to use my head while I was in the army, because everything was thought out for me.”

“You should have become an officer, then. Like me,” Walter said, starting to break camp.

Tomas gave a shrug. “Even officers take orders, it seems to me.”

“Would you like to try your *kahvi* with a shot of homemade prune schnapps before we go?” Walter had pulled a small flask from the inside pocket of his jacket and was now holding it up for Tomas’s appraisal.

“Not now,” Maria Teresa said, taking it from him before he had a chance to top up his own cup. “Isn’t it high time we left Base Camp?” She pointed to a yellow signpost, visible from the stairs. “It says right there that we’re only five minutes from the hiking trails,” she told him, her voice urgent, all of a sudden. “We’ll save the Schnapps for a *real* emergency,” she added, stowing the enamel cups along with the flask in her pack.

Walter grabbed his walking stick and stood, seemingly undecided, looking off at the dirt path trodden into the meadow. “We’ll make the ascent in record time,” he assured everyone, although Ulyssa was sure she discerned a false note of optimism in his voice.

She felt hungrier now than she had five minutes earlier and wondered why the thought of sharing the traditional Grisons walnut torte in her packsack hadn’t occurred to her. It would have lightened her load, somewhat, if only by a fraction.

“Wait for me,” she called out as she shouldered her daypack and hastened to catch up with her cousin. They were past the yellow direction sign when they heard the cawing of the crow and looked back to see the bird perched atop a solitary Norway spruce.

“I hope its cawing isn’t an omen of some kind,” Ulyssa said, captivated by the glint of light on its blue-black tail. “Perhaps it is telling us to go back.”

“You’ve always been so superstitious,” Maria Teresa said. She fingered the silver pendant that hung from a silk cord around her neck. “Remember that time when we were staying at Miss Janutin’s house? You told me that my wish would come true if I spotted a crow flying overhead, just as long as it didn’t flap its wings before disappearing from sight. Even if it looked like the crow was going to flap its wings, you told me that my wish would be granted if I quickly covered my eyes and spun around three times—just as long as the bird had totally dropped out of sight by the time I opened them again.”

“Your wish had something to do with Peter, the goatherd. Didn’t it?”

Maria Teresa smirked. “I’ve got Walter, now,” she said, linking arms with Ulyssa as they headed up the trail.

ERNEST HEKKANEN has recently had work accepted by *The Antigonish Review* and *The Nashwaak Review*.

## Don't Be Such a Cockroach

Ernest Hekkanen

NOT LONG AFTER turning ten years old, our grandson, Fritz, began to act like a cockroach. At least that's what I would accuse him of, more playfully than anything else. Hey, you, you little cockroach, why are you always scuttling around under the table? Are you pretending to be an insect of some kind? and he would reply with these strange chirps and clicks, the same sort of sounds a cricket makes when it rubs its legs together, or whatever they do to produce such sounds, and then one day when I looked under the table, to check on what he was doing under there, well, there he was, wetting the tip of his finger in order to pick up crumbs he would stick into his mouth, and so I said, Fritz, you really are beginning to turn into a cockroach, you know that, and then he gave me this really odd look—you know, with his pupils turned up into his eye sockets so only the whites were showing—and then, sure enough, he gave this really strange-sounding chirp.

You know what he's doing under there? I told my wife, Elsa. He's down there under the table, moistening his finger in his mouth so he can pick up crumbs and eat them. Don't you think we should feed this little varmint before he gives himself a bad case of pinworms from eating food off the floor? Is that what he's doing under there? Elsa said in a rhetorical fashion. Yes, that's what he's doing under there, all right. She came away from the kitchen stove where she was making scrambled eggs, lifted one corner of the tablecloth in order to peek under the table and that's when Fritz clattered around really vigorously, the same way a clattering, dry insect would have done, and before I knew it, he had worked himself in under my chair and was gripping my ankles like they were the steel bars of a prison cell, pretending he had to fend off his grandmother, and I said, heaving myself up from the chair, Holy Jumping Jack Sprat, this is really too much, where's all the domestic bliss we're supposed to be experiencing

in our senior years? Why is Fritz always over here, and why is he always acting like a frigging cockroach, for frigging sake?

Please, Urs, don't get exasperated with him, and you, Fritz, come out from under your grandfather's chair, you're beginning to annoy him, for heaven's sake; and then, what did he do? What did Fritz do? He gave another chirp, even louder than before. Really, this is too much, I said, bending at the waist and looking at him through the inverted V of my legs where he continued to reveal the whites of his eyes below the rungs of the chair. When he looks at me like that I find it really unsettling, fearing his eyes will get permanently stuck up in his head, you know, and then, out of exasperation, I said, One of these days your eyes *are* going to freeze in their sockets like that and then all you'll have to look at are the thoughts swirling around in your head. You know that, don't you, you little cockroach? Please, Fritz, let go of your grandfather's ankles, Elsa pleaded with him. Yes, let go, I echoed her, but he didn't let go, so I had to drag him around holding onto my ankles, over to the broom closet where I opened the door and took out the straw broom and began to poke at his hands and arms, and because his hands and arms were bare right up to where they went into his T-shirt, he began to complain, That's not fair, grandpa. You can't use the broom on me, and I told him, I can when you're acting like a cockroach, because that's all any cockroach deserves, being swept into a pile of dirt on a dustpan and thrown out the door into the backyard—where the snow is nearly up to our knees, by the way—and then I began to sweep at the hair on his head, until finally he let go my ankles and scuttled back under the dining table, where I poked at him with the broom some more, trying to get him out from under there.

You know, there was a guy by the name of Gregor Samsa who acted the same way you're acting right now, I told him, and then one morning he woke up to discover the Fates had turned him into a cockroach and he couldn't switch back into being a human being ever again, and that's what will happen to you, too, Fritz, if you keep acting the way you're acting right now. You'll turn into a cockroach and that will be the end of you, the same way it was the end for Gregor Samsa. Your father will throw an apple at you, one that will stick in your exoskeleton; it'll begin to fester there, and then one day you'll die in the house, next to the baseboard more than likely, and then a week or two later, we'll discover you in a pile of dust bunnies and similar filth, and we'll have no option but to throw you out with the trash, the same way Gregor Samsa's family threw him out, by the way, and I'm sure you're not going to like that very much, so I'd come out from under there if I were you, before you annoy me so much I petition the Fates to turn you into a cockroach. Yes, don't make your grandfather resort to doing that, Elsa added, taking plates out of the cupboard. Sit up at the table now and have some pancakes with syrup and whipped cream and bananas. Can I have cinnamon on them,

too? he said, suddenly becoming a boy again. Thinking the siege would stop if we said yes, Elsa and I looked at each other and jointly told him, Yes, you can have cinnamon on them, too, and then, in an attempt to annoy us to the point of utter stupefaction, he said, Great, can I eat them under the table, and we jointly told him, No, you can't eat them under the table. You have to eat them *at* the table, like a regular human being—like a regular boy of ten years old.

I won't have any then.

Oh, come on. Cut that out, Fritz. Quit acting like such a cockroach. It's no longer the least bit amusing. Really, it isn't.

Fritz's mother lives in a shoebox-sized apartment down around the corner from us and so Fritz is at our house quite a lot these days. We despair over our daughter. She's what you'd call a serial wife, one who's had children by three different men and still can't seem to learn from her mistakes. Beatrix has a ten-year-old mistake, a five-year-old mistake and now a one-year-old mistake. We shake our heads in grief over what we might've done wrong, because, until she was nineteen going on twenty, we thought we had done just about everything parents could do to bring up a child properly. We thought our efforts were paying off, too, because she had graduated as an honor student from high school and seemed to have a bright future ahead of her. But then, in her second year at university, everything went to hell in a hand basket, as they say. Our perfectly intelligent daughter seemed to become a perfect blithering idiot, after one perfect bullseye by cupid's perfectly aimed arrow. She came home from university with a watermelon-sized lump under her tank top and we very nearly had heart attacks right there on the spot—the wife and I, that is. Is this what we sent you away to university for—to get pregnant?

I know, I know, she said, waving off our concerns, you think it's really stupid of me, don't you?—and then she gave us another shock, as though the first one hadn't been of sufficient voltage, when she stuck out her left hand so we could see the wedding band on her finger. Surprise, surprise, I'm married, she said—to Josh. You'll just love Josh.

Josh was the tall, gangly, dark-haired fellow stumbling up the concrete walkway to our house, with several suitcases under his arms, a fellow whom we soon discovered was taking a master's degree in genetics. Elsa and I rolled our eyes at one another, when we learned that he was going to be a geneticist, because obviously there was something he had mastered in genetics—other than what he had learned in the lab. It turned out that Josh possessed a gene that began to express itself after he became a Ph.D. candidate and that was a predilection for other men, which might have explained the soft handshake he gave me when we were first introduced to each other. *Josh, please meet my father, Urs. Urs, please meet my husband, Josh.*

As you can probably guess, Fritz has grown up with some identity

issues. When he goes to live with his father during the summer, he's got two men who are in the habit of mothering him, and during the winter, when he's down around the corner at his mother's place, he has to be the little man of the family, after being rejected by two potential fathers who were once involved with our daughter: one a roofer, and the other a marijuana grower, or so we strongly suspect, anyway, because although the latter one doesn't hold down a nine-to-five job, he drives around a big honking pickup truck, one that is jet black and has darkly tinted windows. The roofer and the grow-op guy spawned mistake number two and mistake number three, respectively. As an additional piece of information, just so you can appreciate the ramifications of our situation, Mr. Grow-op is a bodybuilder who has upper arms the size of my thighs, with the result that his head looks like a delicately poised marble midway between the outermost reaches of his shoulders. In private, as a way of injecting a little humor into our humorless predicament, my wife and I have begun to refer to him as Mr. Pinhead.

Do you know what Mr. Pinhead did today?

No, what did Mr. Pinhead do today?

He got his head stuck in a pin-sized hole and couldn't get it out again.

So how did the situation finally get resolved?

He popped off his head and started playing marbles with it.

But back to the story at hand—how we got our cockroach of a grandson to come out from under the breakfast table. Listen, I told him, if you come out from under there I'll give you that book about Gregor Samsa and how he got turned into a gigantic cockroach and you can see if that's really what you want to become, namely, a giant vermin no one wants to be around. What do you say to that, Fritz? Is it a deal? One of Fritz's saving graces is the fact that he likes to read; indeed, he's got an almost daunting capacity for retention. Elsa and I are constantly buying him books. Once he has finished reading a book it becomes part of the fortification he has erected around his bed down around the corner at his mother's place. That fortification stands nearly five feet tall and is designed to give him some privacy, because he shares his room with his five-year-old brother and will probably, in time, have to share it with his little sister, too, should our daughter, Beatrix, ever get involved with another guy, whom, by the way, she won't be having any kids with, because, thank God, she finally did the smart thing and got her tubes tied.

*Thirty years old, three kids and no husband*, I often lament to myself during stressful moments of familial misery—when, at our age, we should be experiencing some eventide bliss.

Do I get to keep the book? Fritz said, now summoning me back to the present.

Yes, you can keep the book about Samsa, provided you act like a boy from now until the time you have to go to school. Do you think you can

do that?

At school, Fritz is always getting into trouble. This year's running joke is that our ten-year-old grandson has been given his own office, but that he has to share it with the principal. There are so many support people trying to keep the kid from going off the rails, we joke that we don't lead our own lives anymore, due to the fact that we have so many appointments to take the grandson to, and then one day, he came home with this little ditty:

Shampoo isn't real pooh, you know;  
Therapy isn't real pee;  
And whales don't have to worry about their waistlines,  
Not that anybody really cares.

He kept repeating the above ditty over and over and over again until finally, fed up with the broken record that he had become, Elsa and I started mimicking him, in unison, just to show him how stupid it sounded—and what did he do? What did Fritz do? He turned his eyes up into his head and said, You guys are really mental, you know. No wonder I'm the way I am. It's all in the breeding stock.

When, at last, Fritz had finished eating his breakfast I went to get him Kafka's book, *The Metamorphosis*. As soon as I gave it to him he started reading it; he kept reading it even as we walked him through the knee-deep snow up to the elementary school, which is only a couple of blocks up the hill from our house. But then, at noon, we had to go fetch him, not because he was acting like a cockroach, but because he kept telling everyone that he was Franz Kafka. Before turning him over to us for the remainder of the day, the female principal took us aside and said, Really, you've got to be careful what you give that child to read. He's extremely impressionable, and you never know what he'll do next.

Well, what did he do that was so offensive this time?

He kept going around pretending he was spitting blood into a handkerchief.

That's not in *The Metamorphosis*.

No, but it's in the preface to the book. Look for yourself if you don't believe me, and then she thrust the book at me, quite forcefully. I hadn't perused the book since teaching German literature over a decade before. In the preface to the edition, the editor, one Ernst Pearlman, tried to suggest that *The Metamorphosis* was a metaphor for several pivotal events in Kafka's life, one being the hemorrhage he experienced on August 9, 1917, at the age of thirty-four, when the family's maid announced, *Herr Doktor, you won't last much longer*—a pretty spurious claim, if you ask me, because Herr Doktor had written *The Metamorphosis* in 1912. However, there it was in print: a most bloody reference to blood being coughed into a handkerchief. The principal, in an attempt to be helpful, had underlined the passage in red—twice, as a matter of fact.

Fritz, as I have already told you, has some identity issues, but also an amazing capacity for retention. He is also a good chess player. Among the books that comprise the fortification around his bed are a number of volumes that document famous chess games and as he read the books he memorized every move of every game. Now, the same thing began to happen with the books penned by Franz Kafka. Fritz read every book I had on my bookshelf, including the *Diaries*, adding them to the fortification around his bed. And then, one day, toward the end of the school year, a few days before he was scheduled to go to the city to live with his father for the summer, he woke up thinking he had become the writer. He adopted Kafka's adroit, affected manner and then he began to reenact long passages from the *Diaries*, in particular certain parlour scenes, like the one in which Kafka is labouring on his first fiction piece and his uncle grabs the binder and denounces it as *the usual stuff*.

Where is the stoker when I need him? Fritz began to wail. Where is he? I've got to take him up to the pilothouse to see the captain.

Don't be so frigging Kafkaesque, I told him. We don't have a stoker in this house, nor do we have a coal furnace, whereupon he went downstairs to the basement and brought up an imaginary friend whom he claimed was the stoker.

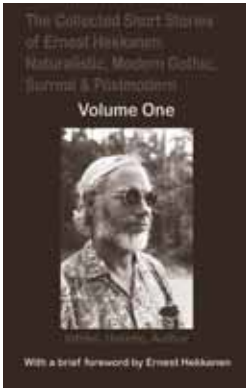
Thank God, he's going to go live with his father for the summer, I told Elsa. I can't stand any more of this. My nerves feel like they've been worked over by a rasp.

Yes, I think the change might do him some good, she said.

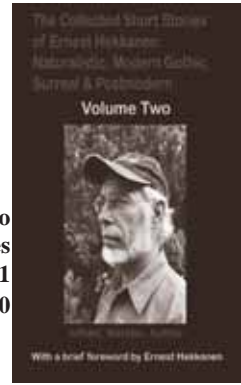
In the city, his strange behavior continued, unabated; and in retaliation, his father initiated court proceedings in an attempt to secure full-time guardianship of him. Before he was able to get possession of his son, Fritz began to cough up blood—unhealthy quantities of it, too, which totally baffled the medical system, because he didn't have tuberculosis. Then, one lonely night, Fritz up and died.

That's the end of the story, except for a note I later found under the bed where he had slept in our house so many times. There was a quote pulled from the story, *Home-Coming*, which goes like this: *The longer one hesitates before the door, the more estranged one becomes*. The handwriting bore a frightening resemblance to that of Kafka.





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