

# The New Orphic Review

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# Contents

Volume 14    Number 2    Fall 2011

Ernest Hekkanen	4	<i>Stories From Life</i>
Roger Pylypa	7	<i>Untrammelled Voyage</i>
John F. Buckley	15	<i>Three Poems</i>
David Letourneau	19	<i>Canadian Woodsman</i>
Jill Mandrake	33	<i>Two Very Short Stories</i>
Margrith Schraner	36	<i>sinistral</i>
Carl F. Thompson Jr.	38	<i>Kindred Spirits</i>
Barry Benson	50	<i>Three Poems</i>
Tim Strutz	53	<i>Brake Test</i>
Robert Cooperman	57	<i>Four Poems</i>
Hillel Wright	62	<i>What We Take With Us: Remembering Michael Woligroski</i>
John Grey	65	<i>Three Poems</i>
Ivor C Treby	68	<i>Three Poems</i>
Paul J. Healy	71	<i>Termination Shock</i>
Ernest Hekkanen	75	<i>All I Really Want on New Year's Day</i>
Ernest Hekkanen	84	<i>Story Autopsy # 5</i>
Ernest Hekkanen	88	<i>Today is Good Friday</i>

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by Bruno Schwegler of Wohlen, Switzerland. Watercolour on paper.

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 43 books. The most recent are *All Night Gas Bar*, and *Ten Story Autopsies*; *Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow*; *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills* and *Shadows on a Cave Wall*. Hekkanen is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* and *Contemporary Authors* (Vol. 240) in the United States. He is the subject of Margrith Schraner's critical study, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen* (2007).

## Stories From Life

### Ernest Hekkanen

BACK IN THE early to mid-1970s, while working the graveyard shift at an all-night gas station on Hastings Street in Vancouver, I would set my old Underwood typewriter on top of a stack of wooden Coke boxes in the bay of the garage and there, when I was not serving customers at the pumps, I would write stories based on my experiences since arriving as an immigrant to Canada. During the time I worked there, I was held up a half-dozen times, assaulted and even stabbed.

During my early 20s, I was operating under the assumption that a writer should learn a little something about life before setting out to write about it. That had resulted in my working at many different jobs: as a ranch hand, day laborer, well digger, fire fighter, fruit picker and planerman at a sawmill. I wrote quite a few stories at the service station and became well-acquainted with the late-night denizens who frequented the East End of town. Over the years that I worked there, I wrote nine stories based on my work experience as a gas jockey. Oftentimes, the stories would barge, full-blown, into the service station, and all I had to do was faithfully transcribe them onto the page.

By late 1976, I was beginning to wonder whether I might not be digging a grave for myself with each new working-class story I wrote, because my stories certainly weren't getting a very good response from magazine editors. One editor wrote, "I hate it when Americans come up to Canada and write about our society without knowing anything about it. We *aren't* like your characters, not one little bit! We don't speak like them and we definitely don't act the way they do!"

Because I was transcribing the stories almost verbatim from real life, with very little fudging other than sometimes combining two or more incidents in one short story, I found the reaction of the editors rather bewildering. Bewildering, and a little bit depressing, too. Was I fooling

myself that such people lived in Canada, or was the literary elite of the country in denial that such people actually existed? I was, needless to say, a little baffled.

By 1977, I had written enough gas station stories to assemble them in a collection entitled *All Night Gas Bar*. That manuscript made the rounds of at least eighteen book publishers, none of whom had a favorable word to say. One editor told me: "I don't like your thinly veiled criticism of our country. You should feel lucky that Canada gave you refuge," another said: "These stories are all about men and their issues. Half if not more of our readers are women and they wouldn't appreciate *All Night Gas Bar*. Also, the very few women you have in your stories aren't described very well. Indeed, I suspect you of latent misogyny," and another: "Too much brutality and too little humanity," and yet another: "Your stories are competently written, but surely, there are more uplifting things to write about," and lastly, "These stories are too much the same, and they nearly all end in robberies."

After four years of futile attempts to get *All Night Gas Bar* accepted by a book publisher, I finally consigned it to one of my archival boxes. A couple of years ago, when I was throwing out possessions, I stumbled upon that collection. The stories seemed a little antiquated, given how much credit-card procedures have changed at service stations and how security matters are now being practiced, especially at night on the graveyard shift, but other than for that, they struck me as fresh, evocative of the times and, most importantly, as pretty good tales, ones that were anchored in real life. All I had to do was provided a context for them. Consequently, I decided to write ten story autopsies that would examine, in some small fashion, what gave rise to the stories and what might have caused them to die in manuscript form.

Upon completing the manuscript, I again sent it out to publishers. Usually it was met with indifference, but sometimes it was met with the same sort of antagonism it received in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One reader with Ronsdale Press summed up his criticism this way: "Some of the writing in this book is good: interesting, concise, reasonably insightful. I learned something about Vancouver society and culture in the 1970s, and it was an interesting slice of life for that profession at that time. While there were some compelling, well-written—and apparently true—stories in this collection, and some really interesting characters spring up from time to time, I can't see it making a successful book.... More, it feels frequently to me like the author wrote about a collection of things that happened to him because he wanted desperately to write."

In the end, I decided to self-publish *All Night Gas Bar, and Ten Story Autopsies*, as I have done with nearly all my books.

In Canada, there seems to be a bias against narratives that cut too close to real life; however, this might be starting to change. Ross Klatt's

story, “First-Calf Heifer,” which originally appeared in Volume 13, Number 2 of this magazine, has been picked up for inclusion in this year’s *The Journey Prize Anthology*, and in the present issue of *The New Orphic Review*, we have another story based on work experience, namely, Roger Pylypa’s, “Untrammelled Voyage.” David Letourneau’s story, “Canadian Woodsman,” and Tim Strutz’s story, “Brake Test,” might also fit into this category of fiction. So who’s to say? Perhaps the old approach of going out into the world to forage for stories is making a comeback.

ROGER PYLYPA spent fourteen years working in group homes with developmentally disabled adults, primarily with Community Living in Victoria, B.C. In 2009, he graduated from UBC with an MFA in creative writing. His thesis was a novel for middle-grade children. Roger has a bachelor's degree in child and youth care, and twice published articles on personal experience in the professional journal *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*. He currently works as an educational assistant in the Victoria school district.

## Untrammelled Voyage

Roger Pylypa

TREVOR SAT AT THE back of the bus, squeezing and unsqueezing his A&W cap. He always sat at the back, the best place to watch people. Unusual people were the friendliest—they'd often talk to him, or at least watch back. Today there was a mom with a baby on his left and a weird girl across from him. Well, nobody should really be called weird—people are different, that's all—but boy, did this girl look strange. Spiked hair, and spikes on her belt and bracelets. Shiny black lipstick and eyeliner. Three earrings in her tongue. Leather skirt, long boots, and lacy stockings with a tear that showed when she crossed her legs. He allowed himself to wonder, just for a moment, if she had a boyfriend. "I'm Trevor," he said.

The girl smiled slightly.

"I have a new roommate," he said. "She's moving in today. Her name's Danica."

The girl nodded.

"My last roommate died of cancer. Her name was Tina."

"I'm—sorry to hear that." She fumbled though her purse and pulled out an iPod.

*Sorry to hear that.* Trevor was tired of those words. "Danica is her replacement. For her room. I hope she's nice."

"I'm sure she will be." The girl twiddled with the earphones as she put them in. Trevor watched her finger move in gentle circles on the iPod control. When she stopped, he looked up at her face. She glanced at him and looked straight down again, then shifted position in her seat and gazed out the window. He watched her a moment longer before turning to the baby beside him.

"Hello, baby." Trevor waved at the child and looked up at the mother. "I work at A & W. Been there fourteen years. Helping customers. Where do you work?"

The mother played with the tot's fingers. "Normally I'm a teacher,

but right now I'm taking care of my baby here.”

“I've got a new roommate. Danica.”

“Yes, you were saying.”

“I live at Dunbar Home. Eleanor's the supervisor. I like most of the staff, especially Angus.” He wondered if his girlfriend, Ginelle, had ever wanted a baby. Sometimes she'd say things like “I love children, especially babies” and “I won't be able to have babies much longer.” He liked kids too, but being a father wasn't something he'd ever thought about. Not really.

The baby turned to face Trevor and giggled. It had beautiful brown eyes and the silliest smile you'd ever seen. They stared at each other for a few seconds.

The bus passed a huge willow tree next to a gas station. Trevor pulled the bell, stood up, and said goodbye to everyone.

He went straight to the office when he got home. Eleanor was in the swivel chair, typing on the computer, phone between her shoulder and ear. She looked up at him through her glasses, brushed a few strands of long grey hair out of her face, and put one finger in the air.

He heard the fridge open and hurried to the kitchen. Sure enough, Mark had his hands on a block of cheese. The staff often found cheese under Mark's bed—last week they'd found a mouldy chunk hidden in the mattress. Regular staff kept fattening food locked in the storage room fridge, so it must have been a casual who'd left this block out.

Trevor tried to take it away, but Mark's grip wouldn't give. “You're not allowed,” Trevor said. “You have to lose weight.”

Mark tugged at the cheese block. “I'll eat what I fucking want.”

Eleanor came into the kitchen. “Guess what, Trevor? Danica's here. Everyone else has already met her.”

“Mark has the cheese,” Trevor said.

“How about you let go, Trevor.”

“But he has the cheese!”

“Trevor.”

He let go. Eleanor turned to Mark. “Let me put it away,” she said. Mark held it tight against his chest. His *Wheel of Fortune* T-shirt bulged over his jeans.

Eleanor put out her hand. “Why don't you watch your game show channel?”

He held the block a few more seconds, then let out a groan and gave up.

Trevor went back to the office and leaned against the doorframe. Good thing he'd gotten her to stop Mark in time.

A few minutes later, Eleanor was back in the office. She pulled a box out of the med cupboard, took out a packet, opened it, and poured its pills into a med cup. Then she put the box back and locked the cupboard.



Meds had to be kept safe—for the other residents, of course. Trevor would never take anyone else's pills. They wouldn't even need to lock it if they didn't have to worry about his roommates.

Eleanor got up, put her hand on his shoulder and directed him into the hallway. "Danica's downstairs. Angus is helping get her room arranged. Let's go say hi."

Angus was here, good. Maybe he'd help with the shipwreck story again tonight.

Trevor followed Eleanor downstairs into Tina's room. Danica's room. "Hi Angus!" he said. Angus had scraggly red hair and wore his usual checkered shirt, sleeves rolled halfway up. He introduced the small woman sitting next to him as Danica.

"Hi, Danica. I'm Trevor."

Danica slowly raised her head and said hi. She was young, maybe a teenager, maybe thirty, but definitely younger than he was. She had straight black hair and dark eyes, and wore one of those curved things that holds your hair back. She looked Chinese.

As Eleanor gave Danica her four o'clock pill, Trevor scanned the room. He'd already seen it many times in the last three months completely bare of Tina's things—no pictures of horses or stuffed animals, no CD player or figure skating calendar. It still seemed like he should hear Billy Joel blaring from her room as he tried to call her for dinner, either waving his arms from the doorway or risking what the staff called the "wrath of Tina" if he dared step into her room. Now there were boxes on the floor, clothes on the bed, and a red-and-grey walker in front of this new person. Some pottery and a couple of drawings on the dresser. Trevor didn't feel like he could get used to someone else living in Tina's room.

"Hi Danica," he said again. "Can I help you with something?" He looked at Angus.

"My clothes." Danica put a sweater on her walker, grabbed the handlebars, and stood up. She undid the wheel locks and walked toward the closet.

"I think she's okay right now," Angus said. "When she needs your help, we'll let you know."

Eleanor put her hand on Trevor's back. "She's really busy getting unpacked. Angus is helping her. Give her some time to adjust to Dunbar, okay?"

Trevor let his head down. "Well, okay." Maybe he could help later.

\* \* \*

Beatrice was eating with her fingers again. It wasn't so bad with the broccoli, but once she got to the mashed potatoes, it was time to stop her.

"Angus," Trevor called. His eyes shifted between Beatrice and Danica, who sat across from him. Beatrice was a lot older, but quicker-moving. And wore more colourful clothes. But Danica was prettier.

Angus called back from the kitchen. “Just a moment, okay Trev? I have to cut up Danica’s dinner. Eleanor had to go home, so I’m the only staff on tonight.”

“Why did she have to go?”

“She’s been here since nine this morning helping Danica get settled. No one took her evening shift. I’ll try to find time to help you with your story tonight.”

Try? Trevor hated that word. Angus was his key worker—the guy who helped him make goals every year, took him on holidays like the Okanagan trip last summer, and was helping him write a story about a shipwreck. He hadn’t said “try to find time” much in the last few months while there were three people living at Dunbar. They’d made great progress on the story. And he knew Danica needed help, but it wasn’t like Angus was *her* key worker.

Beatrice scooped up another chunk of mashed potatoes with one hand. Trevor had seen the staff help her use a fork many times. How exactly did they do it? He held her arm and tried to put the fork in her hand. “Come on, Beatrice, use the fork like you’re supposed to. Just like Eleanor says. You don’t want people to wonder in a restaurant.” He looked up to see if Danica was watching.

Beatrice said nothing—she didn’t know many words. She began eating with her other hand.

Angus came into the dining room. “Hey, Trev, remember, that’s the staff’s job.” He touched Trevor’s arm. “Tell me about the Canucks game. I only saw the end of the second period.”

Trevor let go of Beatrice’s arm. “It was awesome. Too bad they lost.”

“What a drag.” Angus helped Beatrice put the fork in her hand and guided her for a few bites. “That’s it,” he said. “You’re getting better at this, Beatrice. Next time you’re in a restaurant, everyone will be impressed.”

“I got her started.” Trevor looked at Danica.

Angus sat down to eat. “Was Luongo in goal?”

“Yeah,” Trevor said. She’s a lot shorter than Tina, he thought.

“Did the twins score?”

“Um-hm. Do you need any help, Danica?”

She smiled and said, “No.”

Trevor offered her the milk anyway. “I hope you’re happy here at Dunbar.”

“Thanks.”

“Where did you live before?”

“My parents’.” She talked slowly. “In Richmond. And Phoebe. My cat.”

Trevor couldn’t think of much else to ask, so he watched her eat. She ate a little at a time, between forkfuls looking up at the painting on the

wall. He wondered if she'd like to see his shipwreck posters or model ship. He already had the sense she liked beautiful things. She seemed to react to changes in the background music by tilting her head or closing her eyes. Danica was a lot different than Tina, or Beatrice. She didn't have trouble eating. But she used a walker. How would she get up the stairs?

Better make a special effort to visit her. In her bedroom.

"Hey Angus," Trevor said. "When is Ginelle coming over?"

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Angus rested his chin in his hand. "Maybe she could come for dinner Saturday, once Danica is properly settled in."

Trevor wasn't happy with that response. He could bus to his girlfriend's whenever he wanted, but her parents had stupid religious ideas and never even let him close the bedroom door. The only time he could hold Ginelle—really hold her—was when she came to Dunbar, which the staff had to arrange. She was only over for a couple hours every few weeks. Angus kept saying "arrangements" were difficult. Trevor hated that word too. And even when they were alone, she never let him get past kissing. But at least he had a girlfriend. Some people never got one.

After cleaning up, Trevor went to his room and read over what he'd written of the shipwreck story so far. It was a legend he'd made up, what he imagined might have caused the wreck on the big poster in the middle of his room. He called it *Untrammelled Voyage*. The printing was neat, even where he'd written over erase-marks when Angus had told him he'd made a mistake.

It was Angus who'd suggested the word "untrammelled." It meant you were free to move, not stopped from doing what you wanted.

Every time he heard Angus in the hallway, Trevor sat up and put the pages of the story together again. Each time, he ended up lying on his bed, gazing at the poster or the model ship they'd built together last year. There hadn't been any shipwreck models at the store, so they'd put together a regular model and crushed in the side afterwards.

At 8:00 he went up to the office, where Angus was doing meds. "Hi, Angus."

"Oh, Trev, really sorry. I've still got tons left to do tonight. Maybe we can look at your story tomorrow."

Trevor went back to his room and read his story again. He fell asleep early, thinking about the girl on the bus. He felt a bit guilty, so thought about Ginelle as well.

\* \* \*

"Who's on tonight?"

"Marilyn."

Trevor closed his eyes tight and grimaced.

Eleanor typed on the computer and spoke at the same time. "You

have to try to get along with her, that's all. Angus will be here."

"She doesn't give me respect."

Eleanor sat back and looked at him. "We've been through this. You feel she doesn't respect your independence. I've talked with her about it. Give her a chance to get used to working here. I told her she'll be helping Danica get more settled tonight, so you won't have to deal much with her."

Trevor leaned his head against the door. "She'll still tell me what to do."

"If there's a problem tonight, we'll talk to someone at head office. A chance to use what you learned in your self-advocacy class."

Trevor slumped out of the room and dropped onto the couch. Why didn't people like Marilyn work in laundromats or something? And how was the self-advocacy class going to help? The class had been about standing up for your rights. He also had a booklet Angus had gone over with him, with sections on rights and responsibilities, and a lot of other things he couldn't remember. He kept it in his drawer. So far the booklet hadn't made Marilyn any nicer.

"Oh, and Trevor," Eleanor called. "There's a new casual, Roberta, who's been here since noon. She's going home at four when Marilyn gets on."

Trevor got up. A new casual—a woman. He found her in the family room next to Danica, doing a jigsaw puzzle.

"Hi, I'm Trevor. Doing a puzzle, eh?"

"I'm Roberta. Danica's helping me sort the pieces." Roberta was pretty, with green eyes and curly hair. And nice boobs.

"Want to see my shipwreck model, Roberta?"

"Sure." She looked at Danica. "I'll be back in a few minutes, okay? Keep searching for red pieces."

"Okay," Danica said. "Hi, Trevor."

Trevor touched her on the shoulder and said hi. Then he took Roberta to his room and showed off his three shipwreck posters. He talked for a few minutes about the biggest one, *The Rhone*—a steamer that sank in a Caribbean hurricane after hitting a rock near Salt Island on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October, 1867. Apparently it was a good shipwreck dive—his dream was to actually get a close-up look one day. He showed her *Untrammelled Voyage*, based on the true facts of the terrible night of the storm. Then he showed off the model, explaining all the details. A few times as he pointed to parts of the ship, their fingers touched.

\* \* \*

Trevor ate dinner quickly. He tried to forget Marilyn was sitting beside him. Marilyn, with the deep voice, perfect-looking clothes, and too much eye-liner. He looked at Angus a couple times, but Angus didn't look up from his plate.

Marilyn broke the silence. “What did you do today, Mark?”

Mark rested his arm on the table and put his cheek in his hand. “I did recycling at the airport, then we went to the library, and then—”

“That’s great, but remember, we don’t eat with our elbows on the table.”

Mark moved his elbow off the table’s edge. Angus slowly took his off as well.

“How about you, Trevor?” Marilyn asked. “Did you do anything interesting today?”

“Not really.” He forked a chunk of potato and shoved it into his mouth.

“Could you answer my question?”

Trevor spoke through his chewed-up potato. “I did.”

“Trevor, don’t—”

Angus interrupted. “I think he’d rather not talk about it.” Marilyn narrowed her eyebrows at him.

“It’s my right,” Trevor added. “Self-advocacy.” He surprised himself by using that word. But Marilyn and Angus were too busy exchanging glares to notice.

After dinner, Angus helped him with his story. But they only got through three sentences:

*The captain of the Rhone looked out at Salt Island. He preferred the sea, even in a hurricane. On a ship, he was under his own control.*

Trevor wanted to add: *Alone with her, he needed nothing else*—but Angus had other things to do. Instead, he lay on his bed and imagined he was the captain of the *Rhone*, and that Roberta had come to him, scared of the storm, and asked to stay with him for the night. If anything happened to the ship, she wanted him to save her. So he agreed to share his cabin, together. Trevor’s hand slipped under his belt, and then—

Marilyn knocked on his door. “Have you done your teeth?”

He said “shit” to himself and sat up quickly. “I decide that on my own. I’m a grown man.”

Marilyn entered his room. “Grown men brush their teeth. Okay?”

“I’m thirty-eight years old.”

“I’m not trying to be mean. I’m doing my job. And I don’t have time to check later.”

“Angus will help. You’re supposed to work with Danica. That’s what Eleanor said.” Trevor felt his chin begin to quiver. He left his room and went to the bottom of the stairway beside Danica’s room. He called up the stairs. “Angus!”

Marilyn approached from behind and pressed on his shoulder. “Teeth, Trevor. I’ll help you.”

Angus appeared at the top of the stairs. “Trevor does his own teeth. Always has. Right, Trev?”

Marilyn went up the stairs and motioned to Angus to follow. In a moment Trevor could hear them arguing from the office. He felt bitter. He’d been doing his own teeth for thirty years, yet still needed Angus to fight for him.

Danica came out of her room and pushed her walker toward the stairway. “Trevor. It’s okay.”

It wasn’t okay. He didn’t need anyone’s help. Maybe Danica did, but not him. He looked her in the eyes. “Can I help you with anything?”

She pointed upstairs. “TV.”

Helping her up the stairs was definitely the staff’s job. Not something they would ever let him do, not even Angus. But they were still arguing. Danica could probably do better with steps than they realized.

He gently held her arm. “Come on. It’s easy.” He put one arm around her waist and she leaned against him. Her body felt warm. Together they walked a few steps to the foot of the stairs.

Trevor stood behind Danica and held her by the waist as she lifted one foot at a time, grasping the handrail with both hands. Halfway up, they paused. He was one step below her, face pressed into her hair. He felt tense, and a bit woozy. Her mouth was close enough to—

“Oh, no,” Danica said. She began to slip. Her body leaned back and one hand let go of the rail.

Trevor grabbed her arm. “I’ve got you,” he said. But he wasn’t sure. He had to think fast—what would a captain do? She felt so close. If she was a little closer, she wouldn’t fall. He moved his arms completely around her, tight, and used the strength of his legs to hold hers up. He wanted to face her, too—somehow that seemed important to the rescue. Their heads were touching. All he had to do was turn a little. Slowly –

Her eyes looked terrified.

It’s okay, Danica, he thought. I won’t let you fall. He noticed himself shaking. Because I care about you. His heart pounded so hard it hurt. Trevor closed his eyes and pressed his mouth against hers.

She threw out her arm and knocked him off balance. As he stumbled, he heard thumping on the steps below. Something was wrong. He steadied himself and stared at the landing.

Danica lay at the bottom of the stairs. She didn’t move. Trevor turned and looked upstairs. He could still hear voices. A few seconds later he looked at her again, edged down the steps, and held her hand. It was limp. He could tell she was breathing, but there was yellow water coming out her nose and her eyes didn’t look the same size.

Trevor glanced up the stairs one more time. Then he lay beside Danica and held her, really held her. He knew he was the only person who could make everything all right for her again.

Raised in the Detroit area, JOHN F. BUCKLEY currently resides in Orange County, California, with his lovely and talented wife. After living like a hermit for several years, he has recently begun leaving his home to perform poetry in public venues. His work has been published in a number of journals, one of which nominated him for a Pushcart Prize in 2009. His chapbook *Breach Birth* was published by Propaganda Press in March, 2011.

## John F. Buckley / Three Poems

### The Story Behind My Next Tattoo

There's a woman parading about  
with faces where her holes should be,  
swanning about and grinning at every orifice.

She went to the fancy plastic surgeon's office  
over on Figueroa, in the medical center  
with the deadpan pansies outside,  
just to show off and speak Swedish  
and Swahili simultaneously.

I call her Mother, though she's a little too young,  
but she doesn't object,  
because she has noses and silver-belled throats and  
hazel eyes instead of eardrums, even waxy ones.

She cries, "Look at me! Look and marvel!"  
with the mouth in her mouth,  
its chin nestled in her lower lip.

I fear her and run to her incessantly  
like a kitten after a piece of mint dental floss.

Someone must package her, someone  
must give her a TV show, someone  
must marry her, that exceptional kisser,  
and make her the happiest woman in the world,  
an honest woman, no more lisping, distorted lies  
from the wee swallow tongues in her orbital sockets.

Will she warble to me in sweet, ten-part harmonies when I am old?

## Green Arthur

He rummages throughout the garden, pulling up carrots to munch upon, plucking our chives from the corner patch, nibbling, mumbling “Green, Arthur Green. The xylem goes up and the phloem goes down,” looking up at the bark on the birches, lovely cigar scrolls, looking down at the ground and the grime that lives under his rough naked toenails, at the pillbugs all milling in exodus from leafpile to underlog.

Mom grabs the phone with one hand to ring up his mother to come and go get him, a broom in the other to shoo him away from the vegetable plots, which hiss at him, whisper of sinister Brandywine tomato conspiracies ripening there on the vine on the left, there on the vinyl zucchini—don’t eat it, don’t touch it, it’s only for sitting upon!—there in the cups of bikini tops strung on the laundry line, drying. Naughty!—

Butter abruptly churns inside his face, whey squeezing out of his eyelids, cream rising into his mind. “Hello, ma’am. I know you. I’m sorry. I’ve gotten away for a bit, haven’t I?” There is my past tutor back in the saddle a moment, his horses come back to the stable. But then again, there they stampede, dirty bad loa mounts, taking a bath in the river he needs still but still keeps on flowing and churning and

churning and churning; he damns me next, all ten years, for stealing his girlfriend, the virginal Brussels-sprout maiden, and giving her whiskey and squeezing her produce and kicks at my kneecaps, a violent afterclap Mom does not countenance. Off she goes, swinging and swishing at him, on the phone calling the cops this time, calling me indoors away from the man outside, our ragged neighbor. “He got

a perfect score on his SATs” once was the case, an eidetic eidolon, the boy who was beamish, not scary and hairy as Arthur, Green Arthur, crying now, pitching a tantrum and the trashcans across the backyard, pulling down clothesline and bathing suits, making another scene. The xylem goes up and the phloem goes down and Arthur goes sideways, pear-shaped, bananas, feet in the soil and head in the thunderclouds.



## Aquarian Freakout

Sometimes, it's hard to be that air sign.  
Hating individuals but loving humanity.  
Sixty seconds behind but sixty years ahead.  
That's what they say as they light another  
stick of incense and then stretch for the bong  
on the far side of the circle. Look, a diameter!

Sometimes, it's hard to take every emotion  
and put it under a microscope, testing its validity.  
Is it selfless at the core? Will it lead to the humane  
revolution that frees Kareem Mumia Al-Jamaica?  
To take every emotion like an ugly, chafing rock  
you are forced to own, screw it into your belly-  
button like a jewel and start shimmying about  
like a sexy genie is often much too embarrassing.  
*I scrutinize* is far better than *everyone's watching*.

Someday, despite the pain of not being able  
to afford the treatments to offset—the word  
*offset* seems gentle enough to tolerate—my  
near-sterility, my cloudy balls, I will take our  
hypothetical future children whom I love so  
fucking much I want to trepan myself to let  
the cranial pressure out onto the playground  
near our house and catch them as they come  
down the red plastic slide, announcing *whee*  
or *we* or *wee*. In the last case, I will lead them  
to go pee over in the stinky big-kid potties.  
There may be high-fives upon successful completion.

Someday, I will want to take them into the woods,  
into Nature, but then remember that every man-  
made footprint may trample a California condor egg  
fallen from the canopy. Can I rationalize the assault,  
accidental though it be? No. So we will stay at home  
and play Legos. Legos help build valuable skills  
despite their totally ridiculous rectilinear bias.

My mom used to watch the tears run down my face,

*The New Orphic Review*

sneer, and screw up her face, parodying a crying child, taunting, *Muh-muh-muh-muh!* Waaaaah! Obviously, firstborn sons may not become weak whining bitches. Mom was an air sign too, a Libra, the sign for lovers.

DAVID LETOURNEAU has been a professional marketing writer for fifteen years, working for such companies as Time Life and Coldwater Creek. "Canadian Woodsman" is his first published work of fiction. Letourneau currently lives in the United States in Stamford, Connecticut.

## Canadian Woodsman

David Letourneau

THEY WERE BOYS when they found the fingers. Not what they expected to find chasing a jackrabbit through the woods, yet there on the ground, in the dirt, were two fingers without a hand, an arm, a man attached to them. They knew it was a man from the wedding ring clinging to the end of one of them. It looked like their father's ring. All the men in Courcelles had a similar ring, bought from the same jeweler in the rural Estrie region of Quebec, some sixty miles south of the city.

In Courcelles you were either a logger or a farmer, which meant you ran a chainsaw, brush cutter, rotary tiller, some type of device made to permanently alter the state of something else, and every so often, by unfortunate consequence, cause irreparable damage. Given where they were, in a recently cleared pocket dotted with tree stumps, Claude and Emile figured a chainsaw was the culprit of what lay before them.

"Rentrez à la maison!" (Go home!) yelled a lumberjack who emerged from the woods, stomping the ground in blocky work boots. He held a small wood box. Water dripped from the bottom and streaked his pants. "Rentrez à la maison tout de suite!"

"Les doigts sont ici!" (The fingers are here!) Claude pointed to them in the dirt as he back-pedaled, grabbing Emile by the sleeve and retreating into the thick.

"Arrête!" (Stop!) said Emile when they'd gotten far enough away to spy. They hid behind trees and watched the lumberjack kneel and open the box.

"Qu'est-ce qu'il fait?" (What is he doing?), Emile asked.

"Il les met dans la glace. Pour les apporter à celui qui les a perdus." (Putting them on ice. To bring to the man who lost them.)

"Pourquoi? Il ne pourra plus jamais s'en servir." (Why? He can't use them anymore.)

Claude spoke like the older brother. “Ils font partie de lui, même s’ils sont morts.” (They’re part of him, even if they’re dead.)

The lumberjack rose to his feet and rumbled off in the direction he came. The wind carried the smell of shepherd’s pie and their mother’s voice from the house. “Le souper est prêt!” They would have a story to tell at suppertime that evening. Claude suggested after dessert.

\* \* \*

The first paying job Claude and Emile were able to find as young men was at a logging camp. They started by peeling potatoes for hungry lumberjacks in a makeshift kitchen and later moved up to cutting trees. Eventually they learned the trade and decided to venture to the United States to start their own logging operation. The decision was Claude’s. He had heard stories of prosperity from those who had crossed the border and envisioned a new life for his family. “You come wid me. We cut wood in de U.S.,” he said to Emile. So with little money and even less English, they moved to New England and took work wherever they could find it. In time they were able to secure a bank loan, founding The Proteau Land Clearing Company in 1959.

Early on the language barrier made them easy prey for contractors looking to take advantage of migrants from the north. They were underpaid on many jobs and sometimes not paid at all. Gradually they learned how business was done.

When Claude wasn’t on the job site he was handling business calls from his trailer home. Weekday evenings were spent on the phone talking broken English to contractors, negotiating deals and giving bids on jobs. Sundays offered a brief reprieve: church in the morning, newspaper and sports on TV in the afternoon, dinner in the evening. When Claude’s head hit the pillow he fell asleep almost instantly. There was nothing waking him save the alarm clock at four in the morning and maybe a brisk shoulder shake from Marcelle, his wife.

After twenty years of doing business in the States, Claude had gained a healthy confidence. He walked like he was going somewhere and spoke with assurance, despite the Québécois accent, mixing French with English and still managing to get his meaning across. His broad frame and square face could make him imposing till you got to know him. The beginnings of a pot belly were starting to show, and white wisps of hair began creeping in around his ears. He was easy to spot on the job site among all the commotion of moving machinery and men; he was the one wearing the white hard hat. Union reps knew who to go to if regulations weren’t being followed. They relied on him to steer the job, to keep things running smoothly. Everyone relied on Claude for something.

Beyond work there was family. In the early days Claude would go to the market for groceries, knowing Marcelle and Celine, Emile’s wife, were hesitant to venture there. They feared the language barrier would

cause only misunderstanding and embarrassment. Of the four of them, Claude had the best grasp of English. He would deliver groceries to their trailer homes every Wednesday night till the women were better assimilated. On Saturday nights he would take them all for dinner and drinks at the Franco-American Club. There they could laugh and trade stories with compatriots and not feel so far from home. A night of drinking did not dissuade them from church the next day, however. Claude had promised Marcelle's parents *le bon Dieu* (the good Lord) would remain in their lives even in America. They sat in the same pew at Sacred Heart every Sunday for Father Saint-Pierre's ten o'clock mass in French.

And after the accident there was Armand, Emile's son.

The Proteaus were hired to clear land for a golf course in Concord, Massachusetts. The terrain was dangerous for heavy equipment. Steep banks and rocky ledges made conditions precarious for skidders, huge scorpion-like machines designed to drag felled trees to the chipper. It was raining the day it happened, the morning Emile tried navigating his skidder around a boulder embedded on a hill. He managed to get half way around the stone when the skidder's spinning tires churned the dirt into mud, creating an avalanche. The skidder's front end rose on its rear wheels, like a scorpion set to attack, and fell backwards, tumbling down the hill. Emile was thirty-six when he died.

For weeks after the accident, Celine pleaded with Claude and Marcelle to take her back to Canada with Armand. Her anguish had made her erratic and dangerous. After several suicide attempts, her family admitted her to a psychiatric hospital in Quebec City, praying a short stay would remedy her despair. But Celine never found peace. Life outside the hospital walls overwhelmed her. It was safer inside. She would live there the rest of her life, and Claude and Marcelle would take custody of her son, Armand. He would be their only child.

\* \* \*

Summers off from middle school meant Armand could go to work with his *oncle*. At four-thirty he was awakened by the alarm clock and the smell of breakfast coming from the kitchen of their new house. He dressed to the spitting and popping of bacon on an aluminum pan and the buzz of his uncle's electric razor in the bathroom. When he brushed his teeth he'd watch a swirl of gray-black stubble go down the drain. Some day, he thought, when he was a man, it would be his own.

Their plates were already prepared when they sat at the table: Claude's with two eggs sunny-side up, burnt rye toast, bacon strips, crispy slices of fried potatoes, and a cup of hot tea on the side. Armand's usual was a scrambled egg with melted American cheese on top, plenty of ketchup to dip it in, spongy white toast, bacon, and orange juice. The conversation was sparse, except for Marcelle's repeated reminders to be careful and not get in the way of moving equipment.

After breakfast it was to the furnace room in the cellar where work clothes hung on nails. On the concrete floor by the furnace, atop folded grocery bags, stood a row of battered work boots. Armand watched as Claude laced one boot and then the other, notch by notch. Like the boots, his uncle's thick-fingered hands were scuffed and stained with grime so deep in the crevices they seemed impervious to soap. Beside the boot-lacing chair was the cedar chest. Claude opened the bottle of rubbing alcohol that sat on top beside a blue box and towel. He poured alcohol in his palm and wrung his hands together, then toweled them dry. Like a doctor preparing his instruments, he laid out the contents of the blue box. He held a syringe up to the ceiling light and pulled the plunger, then drew liquid from a small glass bottle he turned upside down. Eyeing the syringe carefully in the light, he would glance down at Armand, who was transfixed.

"You know why *ton oncle* do dat?" Claude would ask with a smile.

"So *ton oncle* can stay big and strong." It was what his *tante* had told him.

"Daaat's right," Claude said in his slow and deliberate chieftain voice. "So *ton oncle* stay big and strong." And after rubbing a spot on his stomach with an alcohol swab, he pinched his skin, breathed in, and injected himself with the needle, looking down with a wince and a grunt. "Big and strong like your *papa*."

"You sure you want to come wid me today?" he asked as he packed the blue box. "Don't you want to play wid you friends? Ride you bike?" It was more of a gentle suggestion than a question, not that he didn't want his nephew with him, only that he felt for his loneliness.

"No, *mon oncle*, I want to go with you."

"Daaat's *hokay*. You come wid me den."

\* \* \*

Armand's favorite part of the day was the morning. He felt like a grown man driving down the highway with his uncle in a growling tool-bed truck, seated high above passing cars, the radio tuned to the AM news, cigarette smoke clouding the dashboard. When the news was over the music started. Eddie Rabbitt sang, "I'm drivin' my life away," while Anne Murray asked, "Could I have this dance?" Claude drummed his thumbs on the steering wheel and smiled at Armand, knowing it amused him.

They were the first ones on the job site, their truck weaving around mountainous wood-chip piles steaming in the morning cool, still warm from yesterday's shredding through the chipper. Before exiting the truck, Claude reached for the ever-present roll of hard candies, butterscotch. He put three pieces in his mouth and handed the rest to Armand. "You 'old dat for me, *hokay*?" Which was to say, "Have these ready if I need them." Claude was always losing pocket knives, cigarettes, candies. He knew they would be safe with Armand.

When they reached the clearing where Claude's chipper was, Armand stopped.

"You come *hin de* chipper wid me, no? I show you 'ow it work."

Armand shook his head no, his fear of the orange dragon causing his laugh to quiver. Claude nodded.

"*Hokay*, you be good boy."

"I will, *mon oncle*."

"Watch de *hequipment*. Stay *hout* of de way."

But he always stayed long enough, at a safe enough distance, to watch his uncle awaken the fearsome machine.

Up the side of it Claude would climb, thirteen feet high, to enter a glass-encased cab where he'd sit behind levers and buttons. He would be the brain for this mechanical beast that pushed fuel through its hydraulic veins and thick black smoke out its nostrils. Its long swooping neck had a claw at the end that grabbed twenty-foot trees like twigs and plopped them onto a flatbed in the back. From there a conveyor belt led the logs to a gaping mouth where spinning blades chewed them to bits. For maples, pines, oaks, birch . . . whatever genus of tree may have graced the forest for hundreds of years, the chipper was the final gateway. The dragon showed no mercy. When it was awakened its roar was deafening, and so powerful that it hit the chest like a fist, knocking Armand's resolve to stay in the area right out of him. It sent him into the woods where he pretended to be Detective David Starsky, on the hunt with his partner, Hutch, for escaped convicts.

High above in his glass cab, Claude would watch over his crew throughout the day. Though he had a dozen laborers to keep track of, he never lost sight of his nephew. There were things in Armand he wasn't used to seeing in his native Quebec. He saw a young mind at work, evidenced by the handwritten papers in his room, the scribbled thoughts and stories, the crayon drawings of people he pretended to be when he played in the backyard and among the wood-chip mountains. He didn't fully understand it all, but he knew it was more than childish behavior. Claude saw in Armand what he might have been if he'd had an education. Determination without schooling yielded him only a modest ranch house. He wanted more for the twelve-year-old boy who was now his own.

This was the job Claude needed to run without breakdowns or delays. He signed a contract with New England Gas to clear land for a forty-mile pipeline. The schedule was tight and the pressure to finish on time great. For the past two years, The Proteau Land Clearing Company was in financial straits. A high-paying project like this could keep the company from bankruptcy, or at least delay the inevitable. He offered New England Gas the lowest bid of all subcontractors. He signed the contract despite the "discretionary termination" clause that threatened to replace his crew if it fell behind schedule. In all his years in the land clearing business, he

had yet to work a job without an interruption, without a dead engine or a grinding gear shaft requiring lost time for repair. He knew he was taking a risk but he signed on, desperation moving his pen.

\* \* \*

The smell of pine chips mixed with fuel spills and truck exhaust. It welcomed Armand when he opened the door of the pickup. What was different about this morning was that someone else had arrived on the job site before them, a man with a green hardhat. Claude wasn't expecting the visit; Armand could tell when he muttered his favorite French curse under his breath. It didn't take long for Armand to dislike the man in the green hat, who made his uncle, always strong and sure, nervous.

"Mr. Proteau," the man said, "are you always here this early?"

"*Oui, halways.*"

"I see you brought some help with you today."

"Dis *his* my nephew, Armand," Claude said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "He come wid me when dere's no school. He's a good boy, *oui*, Armand?"

The good boy smiled shyly.

"Well the reason I'm here is to see how things are coming along. I know you had a machine go down last week; lost a couple days."

"*Oui*, but we fix dat *has* soon *has* we can and start to work right *haway*. We catch up quick."

"I appreciate that," said the superintendent, "but that doesn't change the schedule."

"I *hunderstand*. We get de job done. We work 'ard."

"I know you do. I also know you're aware of the contract."

"*Oui oui.*"

The superintendent pulled a clipboard out from under his arm. "I need you to sign this."

Claude's hand shook when he held the pen.

"Are you okay, Mr. Proteau?" asked the superintendent.

"*Oui*," said Claude, scribbling his name. "I got diabete. I shake some time."

"My dad has that, too. Are you on insulin?"

"*Oui*," he said, and handed the clipboard back to end the conversation. "I see you."

"I'll see you, Mr. Proteau."

His *oncle* had always been a quiet man, but now the silence weighed heavy. Even the overly jubilant morning birds seemed subdued on Claude and Armand's walk to the chipper. Armand trailed a few steps behind his uncle, hating the man in the green hat.

They reached the invisible line where Armand stopped walking. Claude continued without a parting gesture. No offer to sit in the chipper's cab. No demonstrations. Armand thought of something relevant to say. In the



surprise of the superintendent's visit, Claude had forgotten his sweets.

"*Mon oncle*, do you want your candies?" he yelled.

"No candy today, Armand. You go play."

\* \* \*

The superintendent had come again. This time he wasn't as cordial. Claude's crew still hadn't made up the time they lost when the chipper broke down, resulting in another condescension: the signing of the clipboard. But all Claude could think about on the drive home was when he was a boy, chasing *petits lapins* in the woods with Emile. They'd bend over laughing whenever they came close to catching one, which they rarely did. They never meant any harm; it was the thrill of chasing an elusive ball of fur they found entertaining.

Claude missed Emile most when life was difficult. He imagined what his brother's life would be like now, running a chainsaw again, living next door, raising his family. Then he thought he might be better off *avec Jésus*. Working so hard just to get by wasn't what they imagined when they came to the States. Where he was he didn't have to worry about making the mortgage or giving his son an education. He could rest easy knowing it would be taken care of for him. Still, Claude wondered. What if Emile were alive? Would he be signing clipboards, too?

Though it was summer, it wasn't exceptionally warm, not at five-thirty in the afternoon with wind whistling through the windows. Armand didn't know why his *oncle* was sweating; he wasn't exerting any energy; he was just driving. His cigarette hand, arched over the steering wheel, trembled. Marcelle had given him an earful that morning: he wasn't following his diet, he was losing weight, he was drinking more. Only Armand knew, too, that he wasn't taking the medicine that made him big and strong. He would ask Armand to run upstairs to fetch a pair of socks or send him on some other errand outside the furnace room where they dressed in the morning. When Armand returned, his uncle would be fully clothed and ready to go. The blue box with his medicine stood untouched.

Another forty minutes and they'd be home. The afternoon drive didn't have the country-music beat of the morning, only the mesmerizing hum of tires on the highway. With his imagination tapped and fatigue setting in, Armand focused his attention on the quiet man behind the wheel. The afternoon sun highlighted his features: his cheeks were sunken and grizzled; his hair, a dirty white, almost yellow, was overdue for a cut. He wasn't the happy *oncle* Armand had always known. Maybe he had refused a seat in the chipper one too many times. A step of courage on his part might be just what his uncle needed.

"I think I want to go in the chipper with you tomorrow," Armand said, breaking the silence.

"*Quoi?*"

"I want to go in the chipper tomorrow. I want to see how it works."

“Ya know, maybe *hit*’s a good ting you don’t know ’ow it work. Maybe you like *hit* and want to work wid *ton oncle* all de time. I don’t want dat for you, work ’ard and get dirty every day. I want you to go to college, get a good *heducation*. You ’ave nice clean job, wear white shirt, work *hinside*. Dat’s what I want for you.”

“So you don’t want me to run the chipper?” he asked with a hint of relief in his voice.

“No, I just play wid you when I *hask* dat. I want you to go to college. You too smart to work in de wood.”

“Okay, *mon oncle*. I think I’ll go to college then. If that’s what you want.”

“Daaat’s what *ton oncle* want.”

\* \* \*

Marcelle had never fought so much with her husband. It was as if he was replaced with someone else, a stranger. He no longer listened to reason, even when he was in the emergency room after another set of convulsions and a blackout. Doctors couldn’t stress enough the need for daily insulin injections, which he said he was taking, but tests proved otherwise.

“*Veux-tu mourir?*” (Do you want to die?), Marcelle asked him.

“*Je veux que toi et Armand viviez*” (I want you and Armand to live) was his response.

“*On ne peut pas vivre sans toi, Claude.*” (We can’t live without you, Claude.)

“*Tu ne peux pas vivre avec moi*” (You can’t live with me), he said.

“*Tu es fou.*” (You’re a fool.)

“*Marcelle, tu sais ce que la Bible indique au sujet d’appeler un homme un fou.*” (Marcelle, you know what the Bible says about calling a man a fool.)

“*Le bon Dieu serait d’accord avec moi.*” (The good Lord would agree with me.)

“*Alors le bon Dieu doit être trop occupé avec d’autres choses pour connaître mes responsabilités.*” (Then the good Lord must be too busy with other things to know my responsibilities.)

“*Tu blasphèmes, Claude.*” (That’s blasphemy, Claude.)

“*C’est la vie, Marcelle.*” (That’s life, Marcelle.)

After such exchanges she could hear no more. She had to leave the room before she said things out of anger she’d regret later.

\* \* \*

What was initially a remedy for a boy’s lonely summer became a caretaking mission. Marcelle gave Armand the responsibility of watching over her stubborn husband. She feared for the safety of both of them but didn’t know what else to do. Armand was the only recourse she had. The decision upset her so that she found herself at her own doctor’s office complaining of chest pains.

Armand wasn't exactly sure what ailed his uncle. He knew it had something to do with blood. His *tante* told him so. Whatever it was, it worried him.

"*Ton oncle* 'ave a cold," Claude told Armand on a morning drive. "*Ta tante* get nervous hover nutting."

"Are you sure it's a cold?" Armand asked, questioning his uncle for the first time ever.

"You tink *ton oncle* lie to you!"

The stern tone. The furrows in his uncle's brow. They brought fear to Armand's heart and tears to his eyes. He looked out the passenger window and said nothing for the rest of the ride to work.

\* \* \*

Breakfast was quiet that drizzly morning, more so than usual. It was the silence that lingers after an argument. Armand heard it the night before from his bed. He couldn't make out the words but he knew it was serious. His aunt and uncle went through the morning routine without saying a word to one another. Even when Claude brought his plate, the food barely touched, to the kitchen sink, something he never did, Marcelle didn't acknowledge it. Armand was afraid to speak for fear he'd catch residual fallout from either one of them. When the time came to leave he gave his aunt a peck on the cheek and was out the door and in the truck, waiting for his uncle to follow.

"Marcelle, je ne veux pas te laisser fâchée avec moi" (Marcelle, I don't want to leave you angry with me), Claude said at the door.

"C'est ta decision à toi!" (That's entirely your decision), Marcelle said.

"Est-ce que j'ai été un bon homme?" (Have I been a good man?), he asked.

It was an odd question, out of character. Marcelle took a few moments to respond.

"La plupart du temps" (Most of the time), she said with a marginal smile. "Quand tu m'écoutes." (When you listen to me.)

"J'espère que j'ai été bon pour toi." (I hope I've been good to you.)

"Je souhaite que tu aies été aussi bon pour toi que tu l'es pour moi." (I wish you were as good to yourself as you are to me.)

"I be *hokay*," he said and held her tight.

"Mange le lunch que j'ai fait pour toi." (Eat the lunch I prepared for you.)

"So *ton oncle* stay big and strong?"

"Oui, mon cher."

He held her, not saying a word; the refrigerator humming, the wall clock ticking. Then he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her on both cheeks, and when he opened the door to the dank morning, it was as if the slate sky descended on his shoulders, reminding him of his

*responsabilités*. “You pay de bill today, *hokay?* Life *hinsurance*, *helectric*. I leave de checkbook *pour toi*.”

“Avons-nous déjà manqué un paiement?” (Have we ever missed a payment?), Marcelle said. “Ne t’inquiètes pas autant.” (Don’t worry so much.)

“*Hokay*, Maman.”

“Faites attention.” (Be careful.)

“I’ll be careful.”

\* \* \*

Pay day wasn’t until Friday but the boss was making an executive decision to pay the men three days early. “De men work more ’ard dis week,” Claude said. “We pay dem today, *hokay*, Armand?” He brought the checks in what Armand call the “buck bag,” a brown leather satchel with square handles. It was Armand’s job to distribute checks during lunch hour.

Armand loved distributing checks. It made him feel like he was part of the crew. He would surely be the hero this time. His watch read only eight-thirty; noon couldn’t come soon enough, not just for the checks but it had started to rain, which meant he’d be spending most of his time behind the wheel of his uncle’s truck pretending to drive while making engine noises with his lips. It made for a long day.

The ground beneath them was soft; the lifeless remnants of trees—bark, branches, leaves—created a spongy layer that absorbed the rain. Everything about the morning was drab and colorless. Armand was beginning to think he should have stayed home. Then he thought about his *tante* and the responsibility she had given him. He couldn’t let her down. He kept walking with his *oncle* till they reached the invisible line. The chipper looked even more ominous in the rain, its cab a solemn perch in the murky sky.

Claude had been unusually talkative on the drive in, giving Armand grand life advice while his nephew was barely awake. He told him to be fair and kind to everyone, rich or poor; it didn’t matter. He said people would always try to take advantage of you, to cheat you in some way. Don’t be like that, he said, *le bon Dieu* would never do that. Take care of your family, he continued; some day you will be married and have children; *le bon Dieu* gives you the responsibility to feed them and clothe them, to make sure they have what they need to lead a good life. Of all the things you do, that will be the most important. Armand nodded in agreement with his uncle’s words, growing more alert with each point.

“*Ta tante*,” he said, before a lengthy pause; Armand wasn’t sure if he was gathering his thoughts or himself. “*Ton oncle* would be nutting witout ’er. Armand, you good to *ta tante*; I see dat. You keep doing dat and *le bon Dieu* ’ave good ting for your life; I promise you dat.”

“Okay *mon oncle*, I will.”

“Daaat a-boy,” he said approvingly, ruffling his nephew’s hair with

his big hand.

Occasionally Armand would be the recipient of such speeches, but it had been a while since he heard one, and never on the morning drive. They were usually given on the ride home when the long day had made his uncle contemplative. Maybe the weather was having the same effect on him.

“*Ma tante* said you should take your candies,” Armand said hesitantly, extending a fresh roll to his uncle. “She wants to take care of her family, too.”

Claude couldn’t help but smile. “You good boy, Armand. You learn fast. Give doze candy to *ton oncle*. You tell *ta tante* I take dem just for ‘er, *hokay?*”

Armand handed them to his uncle and was about to run off when Claude held him by the shoulder. “Did you ‘ear what I tell you dis morning, *mon petit homme* (my little man)?”

“*Oui, Papa.*” Armand reserved the phrase for when he wanted his uncle to know he loved him. He could never say the exact words, yet he knew, “Yes, Dad,” in French, was just as good. Maybe better. It made his uncle hold him tight before sending him off with a “you go play.” Armand stayed long enough to watch him climb the side of the chipper. With the sky darkening even more, he knew he had little time to make it to the truck before heavier showers came. Besides, he had a lot of driving to do. He and Hutch would soon be in hot pursuit of bank robbers hiding in the area.

\* \* \*

Evening saw Claude in his customary position: encased in the folds of a newspaper, sunk low in his black leather recliner with one leg draped over the side. He wore the elastic band sweatpants and white T-shirt Marcelle laid out for him after he showered. Armand’s eveningwear consisted of Batman pajamas and matching slippers. He’d spent much of the night coughing and sneezing. His day of chasing bad guys in the rain had gotten the better of him, just as his *tante* had predicted. She’d given the weary detective a talking-to when he arrived at headquarters. He curled up on the couch and doodled in his notebook, drawing pictures of electric guitars he dreamed of having and writing lyrics he would sing as he played them. It was during that time Armand noticed the newspaper shaking in his uncle’s hands. It was unsettling to see he had little control over it, and even more discouraging to hear the sudden command from behind the wall of black-and-white pages: “Armand, you have cold. *Ta tante* want you to stay ‘ome tomorrow. You stay ‘ome. No complain.”

There were tones in his uncle’s voice that dictated how Armand would respond to him. They let him know when there was room for negotiation and when there wasn’t. The tone he’d just heard was clear: there would be no further discussion of the matter. Though Armand was disappointed,

he accepted his uncle's decision without challenge.

"Okay, *mon oncle*," he said. "I'll stay home."

\* \* \*

Marcelle awoke to the sound of rain pattering on the windows. When she was conscious enough to engage her senses she began smelling food. She walked downstairs to find her husband in front of the stove frying sliced potatoes. Two eggs sat on the counter waiting their turn. The toaster was loaded. Ketchup was on the table. Everything was as it would be if she was captaining the kitchen, though a little less tidy. Claude dropped the toaster lever, cracked the eggs and oozed them into the other frying pan; the kettle began to whistle, just in time to fix a cup of instant coffee: synchronicity acquired from his logging camp days. Marcelle was confounded.

"Claude, qu'est-ce que tu fais?" (Claude, what are you doing?)

"Je fais le déjeuner, Maman. Pour toi." (I'm making breakfast, Mama. For you.)

"Laissez-moi faire" (Let me take over) she said, attempting to nudge him away from the stove.

"No no no," he insisted. "Make some coffee; de water's ready. Den sit down.

"Claude, ne soit pas ridicule." (Claude, don't be ridiculous.)

"Maman, I do dat for you, *hokay*? Now sit down."

"Mais Claude—"

"Sit."

Marcelle conceded. Her husband never asked much of her. The least she could do was let him do what he wanted, even if it was in her kitchen. He sat down with her as she ate, sipping his tea and looking out the window at nothing in particular.

"C'est bon," she said.

Claude had no reply. His gaze stayed fixed.

"C'est bon, Claude."

"Ouais? Merci."

"C'est quoi le problème?" (What's the problem?)

"I tink about Maurice Lemieux."

"Pourquoi Maurice?"

"He a good man. He lose his wife to cancer. He alone. He deserve to be 'appy."

"Il a été un bon ouvrier pour toi." (He's been a good worker for you.)

"Fifteen year he work for me. Never complain. Always work 'ard. No one work 'arder den 'im. He a good man, Maurice Lemieux. Good man."

"Qu'est-ce qui te fait penser à lui?" (What makes you think of him?)

Claude stared out the window at the dark rainy day. He didn't fully grimace or smile but melded the two expressions into one, creating a look of weighty contemplation. He turned to Marcelle.

“You should ’ave ’im hover for supper sometime. He like turkey. He love de turkey.”

“Demande-lui s’il voudrait venir dimanche, après la messe.” (Ask him if he’d like to come over for Sunday, after church.)

“*Oui?* Hokay, I talk to ’im today.”

Claude stood up and kissed Marcelle on the cheek. “I go shave. I be back, *ma chère*.”

From his bedroom across the hall, Armand could hear the razor groaning. He had been awake most of the night coughing. He wanted to get up and ask to use the bathroom, just to see his uncle, but he was too tired and weak to get out of bed. He listened to the water running through the pipes in the walls, the toilet flushing, a nose blowing, a burp, and the click of a switch. He opened his eyes enough to watch the strip of light under his door, to see when his uncle was walking past. He heard the floor creaking in his *tante*’s room. His *oncle* was bustling about, probably looking for thicker socks to wear in case his boots got soaked. “*Halways* keep you feet dry,” he used to say, “dat way you don’t catch cold.”

Armand wasn’t sure if his *oncle* stopped in to kiss him goodbye. He’d drifted off to sleep. He also wasn’t sure if the sound of his truck driving away was a dream or he actually heard it. The weather outside wasn’t the only thing that was murky.

Having been fed well and held closely for what seemed like several minutes, Marcelle was ready for the day—house-cleaning day, which would start with the bedroom upstairs. When she entered it she noticed, to her amazement, the bed had already been made, though not as tightly tucked as when she made it, which was always. She stood there dumbfounded, staring at the bed as if questioning whether or not she had entered the right room in the right house.

\* \* \*

The superintendent said he would be on the job site at six-thirty a.m. He would have representatives from New England Gas with him to survey the site and collectively decide whether or not Proteau Land Clearing would be the company to finish the project. Claude had stopped counting the days they were behind schedule. If he had it wouldn’t have made a difference; his crew was working as fast as it could. He still wanted to make a good showing. He wanted things to look professionally done and in order when the super showed up, which meant neatly stacked logs and clear pathways, no straggling trees here and there, like the huge birch lying in plain view on the bank bordering the town gravel pit. Claude’s crew wouldn’t arrive for another two and a half hours, too long for him to wait for a skidder operator to remove the unsightly tree. He would have to do it himself. Claude could run every piece of equipment he owned better than any operator he hired. He never made a point of it, though; he didn’t see the need. Only Emile knew the things his older brother was

able to do. It was why he trusted him implicitly when he said, “You come wid me. We cut wood in de U.S.”

Claude awakened the skidder with the turn of a key. A bulbous mass of black smoke shot from the exhaust pipe into the gray-white sky. Rain continued to fall hard, pelting the skidder’s cab with such force it nearly drowned the sound of the engine. Claude sat still inside, each hand gripping a lever. The gravel pit bank was straight ahead but indistinguishable from the rain. He had positioned the skidder just so the day before. He checked his instruments: rear grapple—scorpion claw—raised, front blade raised, wipers off. Wind and rain rushed the cab freely. He was ready. He whispered a string of words that ended with *bon Dieu* before pushing the accelerator down, gradually applying more weight until the peddle was fully depressed. The bank was still indecipherable but he could feel it drawing nearer. The closer he got the clearer his memory became. He could see a little brown hare scurry into the brush, a burlap sack of potatoes, the American flag, Emile in a casket, Armand on a bike, Marcelle in the kitchen. He could see his dreams with clarity: his nephew in a business suit; his wife laughing at something her husband said. The visions made him smile. The wind felt refreshing on his face. He closed his eyes to take it all in. He could feel his body rising to meet something, then falling backwards, the iron taste of blood in his mouth and the sense of something charging at him. He kept his eyes closed and prayed his dreams would come true.



JILL MANDRAKE is currently working on two novelettes, and an ongoing series of one-page stories. Even though her musical band is no longer together, she occasionally does music-related projects. Drop in at <http://radio3.cbc.ca/#/bands/Sister-DJs-Radio-Band>.

## Two Very Short Stories

Jill Mandrake

### Back Door, Please

IT WAS DECEMBER 23, 1975. The snow had been cleared from the downtown streets.

Three girls were waiting at a dimly-lit bus stop. If you'd called any one of them a "girl" to her face, she would have said, "I'm not a girl; I'm a woman."

Alice was nineteen, Vicki was twenty-two and Christine was twenty-three. Alice and Christine could take the #10 all the way home, but Vicki would have to transfer at the desolate Chester Street loop, way at the end of the line. She whimpered, "What if I miss my connection?"

Vicki was missing her partner, who was working up in Fraser Lake over the holidays. Christine had a partner at home, waiting for her. Alice rented a room from an old woman who rented out all the upstairs rooms in her falling-apart house.

Alice was forbidden to cook there. A handwritten sign in the hall read, "Tenants: No hot plates, no overnight guests, no noise after 10PM, no dogs, cats or pets, including children". An identical sign was taped to the wall of the freezing water-closet.

Christine and her partner lived in a basement suite, but it was fixed up so gaily you could hardly tell it was a basement, especially in the winter when all else was dark anyway.

The #10 came by and the three girls boarded.

All season, the bus drivers had been insisting that you exit by the back door only. Even if you were a conservative-looking old woman who was chasing after a guy who forgot his lunch on the seat of the bus, if you used the front door, lunch in hand, the driver would not let you out.

This particular night, the driver must have had a lot of passengers

trying to exit out the front door, because he wore the grinchiest scowl that Alice, Vicki or Christine had ever seen. “Cheer up, it’s nearly Christmas,” said Christine, in her jolly student-teacher’s voice.

She and Alice and Vicki were the only passengers.

When the bus neared Christine and Alice’s stop, they rang the bell and approached the back door, dutifully, but the bus kept going. Outside, snow was beginning to fall.

“Man, that’s pretty,” said Alice. She and Christine simply stood in the stepwell; then Vicki got up to join them. She walked down the tilting aisle so gracefully, you would have felt proud to know her.

When the bus got to the Chester Street loop, the driver stopped his engine for about ten seconds. No passengers were waiting there. He didn’t open the front door and he didn’t open the back door; he just fired up his engine and began the route all over again.

“I’m glad we’re in this together,” Vicki said to Alice and Christine. From the thin vertical windows of the bus’s back door, all three girls admired the flying snow.

“My watch has stopped,” said Alice. “We’re about to freeze.”

## Rarified

That's it," she said. "If I hear one more of your stupid Baby Boom references, I'm gonna scream. And while we're on the subject, for your information, I hate black-and-white movies. I've always hated them, just like I hate vinyl records. What a scratchy-sounding world you must have lived in. What do you mean, 'What's a Baby Boom reference'? If I hear one more tired-out, 60's pun, you're never coming over here to dinner again."

Just before this, the only thing poor old Dad had said was, "This meal is gourmet, and I don't mean Eydie."

Necessity dictated a minimalist form of expression after MARGRITH SCHRANER fractured her right wrist one icy evening in January, 2011. The poem below serves as a shorthand reminder of a short-lived hiatus, one week after surgery, while still submerged in the gray uneventfulness of pain. Margrith is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*.

## sinistral

Margrith Schraner

left-handed writing is detailed,  
accurate, sequential narrative,  
a line, a path, a goal destined  
to reach intricate corners of reality  
where brain halves finally meet.

imagined portraiture, blessings in disguise  
boxes of chocolates robed in marzipan  
circus performances, dazzling light,  
the dreaming brain a hyacinth that  
spreads its legs, white, across the page.

the pen once shaky stands up straight,  
laughs, shakes its head, incredulous,  
is whisked along a flowering garden path,  
collects persimmons, transcendental apples, pears,  
not daunted anymore by what has come before.

knows fully well that time runs out,  
but says *not now*, we've only just begun,  
the day is young, it is digesting its morphine,  
breaking it down into commas, full stops, question  
marks, dictated by who or what i do not know.

there is no parting of the veils,  
not even coffee at the oso, yet,  
sun melting snow, airplane flies overhead,

five of ten planets in my sign, chickadees  
chirping at 11:09, the Beats departed

e.e. cummings in the wings,  
poems not charted, marked, identified.  
what gives? who gives? it is all one.  
no last line comes, it isn't meant to be,  
the wind chime said; could it have been  
the crow?

maybe.

*(February 13, 2011)*

CARL F. THOMPSON JR. is a short-story writer who lives in Annandale, Virginia. His stories have appeared in *The New Orphic Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, *The Potomac Review*, *The William and Mary Review*, *Phantasmagoria*, *Thema*, *descant*, and elsewhere.

## Kindred Spirits

Carl F. Thompson Jr.

THAT MAD MONDAY marred forever by the carnage at my old high school—all those senseless shooting deaths—marked four weeks since Chantou had left me. No note, no voice mail, no word of any kind. She had just stepped out and that was that. Maybe it's being sixty and pensioned off and your wife of ten years is eighteen years younger than you. Plus you're a retired cop and you're bothered when your old buddies still on the line can't find the shooter of four teenagers and on top of it you can't find your own wife.

Flags, lowered after the shootings, whipped erratically in cold winds. April had all been vectors of wind, or milky slush in murky fog, or darts of icy rain, or pallid snow dressing lawns, if not streets. Finally, on Thursday, April offered up a day that looked like commonplace spring.

But I'd had it. I was in a funk. That first nice Thursday I hauled myself out of my suburban hovel for a walk. Not that I live in a hovel. I don't. It's a substantial house, in fact. I just hadn't cleaned the place since Chantou had left. I attributed her leaving in part to the persistence of winter. I do not believe myself to be a naturally cold partner, though Chantou says I am moody and sulk and that she doubts my rationality—too many years in homicide, she says. But Chantou is from a hot country, so I still say it's winter that drove her away.

We (now I, I guess) have a neighborhood park a five-minute walk downhill from the house. The park is the gift of a broad, miles-long stream sunk in a seam of land surrounded by oaks, poplars, junk trees, and vines, all of it chambered by Northern Virginia suburbia. A jogging path—asphalt except where cement bridges leap gullies and bends in the streambed—follows the stream.

Sometimes you see deer cross the path, sometimes snakes. Not that all the wildlife keeps to the park. Behind our house—on a backyard path

I mow through a groundcover of English ivy—a yellow fox roams, hunting. Last week I saw it carrying a grey squirrel in its mouth. It's magical to watch this creature come and go as I sit in the kitchen eating a bowl of cereal.

I was planning to walk two miles, a touch more, maybe. My mind was filled with the unnerving thoughts of the deaths at Hilliard High—that you can die at sixteen, without warning. You can die at any time at all. Even at a stranger's whim. Not that my distaste for firearms (I never fired my weapon in twenty-five years on the job) or my pacifist attitude saved me from the 1968 draft and thereby, from 'Nam. And Chantou, by the way, is Cambodian. And so impetuously strong-spirited and single-minded that on occasion she may inadvertently—and carelessly—shut the rest of the world out. Twice when walking the monuments in D.C., I've had to forcibly grab her arm to keep her from stepping off a curb into oncoming traffic. Each time the traffic light had changed, yet a taxi had recklessly hurtled the now strongly red light. One extra step and her boundless energy, without my intervention, would have died in the street. Taxi drivers can be like that unexpected man with a gun and the bullet bearing your name.

Yet saving her life has evidently not been enough to save her spirit—for me.

\* \* \*

But finally I was outdoors in good, clear air, on a nearly seventy degree day, marching foot-upon-foot, not lackadaisically. Bikers called “passing on your left,” and I moved to my right as they sped along. (How does a biker warn you if you're deaf?) It was noon, or close; the sun high. Two middle-aged women walking their dogs approached on the opposite side of the path and we mutually nodded as we passed.

Crossing a bridge that spanned a twist in the stream, I was perhaps three-quarters of a mile into the walk. Approaching ahead I saw an elderly man in a fedora (you don't see many of those), wearing gentlemanly but baggy trousers. Add to this image—despite the day's temperature—a vest and a long-sleeved white shirt. He kept a fair pace as he approached, gazing straight ahead, a cane in his right hand.

I'm sixty. By “elderly man,” I mean someone seventy-five-plus. It so happens I carry a template in my brain which closely matches the individual I was examining. I noted a somewhat pot belly, another requirement of my template. We could have been approaching like two men in a Western showdown except that he did not seem to pay me any attention. I nodded as we passed—and there I saw it, unmistakably: a well-groomed brownish-grey mustache.

The man who'd just passed me, without a scintilla of recognition, was my late grandfather, who died at eighty-two, twenty-two years ago. I kept walking, forcefully not backtracking. I was enjoying this first day of true springtime. Why should I let a figment of my imagination disturb things?

Especially after all those unsolved shootings at my old alma mater not to mention the disappearance of my wife?

Eventually I reached my turnaround, an orange-painted post marking a mile. On the way back, all I thought of was my time: Had I been walking slow or fast? Time is always paramount. Time sits forever at the wheel.

\* \* \*

I would not be taken in by this coincidence. I may have been hallucinating. It was impossible for that man to have been my grandfather. My grandfather was eighty-two when he died and less hale than this still-breathing, perambulating septuagenarian.

I resolved—well, tried—not to think of my grandfather. He had been a man of magical talents in my early childhood. He had me tugging at my teeth trying to put them in a glass of water the same way he did. He was the man who taught me to feed breadcrumbs to pigeons. A drugstore manager, he walked always, workday or not, with a massive key chain hooked to a belt loop, at least thirty keys jangling. Who knew what rooms and passages they led to, or to what secrets they granted access?

The man who should not have died without my saying goodbye. And I had foolishly joked with him—saying nothing that would intimate he was facing his ending—when he told me about the cancer. I had faced too much death on the job already. I didn't want to accept the prospect of his demise as well. Surely there was still time, right? The cancer had only recently been diagnosed. So I had tried to dodge the reality of the bullet he could not dodge, tried to dodge it in his presence, heartlessly, with reckless, disbelieving humor. Coining feel-good jokes to defer fear and honest grappling with the prospect of death. Cancer of the colon. Sometimes bleeding right through his trousers. Having never before had to say goodbye to anyone in our family, I put it off. I told myself there would be a better time later, a time when I would speak; but overnight, within mere weeks, he was bedridden and barely conscious, and I'd felt it would be self-serving to appear only then at his bedside, with no way for him to talk and probably not even to hear, no way to correct this foolish ineptitude to speak my heart.

I learned that his final words were an exasperated, "Damn it." He'd been trying repeatedly to say something but couldn't be heard. So he ended by cursing the whole thing and traipsed out the door of his mind.

\* \* \*

I walked the next four days in the park without seeing the man again. I wasn't in fact looking for him. I was on the lookout for snakes. I'd once spotted three at different places on a single walk. And, as I do from time to time, I thought of the eight-point buck I'd spotted in an open field very near our home. He and I alone had stared at one another, his massive chest and crowned head versus me, the store-fed, baseball-capped human. Chantou would have loved to have seen him, I'd thought. But Chantou



hadn't been with me on that walk, and now Chantou was gone and I had no idea where.

\* \* \*

"I'm seeing my dead grandfather when I take walks in the park," I told my psychiatrist, a man of about fifty, always dressed in a coat and tie. Retired, and therefore a man of leisure, I forever answered his more formal dress with good blue jeans.

"The one who taught you to feed pigeons?"

"Yes. Him. Actually, I've only seen him once, though I wonder if it might happen again."

My shrink does not take notes during sessions. He takes notes during his ten-minute break between sessions. Or else—perhaps I'm not important enough—he takes no notes at all. (Nonsense. He must take some notes.)

"Tell me," he asked, "was he sitting on a park bench?"

"No. We passed each other walking. I nodded to him, but he didn't respond."

"Surely you've considered that you merely saw someone who looked like him?"

"Of course. I'm sure in fact that's what happened. But I think it's significant that I thought it *could* be him, when I knew it couldn't."

"But when you were a child, you did sit on park benches with him and feed birds?"

"Yes, by the Tidal Basin, I think."

"And before you retired you mentioned more than once that you might like to relax on a park bench and do nothing of importance."

(Yes, I saw this psychiatrist off-and-on for about a year before I retired from the force. And I did not report it to the staff psychiatrist or to anyone else, for that matter. I considered it my own damn business.)

"Yes, yes, I've said that," I responded to his last question. "Haven't, though."

"Do you think it possible your mind is telling you to do that, to relax?"

I visited the shrink once a month for medication to see me through intermittent bouts of depression and nonproductive anxieties about this or that: About Chantou, for example. About too many homicides. In the past, we've talked ourselves crazy about Chantou, though I've clammed up since her departure. My shrink knows all about my grandfather, but zilch about Chantou's walking out. I will keep this change of events secret until we get straight about my grandfather. Arguably, Chantou's walkout could have been anticipated; but my granddad's walk-in couldn't.

\* \* \*

"You're suffering from Chantou's leaving you," my friend Ian, an ex-airline pilot said. An old high school buddy, by law, as an airline pilot, he'd had to retire at age 60. His retirement came right before the

government changed the law, making later retirement a possibility for those still working. But not retroactively for pilots already retired.

“Sure, I’m suffering,” I said. “But I don’t see how Chantou’s departure has anything to do with my dead grandfather.”

“If you keep seeing him, if he bothers or frightens you, invite me on a walk and we’ll see if we can talk some sense into him.”

\* \* \*

Two days later, I spotted the man walking toward me in the park again. Fedora, cane, vest, white shirt, pleated trousers, key chain, and the narrowly pared mustache. This time I pointedly saluted him. “Grand day!” I remarked. His eyes never changed focus. If he was a ghost, was he proving how he’d disowned me for my not having come to terms with his ending?

Good weather prevailed. I walked each of the next four days, seeing him again on the fourth day. I again brightly saluted, he again walked by.

I marched on, turned at the orange post, but this time instead of exiting the park where I’d entered, I continued, speeding up, as if there might be some way of catching up with the guy. Not a charlatan (who’d have known about my grandfather, thus to play imposter?), just a man. A mystery man who would not acknowledge my presence.

A mile past my normal exit point, I approached a curve in the trail where there were two benches. These weren’t the green-painted, curve-backed benches you often see in city parks, but plainer: flat two-person seats without a back. The two benches sat about ten feet apart. Behind them ran the stream, but the view of the stream was obscured by brush and downed trees, remnants of a past flood, so if you sat on either bench there was nothing to look at but passers-by on the trail.

The man who looked like my grandfather was sitting at the far end of the second bench. I stopped, waited for him to look at me, but he didn’t. There were a number of birds about, robins especially, others, eating breadcrumbs. If he had a pouch of crumbs, I didn’t see it. But clearly this was a clue. Breadcrumbs just added to the pattern.

I sat down on the first bench.

“It’s good to see someone feed the birds,” I remarked. “When I was a child, people commonly fed birds. I don’t see that happen much anymore, except for birdfeeders or birdhouses. What you’re doing is more communal, what people do in cities.”

He sat unmoved, as if I did not exist.

He kept his head down. If he’d removed the fedora, there was no way I could have missed being sure. But I was ninety percent sure, which made no sense at all, since he was dead. Wouldn’t a family man, dead or not, acknowledge his own grandchild? On the other hand, twenty-two years had passed since he’d last seen me; maybe *I* wasn’t recognizable to him. Nowadays I have a slight paunch. When he’d been alive, I’d jogged,

been leaner. I've lost some hair, too. Male pattern baldness—my grandfather's kind. For variety, I'd started growing my hair longer, all since retirement three years ago. A child of the Sixties, I'd never had long hair. While I still could, I was giving my hair some freedom. But maybe when you're dead, everything has to be just *so* before you acknowledge someone who's alive. Outside narrow tolerances, otherwise, the connection is broken.

But, then, what was he doing here now if he didn't know who I was, if he had nothing to say?

I'd been sitting no more than a minute or two when he rose and walked away.

\* \* \*

Since my first inability to say goodbye to someone who was dying—to say goodbye to my grandfather—I've changed. Dying is the focal point, the summation. Since my failure to say goodbye to my grandfather, I've made it a point to convey to the dying how that person's life has touched me, made my life better or more meaningful. Sometimes you see a clear, direct path to the person dying. The last person I'd said goodbye to, a seventy-seven year-old reclusive woman ("spinster," they used to say) named Judith—she'd died just before Christmas—I'd known with calm certainty I had touched. You see it when you've genuinely reached someone.

If only I could have spoken to my grandfather with half the openness I'd spoken to Judith.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later I again found him sitting on the bench. I took the adjacent bench, this time carrying my own bread crumbs. I began tossing them. Birds flocked about, pecking.

Before he rose to leave, he pulled a pipe from a pocket, together with a pouch of Cherry Blend tobacco, and lit it.

"You *know* who I am," I said. "Why don't you acknowledge me?"

He puffed determinedly on the pipe and I could smell the distinct, characteristic smell of the Cherry Blend, an absolute identifier for my grandfather.

He partly turned my way as he puffed and reddened the tobacco bowl, maneuvered his cane, and walked off. *Was* I certain?

\* \* \*

Chantou had now been gone two months. I'd filed a missing persons report, and naturally the guys on the force were doing their best. In ten years of marriage, Chantou had frankly worn me down. She'd had affairs twice, neither for long, but any affair is utter disaster. Her brother lived in California and I'd suspected she'd gone there, but calling brought no acknowledgement. It seemed no relative, alive or dead, cared to say to me, "It's you."

One night I dreamed that I saw Chantou flitting like a diminutive angel in the park, a tiny night-hour Tinkerbell at my grandfather's shoulder. He tossed breadcrumbs and she danced silently before him as if spelling in code a secret plan.

\* \* \*

My shrink never called me paranoid to my face. He just said couldn't I see where I'd deluded myself into believing my grandfather felt ill-disposed toward me as he was dying? "But what's the evidence?" he'd ask. "Explain it to me rationally." We had long epistemological arguments on what rationality entailed. Did it include the Leap of Faith? Lots of people made the Leap without being called irrational, though the Leap was founded on faith alone. Or were the "laws" of inductive reasoning merely expressions of faith that whatever had always occurred would continue to occur? If the dead never walked again, then the dead never walked again; period.

\* \* \*

I decided to ask my friend Ian if he'd been serious in his offer to accompany me on my walks. He'd be my witness. Maybe he could talk to the man and draw him out.

Retirement had driven Ian to spending his days sending emails on this or that topic to a list of friends, so this would be a change. It took him forty minutes to drive to my house and we spent an hour on the walks, so I appreciated his effort.

I'd shown him photos of my grandfather at age eighty so that he should readily be able to see what was or wasn't true.

We didn't see him the first walk or the second. Then on the third, a cloudy day, I spotted him walking towards us. Ian stared very closely, intently, as if his eyes were the X-ray eyes of Superman, and impossibly acute, as if he could discern a man's identity by reading his retinal pattern.

Ian wheeled completely around as my ghost man passed.

"I don't think it's him," he said.

"You *don't!*" I said, incredulous. "That's got to be him. He has all my grandfather's behaviors, plus he wears the same clothes."

"But you're asking me if the dead come back. That's not possible."

"As a basic principle, you mean," I said.

"Certainly."

"So, you infer by the fact that you've never seen the dead arise, that that disproves resurrection. I thought you were Catholic."

"I am. I thought you were an unbeliever."

"Look, Ian. This is what I want to know. By his *looks*, by the photos you saw, is that man my grandfather or not?"

"No! He's close, he's reasonably close, but he's not the same man. He's at best a second cousin. You're fooling yourself, and I don't see the reason for it. You remember that once you advised me, for the hell of it,

to read a Nabokov novel, because I'd never read Nabokov?"

"I know where you're heading. I see it."

"So I read the shortest damn Nabokov novel I could find, something called *Despair*. About a man who meets another man whom he thinks looks just like himself. And he plots to murder this other man, believing that all the townsfolk will think that he himself—i.e., the murderer—has been murdered. And pulling this off would reap various rewards, though I don't recall the particulars. So he murders the other man and almost from the get-go, the police nab him, because the man he killed didn't look so much like him after all. He was definitely *not* his mirror-image. I think that's what you have here. I'm not sure what your motivation is, because for the life of me, *that's not him*. Further, I'm not about to start believing in ghosts!"

\* \* \*

In early July, Chantou called and said she was living in the West but not California and not to try to locate her. She had taken a job as a governess, and she liked the family.

"A governess!" My voice went hoarse. "Chantou, I sent you through three years of university at George Washington."

"And I refused to finish just so you could say your wife had a degree. I'd have preferred children, or even a dog. This family is nice. They have both. And I can actually help their son with his studies. I know you don't have caller ID unless you've changed, and since you never change, you still don't have caller ID. Imagine a retired cop without caller ID! So just leave things be. If I ever want to talk to you or get in touch, I'll do that."

"What about our living wills?"

"To have a living will you have to have a *life*. Goodbye, Edgar."

\* \* \*

So, was that it? Was that goodbye? For ten years together, I deserved a better goodbye than *that*.

\* \* \*

On the fourteenth of July, Bastille Day, I found him sitting on the bench again. I remember once when I was a child, my grandfather had taken me on Bastille Day to see waiters in aprons run a funny race in downtown D.C., each shuttling on one hand a tray bearing a glass of champagne, trying not to spill it before reaching the finish line.

I felt bone weary. My shrink had said I needed to get off this kick; my friend Ian would no longer accompany me; I might as well have contacted Ghost Busters.

I sat on my usual bench, but listlessly, staring at my feet.

"It's Bastille Day," he observed.

*He'd spoken.*

"True," I said. I sat unmoving, not wanting to break the spell.

"Why don't you have confidence?" he asked. "Why don't you have

sight?”

He brought a cigar from his pocket and handed it to me. I'd given up smoking twenty-five years ago. I removed the cigar band, fitted it over the second knuckle of my left little finger, and handed the cigar back. My dad and my grandfather whiled away many an evening together smoking cigars. Cigar bands—such as now rode on my pinkie—were a fixture of my childhood. (As were pipe cleaners from my grandfather's pipe collection.)

Prince of Wales. He bit the end and lit up, puffed a coal-red flame.

“I've sort of left you in Purgatory, I guess,” he said.

*Shiver me timbers*—a phrase not recollected since my childhood. He was 'fessing up. I was sane, after all. ... Or was I now in fact totally loony?

“No, no; not Purgatory,” I said at once, “though I deserved it.”

“Did you?”

“Because I loved you but I had no stomach for saying goodbye. Over a career of police work, I learned. Not that that had helped you. I loved you both, you and grandma, but the only way I had of demonstrating the love I'd never professed to you was to tell *her* long after you were gone.”

“So you said nothing, while on my last breath, all I had to say was ‘Damn it.’ Maybe we waste time pumping too much significance into mere instants.”

“If you'd picked up a fishing rod and tried fishing here, that would have clinched it for me—that I wasn't going crazy, that it *was* you.”

“Umm,” he said, again brightening the cigar's ashes. “But I think this stream behind us is all fished out. So, a puzzle for you is to figure whether the streams I frequent now are full of fish, popping at the ends of lines, or not.”

“But if you were going to finally acknowledge me, why did you wait so long to do it?”

“You never knew that occasionally I could be a nuisance. Plus there's a little matter of geography and circumstance. Your grandmother's passing, last year.”

“So you're aware of all this ... what still goes on?”

“I'm aware of some things, yes, not all. What I do know is that you still can't think of your grandmother as dead. I've heard you tell people that in your mind you're still waiting for her to hit one hundred, the three months and a day she had to go. And that as you see it, she's *not* dead, but alive somewhere out there at sea, like a person on a life raft, perpetually floating on the currents.”

“Yes, I've said that.”

“Why?”

“Because she seemed so indestructible. Even in the face of death.”

“Huh,” he said, as if inspecting the notion.

“So. If you’re really here, this is my chance to tell you ...”

“Where she is at sea,” he interrupted, “that’s what I’d like to know. What that raft looks like. Whether she’s alone.”

I wanted to say other things, but he wanted to hear bits from my daydreams.

“The way I see it,” I said, “she’s out there floating alone on a tangerine-colored air mattress. Where? I’d say the Cape of Good Hope has a nice ring to it, but the South Pacific would be better. Pretty big place, I know. Caroline Islands?” I added on the spur, hopefully.

My grandfather placed a hand on my shoulder and shook me affectionately.

“I’ll go find her. And there’ll be no more anguish about past events. You’re absolved. But steel yourself, because there’s more.”

“Steel myself?”

“You remember when you were a little child and your mother taught you to pray at bedtime, ‘Now I lay me down to sleep/ I pray the Lord my soul to keep/ and if I die before I wake/ I pray the Lord my soul to take?’”

“You knew she taught me that prayer?”

“Why not? Your grandmother and I taught it to her. And when you were very young, you and your mom and dad lived for a time in our house. So what could be more natural?”

“First, you tell me to ‘steel myself’ and then you feed me pabulum history. I don’t think I like the way this is going.”

“Suppose I told you you’re a sick man.”

“Am I a sick man? I don’t feel sick. You’re telling me I’m sick, though.”

“I said ‘suppose.’ And there are many forms of sickness. That psychiatrist you see, would he call you a ‘well’ man? Plus, you’re sixty, not thirty. Things happen to sixty-year-olds. You get a splinter in a toe, you don’t even feel it, and then the next thing you know, septicemia, blood-poisoning. You take a plane ride, you sit for hours unmoving, you get phlebitis, then an embolism. You have an allergic reaction to your blood pressure medication and your tongue swells, blocking your airway. You choke on a bite of a ham sandwich or you suck off the end of a Bic pen when you’re writing and it lodges in your trachea.”

“Momma Cass, Tennessee Williams, you mean. Those last two.”

“Or you have ‘sickness of heart.’ You love people, but you don’t show it, you don’t express it. Maybe you’re weak in a way that keeps you from saying the hard things that sometimes have to be said to people you love. Let’s suppose that a grandfather loves you and that you love a grandfather, but the words aren’t said. Now just because you didn’t speak to that grandfather, how proper would it be for that grandfather not to tell you in some way the love he’s had for you? Shouldn’t he make his feelings known? Suppose you have a young wife, so many years younger than you, that you hint and suggest to her your doubts of her faithfulness. If

you are sick at heart, perhaps you can't speak to her properly."

"Perhaps some situations can't be reconciled."

"Nerves, courage, heart."

"You're telling me that I should reach out to Chantou when I can't even find Chantou. It's as if she's disappeared from the face of the earth. But *I'm* sick? You're acting like we're having the conversation I never had with you—the ultimate conversation."

Saying it frightened me. My relation looked away from me, up at the clouds, turning a slow and appreciative circle. His eyes found me again.

"Well, this has been a good talk," he said. "One I wanted. I kept an appointment for it, even though it's late."

Whoa. I blinked my eyes, rolled my fingers in and out of a nervous fist.

"Late? How late do you mean?" I felt panicky. Without any logic to it, I said, "You're *not* telling me I'm going to die—right?"

"What kind of information would that be? Everyone dies."

This had to be hypothetical. "You can't be telling me ... my death is foreseeable. Or, hell, imminent."

This was crazy. I was questioning an *apparition*. An apparition that did now chose not to speak.

"Is there a reason?" I croaked the words from a dry throat.

"Reason? That assumes a just world." He finished his pipe, knocked the bowl on his heel. "Taking Chantou for granted maybe, if there had to be a reason. But if there were reasons—and a just world—you'd assume every murderer would immediately be struck dead by lightning. And your associates can't even solve that thing at your old high school. Let's just say I don't make the decisions and what's the point of speculation? I just wanted a chat with a good man who has his weaknesses and now it's done."

"But you said 'taking Chantou for granted?' She *left* me. More than once."

"Without cause, of course." He raised an eyebrow, a trick I'd never seen him do.

I said, "I could have been kinder to you at the end, but if I messed up with Chantou, I'd sure like to understand how, but that would mean talking to her, and she won't let me. Twice I *saved her life*. Without me she'd have been struck by a taxi."

Where precisely was Chantou in the West? How much time did I have to find her? Where had I gone wrong with her? Things could still be set right.

"Well, I wanted to say goodbye and now I have," he said. "A raft at sea, huh?" My grandparents had bickered constantly in their final years, but maybe it had been their way of going forward.

I did a 360-degree turn out of anguish, hoping that maybe my



psychiatrist could puzzle all this out when we met next week. By the time I'd finished my 360, my ghost relation had disappeared. I knew the direction he always headed down this walking trail, so I jogged after him and rounded the bend. In the distance, cresting a rise in the pathway, I saw him sort of float-walking just above the path, together with a woman at his side. She had streaming long black hair. Oriental hair? She was small, little more than a sprite. Chantou? My wife who was in the West acting as a governess? How? How? But they were out of reach and by the next turning, gone, possibly risen, like balloons.

\* \* \*

That afternoon I again saw the yellow fox pass my kitchen window. Then, as when animals feel the ground shake from the very conception of an earthquake, it froze and turned its head right at me, peering as though it knew something I did not. As if it were conceivable that I was looking at the last living creature I'd ever see.

Who knew how long I had to write this down, ready my affairs, do anything. I was scheduled for a trip to the Land of the West, the land of the forever setting sun. Perhaps I was slated to be a child again, to learn from a young governess with a love of children. A lover of children, yes, and a lover of people who learn and change. People who are thoughtful and considerate and show medium bravery.

I feel as if some strange taxi will arrive at the house at any minute, its driver faceless.

I'm typing as fast as I can.

BARRY BENSON teaches poetry writing at Des Moines Area Community College. *Schooled Lives: Poems by Two Brothers* by Barry and Steve Benson was released in 2009. Other publications include *The Antioch Review*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *descant*, *Flyway*, and *The North American Review*. Son Josef (published poet/fiction writer) is completing at PhD at the U. of South Florida. Barry lives in Des Moines with his wife Sally and daughter Kirsten who has five adult brothers.

## Barry Benson / Three Poems

### X

Yes, you wonder in surprise, another new  
year, how I could call out to her your name  
after all those years before divorce and now our  
new oiled lives numbering twice that span.

And I wondered if I ever would confide  
these matters with you, or perhaps another  
generation later. I sometimes amaze myself  
remembering the thousand nights too

our arms and hips coiled and spooned and  
mint tasted close as close can come to two  
though now our smiled lips will only speak  
rare holiday perfume when our children gather

speak over dry defensive words, a grating parch  
that only another scripted season's enabling arch  
can link—this chasm of familial unfamiliarity  
flown toward distance-traveled cold to visit

there too from your adopted city when our son's  
anticipated graduate degree directs us near  
where you invited me to your husband's recently  
remodeled guest room where you now live

though I instead demur to overnight at Coyote Inn  
(rum specialties) and I, New Year's, resign to burn  
some of this incense you've gifted me this holiday,  
your choice, I see, of sandalwood and patchouli.

My Brother's Lover  
—the Kay Narratives

I place Kay's letters and cards from the '60s in chronological order, and I count (as if I were to copy and mail them to you) a total of 53 pages. Wowie—Zowie! Do you remember all those "nervous times...many times...future times"?

Now I am thinking I'll put them all into a large manila envelope and mail them to you to keep until the next time we see each other—maybe at the all-school reunion where we've been asked to read some of our published poems.

These are Kay's senior year letters to me while I was in the Navy—her affirming, validating words; lines and paragraphs I love to read. But one special letter to you makes me wonder, your senior year, to "Steve Benson / 9<sup>th</sup> Street / Nevada, Iowa"—

that's it and a five cent stamp. It's June 11, 1963 (my third year in the Navy) and Kay is writing to you from Kirksville, Missouri where she's attending a "twirler" clinic (love those '60s) "with 100 girls from all over the country" according to Kay.

I'm not sure how I've acquired this letter from Kay to you. Perhaps you threw it away and I rescued it from the dustpan of history...Anyway, there are certain gems in her letter which obviously let you know how much she'd still love to go out with you.

You'll enjoy them big time. She uses '60s slang to be up close and personal with you: "Man, that's cool, huh?...Dig that crazy sticker!... Ain't it pretty? ... You can fill me in when I get back. Oh yeah." And she signs it, "Bye, handsome! Love, Kay"

Father, Son, & Kathy Harmening / 1<sup>st</sup> Chair

“Goodnight Mrs. Calabash—wherever you are.”  
— Jimmy Durante

SON:

“My first year here on campus after my tour of duty to qualify for the G.I. Bill—after Yokosuka, Sasebo, Tokyo, Hongkong, Pusan, Singapore. And I can’t quit pondering late winter nights, passionate young minds delving into Oscar Wilde’s plays, Hawthorne’s motives—hours inside coffee shops with friends and professors discussing Greek lore over hot scones and cappucinos.

“And I wonder, did you ever have any relationships with a literary woman? I suppose there would be ugly spats of rivalry like Zelda and Scott, yet exhilaration for contemporary poetry with lovers of the pen. Yet I wonder if I’m looking to college for too much. Many friends have dropped out, including flame Sarah from high school. Did you meet a literary woman in college?”

FATHER:

“So, I’m remembering you, Kathy Harmening—my first year of college, out of the Navy, Dr. Marsh’s class—his ‘two top students,’ his quote. End of semester walks across campus to first chair oboe practice, details of how you carve your reeds. Exploring wooded paths, limestone cliffs. Finding agates, fossils. Evergreens along the Cedar. Detailing your therapy, victories.

“But then my Navy savings are running out, G.I. Bill not yet enacted. I transfer to Northern State College, concerns with credits and lodging. I should have called, met your parents in your white frame house adjacent to campus. Now, so many lives we could have led. But when it comes it’s just this one. I tell my son our story, I want to tell you, Kathy Harmening, wherever you are.”

TIM STRUTZ is a man who was young many years ago and now considers himself a writer of stories and an expressionist artist. He lives mostly in the Midwestern United States and occasionally in a majestic place called Belle River, Ontario, Canada. Tim was a police officer and crisis counselor and still teaches criminology at Schoolcraft College. He has previously published stories in *The New Orphic Review*.

## Brake Test

Tim Strutz

BIG JIM SITS down behind me, right behind me. He knows I hate that. He smiles. I know this without looking back. It's a routine; it goes on and on. Maybe it is destiny.

OK, so I look back. And I smile, too. No comment today—just the big shitty grin. He knows; he knows absolutely, there is nothing I can or will do. He's a big damn guy, twenty years my senior and he still out lifts me by a hundred-twenty on the bench. The bench means everything here; the royal blue stripes and gold stars only play at a tale. Jim thinks he could crush me like a bug.

Maybe so, maybe not; who gives a real shit. This crap goes on forever.

And the roll call goes on a while today. Larcenies, larcenies, larcenies; my God I am sick to death of larceny. I begin to wonder if anyone is honest. Maybe honesty is a lost art. These big beefy men in blue don't look much more honest than the filthy cows out on the streets mowing down the little blades of grass called citizens. But they are cleaner, and that's a good thing. I start the crazy thoughts again; the old wino yesterday in the puke green trench coat who ragged out the back of my scout car. It was like that scene in *The Exorcist*, for Christ's sake. I thought his greasy head would spin around.

"You think you might join us today, Shultz?" spits Sgt. "Sperm" Carson. He loves catching me napping at his roll calls. It starts.

"...fucking hot shot..."

"...college fuck-head..."

"...future Chief Brake Test..."

"Sperm" orders everyone to shut up with his trademark staccato cough. They don't like docked pay so they shut up, except for Jim who adds a loud proclamation: "shit."

I shut up, too, but open half of an ear. Cops are good at that, half listening. Old "Hit Man" Sadowski shows up, like he does at almost every roll call. I've heard he was a good old copper in his day. He stands tall

and faded next to my seat. He likes to whisper in my ear, comments about the reports from the previous day. He doesn't need to whisper; no one else sees him; oh, except the mentally impaired janitor on midnights who will talk endlessly when he corners people in the gray hallways.

"He should have worn his ballistic long johns," whispers Hit Man after Sperm reads a report about an elderly woman who euthanized her terminally ill husband during the night with his World War II German Lugar. I glance over at Hit Man to see if he is smiling but instead I see Wolf Man sneering at me from across the room. He's still pissed that I got his old North End Beat. Hit Man is still leaning over me. I still cringe a little, seeing the black and red hole in his forehead where he shot himself in the locker room a decade ago.

By the middle of the day my mind begins to turn to mud, the kind of mud you might find in the middle of a rusty old car that has resided about twenty feet under in a local river. A senior citizen with compressed white-blue hair is telling me for the tenth time about her Nephew's endless use of those damn crazy drugs he gets from his old buddies with the money he takes from me while I bite back the creeping caustic comment that wants to spew from my thin, tired lips. I eventually give her a several-day vacation from the immolation of her life by virtue of an old traffic warrant for Nephew. On the way to the station Nephew calls me a dumb mother fucking cop a couple more times than I can stand so I give him the "brake test" that I am so good at and is responsible for my nickname.

Nephew finally shuts up after adding some of his DNA to the collection in the back seat; too bad, so sad.

After lunch I just want to cruise around the historic neighborhood, see some people that are just snotty rather than deranged. I am starting to believe that just about everyone falls into those two categories, including the idiots I work with. I see The Predator's scout car hiding behind the big old hedge of the turnaround. I debate for a moment, and then test my luck. Most guys give her a wide berth.

"The bushes don't cover the overheads, Karen. You've got to find a better place than this." I mean well, I think.

Karen stares, her eyes cold ice cubes. She is one of only two split tails on the Afternoon Shift.

I see the wheels turning in her head; should she talk with me or tell me to get lost? She only speaks with about half of the shift; all the others are "enemies." She's got a little black book she scribbles in for her lawyer.

"How's it going, Brake?" she finally spits out. She opened a little and we talked some cop talk, which is mostly bitching about idiot citizens or idiot bosses or idiot brothers and sisters on the Department. She went on a while about how much she hated Cougar and Spock and Clunker and Wolf Man and Sgt. Dog and then I lost track and lost interest. Oh, and she did mention how much she hated Sgt. Sperm.

Knowing Karen a little, it did not surprise me that she hated Sperm.

It is near the end of the shift. I can always tell even without my cheap but fancy-ass digital Timex. It is the tension; it always rises near the shift end as I hope to avoid a serious run that will call for me to work overtime. It's always busy near the end when the first of the night's drunks and druggies come out from the caves where they have been buzzing and reproducing misery.

The lightning strikes then; a big run and it sits right in the middle of my beat so I will be writing the big old report. It's a possible homicide, so it might be interesting and worth the extra time away from Steve's OK Corral where I could have been sipping Buds in an hour. Lots of cars come to a run like this, so I am the fourth or fifth one there. That's OK; it's all over now; probably happened some time in the afternoon.

Some maintenance guy with a curled up little claw for a left hand happily walks me over to the west wing of the unhappy Holiday Inn Express where an intensely interested group of coppers mill just outside the entry door. I hear some kind of distant insect-like screech but maybe it's just in my head. I can tell by the looks on the faces that the scene will be interesting. As I march into the room with my business face on I almost trip over the waxy Husband Guy who lies face down on the gooey carpet next to his favorite pheasant gun. Most of the top portion of his head has dematerialized and is sprayed across the ceiling and far wall. His wife is lying in bed propped against the headboard, legs spread. I feel weird noticing how curvy she is, or was, but she wears only a pair of purple panties that say *Go Ahead Everyone Else Has* and a ragged red hole where her chest used to be.

My buddy "Whippit" Rodgers is the evidence technician today. I'm glad. It's good to have a friend nearby at spooky crime scenes in addition to the important people who accomplish nothing, like the Division Commander and Chief and detectives who look so damn good in their fancy suits. Whippit holds his camera and gestures for me to come over against the wall. Look at this he whispers, and points. On the floor near the headboard is a New International Version Holy Bible. It is opened and lying stuck in the middle of a page is a gushy eyeball from Husband Guy. "Read under the eyeball," says Whippit.

It's Psalm 140: *Rescue me, O Lord, from evil men; protect me from men of violence...*

"How could...?" I start to say, but Whippit just rolls his eyes and I realize that question will not be answered here. It might never be answered.

At the next day's roll call everyone still buzzes a little about the big murder and suicide. It is a negative energy that cops often feed from.

"Well, Shultz, quite a scene yesterday, aye," says Sgt. Sperm. "I hear it ain't called Holiday Inn no more; it's the Scatterbrain Hotel." He displays a rare smile, which means he has something vicious to talk about. "So

they were celebrating the finalization of their divorce; wow. But you've got to respect a woman who wears her life philosophy on her shorts." There's lots of laughter; Ha Ha Ha; Yuk Yuk Yuk; a big burp; great entertainment.

"Anything to report, Shultz?" says a grinning Sperm.

"Mary Ann; her name was Mary Ann." It will be a long day today. I look over at my pal the old Hit Man. He is a little more transparent than usual and whispers, "It'll be OK. It's always OK." Amen to that, I think.



ROBERT COOPERMAN'S latest collections are *Troy* (March Street Press) and *Cave Dweller* (Wind Publications). *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* (Western Reflections Publishing) won the Colorado Book Award for Poetry. His work has appeared in previous issues of *The New Orphic Review*, *North American Review* and *Sewanee Review*.

Robert Cooperman / Four Poems

Hell Is Empty—Benjamin Abramowitz: The  
Colorado Territory

I wish Mr. Sprockett hadn't decided  
this moonless night was the time  
for him to invade our pursuers' camp,  
but when Mr. Sprockett makes up  
his mind, you just nod and agree.

So it's up to me to protect Mary,  
but she's fiercer than I'll ever be,  
and her ravaged face would terrify  
even the implacable Amalekites.

But every hiss of wind, every whisper  
of an owl's hunting wing, every cry  
of a night-hunting cougar are, in my mind,  
those killers come for Miss Wexford and me:  
for witnessing the mayor slash Lily Bartell.

And now we do hear boots: Gehenna  
rising; I grip my gun, but devils shout  
like Rebels in the late American War.

My first shot's wide as a mountain.  
A demon flings himself at Mary.  
I fire again; he falls, and she howls,  
and wounds another. For an instant,  
marauders freeze: her lye-ruined face  
a nightmare in the dancing flames.

But a bullet's numbness crushes me,

strength only to fire one last shot; I miss.  
If only we'd been blind to the evil  
we witnessed, but then no better  
than these vipers and scorpions.

Papa, Mama, forgive my running off  
to this New World: as treacherous  
as the one I deserted you in.

“And All the Devils Are Here”—Mary Wexford,  
After the Ambush: Colorado Territory

Those demon riders left me for dead;  
I will be before John makes his way back,  
the same idea as those bushwhackers: invade  
their camp, slit their throats like sliced ham.  
But Doc and me were waiting for them,  
though they sent Doc to Abraham’s bosom  
that he was always talking about. I hope  
he meets his parents there, and they forgive him  
for running off from Russia, and his papoose days.

Only John will miss me, both our faces so scarred  
no one else’d have us, nor would he have me  
’til I convinced him with ways women know;  
him no prize either, after that grizzly done its work,  
and with all the bad he’s done, but he was true  
to me, and to all women, though to most men  
he was the Red Sea drowning Pharaoh.

Oh Lord, I feel weary, a knife wound wider  
than the Missouri, those sidewinders sneaking in  
silent as spiders; still, we took a couple with us,  
and when those devil riders whooped like war path  
Apaches, I held a torch to my face; they backed off.  
Then they were on us, but God bless Doc:  
hit one in the gut, took that boy minutes to die.  
I slashed another, his head all but toppled  
like an apple teetering atop a grocer’s display.

But there was too many, and everything’s  
dark and dreamy. John’s hovering over me,  
whispering for me to be still. Can’t be him,  
just a dream Satan’s sending, though what  
I did so bad—to be punished by my lye-  
scoured face up here and by pitchfork imps  
down below—I surely don’t know.

Agatha Cornwall Cavendish Overhears the Report  
Sheriff Dennehy Makes to Her Husband,  
the Mayor of Gold Creek, Colorado Territory

Leonard kept the tobacco-spewing  
brute on our porch, as if a beggar;  
still, I heard them as if Shakespeareans.

“We got the woman and Doc,”  
the Sheriff hissed. “But Sprockett . . .”  
and silence reigned; my murderous  
husband silently choking on the news  
like gristle big as a bison’s tongue.

“You’ll post lookouts,” Leonard demanded,  
a child ogre-haunted; the Sheriff assured him  
Gold Creek was guarded against that saint  
of murder: even more deadly, with the slaying  
of the two witnesses he’d sworn to protect  
from Leonard’s killers, to assure no one  
would accuse him of murdering  
that soiled dove he’d dirtied himself with.

Hearing the Sheriff stomp off, I withdrew  
to our kitchen; Leonard burst in, poured himself  
too many calming drinks to keep count of.

“Dinner!” he banged a fist on the table;  
I jumped as if Bluebeard were brandishing  
his blade, and withdrew the half-done meal.  
“Why did I marry you?” he shouted.  
“Oh,” he grinned, “your daddy’s fortune,”  
and shoving past me, was gone; I gasped  
as if atop a peak glowering down on Gold Creek.

My hand dove into my apron’s pocket  
for my hidden paring knife; leaving  
the sickening meal, I undressed in my room,  
and hid the knife beneath my pillow, lay down,  
and found the land I prayed never to wake from.

## In a Gold Creek Saloon, Sheriff Dennehy Worries Aloud About John Sprockett's Revenge: the Colorado Territory

I should never've taken the Mayor's  
"Just reward," to head that "posse"  
to do over Doc and Sprockett's woman:  
witnesses to what Mayor did to Lily Bartell  
when she made sport of his equipment  
or threatened a chat with his Missus.  
Should've arrested him for depriving  
every man in town of the one lovely sight  
for over a hundred miles of avalanches.  
When Lily sashayed the boardwalk,  
heads pivoted smarter than a marching band.

Should've never agreed to Wainwright's plan  
either: to creep into their camp and kill Doc  
and the Wexford woman, Wainwright  
hoping to get Sprockett too: payback  
for John leaving Kansas before it was bled:  
sick of killing women and kids,  
which don't stop him from exploding  
into crimson slaughter every so often.  
Satan's in his liver, and has to get out  
or he'll butcher the town, and then some.

But he was off murdering six of our boys  
when we did Doc and Mary silent as Utes.  
My one satisfaction? Mayor'll be last,  
crapping himself, retribution biding its time.  
I can't stop my hands from quaking  
like an aspen stand, not the best way to be,  
if you're Sheriff of a gold-fever town:  
paid to keep drunk prospectors from doing  
too much mayhem to legitimate citizens.  
I can't surround myself with four, five  
deputies every hour of the day and night.  
And besides, what good would it do?

HILLEL WRIGHT is the author of two books of poetry, a collection of short stories and two novels, the latest being *Border Town*. He is also the editor of four literary anthologies. He lives in Japan with wife and Muse, Shiori Tsuchiya.

## What We Take With Us: Remembering Michael Woligroski

Hillel Wright

I NEVER MET Michael Woligroski, aka Mike Wallis, face-to-face. We communicated by e-mail and possibly, although I don't really remember, by post. Of course, we must have! He sent me a copy of his book, *Gardeners in Paradise*, a collection of short stories, and I sent him my novel, *All Worldly Pursuits*, and maybe my short story collection, *Rotary Sushi*. I remember him telling me he read the novel while he was in hospital, being treated for cancer.

How did I get to know Mike Wallis? It was by an e-mail from Ernest Hekkanen, editor of the *New Orphic Review* and publisher of New Orphic books. I was living in Kawasaki, Japan, across the Tamagawa River from Tokyo, and it must have been around 2003, because that's when *Gardeners in Paradise* was published. It was one of those exercises in synchronicity, what I like to call "the random perfection of the universe."

Ernest Hekkanen had serialized *All Worldly Pursuits* in consecutive issues of *The New Orphic Review*, between 1998-2000, and published the complete novel in 2001. He also published *Rotary Sushi* in 2003 and was acknowledged in Michael Woligroski's "Dedication" on page 3 of *Gardeners in Paradise*. Hekkanen also wrote a blurb for the back cover of the book and was, I'm reasonably sure, instrumental in getting both *Gardeners* and *Pursuits* into the hands of his mentor, novelist W.P. Kinsella, who wrote good reviews of both works in *Books in Canada*.

The e-mail I received from Hekkanen reported that Mike Wallis, his friend and neighbor in the West Kootenay town of Nelson, BC, had written a book and was now living in Kawasaki teaching English, as was I. Or perhaps it was that Mike had lived in Kawasaki and that his friend and fellow writer, Arthur Eakin, also acknowledged in the "Dedication", was living there and teaching English.

Well, the latter turned out to be true. Mike was back in Nelson, but it turned out that Arthur Eakin was living in a rooming house in the same part of Kawasaki—Nakahara Ward, as I was myself—and, in fact, I had met a young Japanese woman at the Kawasaki International Center who lived in the same house. So Arthur and I met at the local Starbucks for coffee and he turned up at a couple of the Tokyo poetry readings I usually attended and later, in February & March 2004, took over my Saturday afternoon Travel English class held at a small bar in my neighborhood while I was away visiting my oldest daughter, son-in-law and grandson in Hawaii.

Arthur also put me in touch with Mike Wallis and our communication and exchange of books began sometime in 2003 or 2004. At that time I was looking for a more pro-active publisher for my then novel-in-progress and Mike Wallis, who had just started Deep Water Press, seemed interested. Encouraged by Mike's enthusiasm and totally impressed by *Gardeners in Paradise*, I redoubled my efforts on the novel after chucking out 2 1/2 years' work and changing the setting from Canada to Japan and the main character from a Vancouver massage therapist to a Tokyo manga artist.

Indirectly, *Gardeners in Paradise* influenced the title of my new novel. Originally, my working title was *The Walled Garden*, which is the meaning of the Persian word "paradise", but after seeing Mike's more imaginative interpretation, I resolved to come up with a better title and thus *Border Town* was born.

Sadly, Michael Woligroski, author of *Gardeners in Paradise*, aka Mike Wallis, did not live to read the completed novel, *Border Town*, nor to be its publisher. Mike's cancer returned and he died in Nelson, sometime in 2006, I believe.

Upon hearing about Mike's death and my subsequent loss of a potential publisher, Joe Zanghi, the American publisher of the Tokyo-based Printed Matter Press, stepped up and offered to take over as publisher. Joe had already published *Faces in the Crowds: a Tokyo international anthology*, of which I was the editor, in 2002, so Joe and I already had a solid working relationship and *Border Town* was published by Printed Matter Press, Tokyo & New York, in 2006.

So what brings me to remember Mike Wallis? It was the aftermath of the Great Tohoku Earthquake, tsunami and nuclear catastrophe, which began at 2:46 PM on March 11, 2011. Because of the continuing strong aftershocks and the worsening of the nuclear radiation crisis, my wife Shiori Tsuchiya and I decided to voluntarily evacuate from our rented house in Kawasaki, 250 km (150 miles) from the Fukushima nuclear power plant. We threw away, gave away or sold cheaply most of our possessions—books, clothes, appliances, etc.—and rented an apartment in a beautiful green space along a small river in Naha, Okinawa. I quit

two of my three part-time positions as lecturer at Japanese universities—the 3rd has been re-scheduled as a month-long summer intensive in September—and we have started from scratch here in Okinawa, 1,000 miles from Tokyo. So far I've picked up a few classes at local language schools and a gig teaching Medical English to interns and residents at the Naha City Hospital.

Among the very few books I chose not to sell or give away was *Gardeners in Paradise* by Michael Woligroski, aka Mike Wallis. While sitting at our new kitchen table in an otherwise bare apartment, waiting for the Yamato delivery service to bring the few boxes of essentials—our computers, some clothing, our pressure cooker, important files and a few more books—I began to reread *Gardeners in Paradise*, starting with “The Blue Shark”.

At the very beginning of our correspondence, Mike confirmed what I was certain to be true, that the protagonist of the story, Roy Martinson of Stone Bay on an unnamed West Coast Canadian island, was indeed my old fishing partner Ray Martin of Granite Bay on Quadra Island, and that the character “Hardboil” in the next story, “Pygmy Clams”, was none other than Patrick Nermoyl, actually known around the northern Gulf Islands as “Captain Hardboil”.

But synchronicities aside, these and the ten accompanying stories in the collection are wonderful stories. “Memorable characters”, “exquisitely written”, “beautiful literacy” are some of the phrases other writers and reviewers have used to describe this book. I can only add that the stories are poignant but not sentimental, hard-edged, but not generically “dark”, well-plotted and chiefly character-driven. And the locations in Quebec, Central America and the Canadian prairie ring just as true as the—at least to me—more familiar British Columbia west coast settings.

I'm sorry I never got to meet Mike Wallis, aka Michael Woligroski, face-to-face. I think we would have enjoyed having a beer or a toke or a cuppa coffee together—a couple of geezers in a pub, on a front porch or in the local cafe. But I'm happy to have preserved my memories of Mike Wallis in the best way any author could wish—by rereading and once again enjoying and being moved by his work.

Mike Wallis, aka Michael Woligroski, has left us a dozen stories. I'm sure I'll read them again, sometime, somewhere, if I survive, in some uncertain future. I'll never forget these stories. I'll always remember Mike Wallis.



JOHN GREY, an Australian-born poet, has been a US resident since the late 1970s. He works as a financial systems analyst in the state of Florida. He has had work published in the *Connecticut Review*, *Alimentum* and *Writer's Bloc*, with more work upcoming in *Pennsylvania English*, *Prism International* and the *Cinder Press Review*.

## John Grey / Three Poems

### Desert Shepherd

Out here, at desert's edge,  
the sheep is grilled to the bones,  
flesh pecked away by buzzards and crows.  
You tell me your sheep die of old age,  
falling down on a bed of lush green pasture,  
their wool damp and matted,  
but not savaged, not ravaged,  
merely slowly decomposing,  
giving back the world  
as good as it got in life.  
Nothing stark about your dead sheep,  
nothing that says this could as easily be a man  
who wandered off in the heat of the day,  
lost, forsaken, sun taking him down  
in a barrage of heat.  
No, your dead sheep could only ever be a sheep.  
Just like your family could only be there for you,  
loving and supportive.  
Nothing dies alone in your world.  
Everyone, everything, is eased back into  
the bosom of the family, seeds its memory  
and its progeny.  
Not so in my world.  
A sheep dies and that's the end of it.  
A man dies dreadfully aware  
of all the dead sheep hereabouts.

## Never Grow Up

Yes, there's something Peter-Pan-like  
in a grown man writing poetry.  
Despite a gray hair here and there,  
he's still the teenager filling page after page  
with splendor, torment, epiphanies and despair.  
Despite the calm that surrounds him,  
he brings living to a fever pitch  
like he once did with  
the haughty shallowness of young girls  
and the inequities of acne.  
The steady heart  
is merely mask for the broken  
or the wildly pumping variety.  
The humble garden he tends daily  
is the forest trails he walked at sixteen,  
and the type-written aftermath,  
when he first used the words "maple-leaf viburnum"  
in a sentence.  
No one writes poems about  
a day at the office, a satisfactory meal,  
a night watching television.  
So pain it is Awe it is.  
Seen it all  
but keep that from his wonder  
at the newness.  
Happily married yes.  
But just don't tell his unhappiness.

## String Woman

It's not like the oil I hear about.  
It doesn't just come from places where  
nobody loves us.  
String can show up anywhere, at any time.  
I can sit by the double-paned window  
and knot it, thread it, or cut it up into smaller pieces.  
Whether it's old or young, short or long,  
it's still string.  
My children want me in the nursing home.  
My neighbor recommends origami one day,  
acupuncture the next.  
My husband once worked the soil.  
His photographs gather dust, much of a muchness.  
Given enough time, I could make a length  
of string that would wrap around the world,  
or crush it into a ball the size of the state-house dome.  
Or I could slice it so fine  
that this house would be full of it  
though no one could see a single piece.  
I keep the television on  
just so I can hear something.  
Sound is another kind of string  
though it ties its own knots,  
does its own splicing.  
Floods in Bangladesh, says the newscaster.  
Such a handsome man, I'm thinking.  
His hair would make good string.  
One thousand died, he adds.  
News is like string to me.  
All around the world to get here.  
Film at eleven, a big ball of it.  
Then cut up into nothingness  
by the next story.  
And me, by the window,  
keeping busy,  
finding another piece.

IVOR C TREBY has had work published in *The New Orphic Review* on a previous occasion, as well as recent appearances in *Darkling*, *Measure* and *Quest*. On a basis of some sixteen years of detailed research, he is the prime authority on Michael Field, the pseudonym chosen by two unjustly neglected and misinterpreted female poet-playwrights who lived 1846-1914. He has written a definitive catalogue and four other books on their life and works. He lives in the UK.

## Ivor C Treby / Three Poems

### Drei Hunde

In that strange inconsequential way that dreams have  
I am suddenly in bed with you again, talking of old times,  
how we have missed, regretted, wasted the years in between.  
It is a Saturday, you will be staying until Monday.  
Now in the street—as often in the past, you have people to see,  
business to do—we seem to be parting,  
just as we always did. Suddenly, a group of (my) friends, and  
to my astonishment you are talking eagerly,  
chaffingly with them—in German too—  
and I realise that at least one of these—my friends—  
you know only too well. Your face is animated, dashing,  
alight for adventure. This is a man I do not know at all.  
You leave. I turn away, find at the entrance to Viktoria  
Bahnhof—it cannot be Berlin?—a fox terrier with  
a handkerchief loosely tied around her snout,  
her two companions, one sporting a bandana across  
the eyes, the other, a cravat close-binding the jaw.  
They are unmistakable, but their message indecipherable.

Peggy M.\* breezes back

She comes to Peachtree City  
one hot September day.  
No longer young, not pretty,  
she has no place to stay,  
her clothes all patched and grey.

She treads the shattered sidewalks,  
slow threads the blackened plain,  
this town once torched by Sherman  
and then born new again.  
Rebuilt, but all in vain.

Now kudzu climbs the shade trees,  
throws string-green arms across  
magnolias, and live oaks,  
witch-haired with Spanish moss,  
but long inured to loss.

Within the Fox Theatre  
she pauses, looks about—  
here in its ruined splendour,  
once, all *her* stars came out,  
a triumph none could doubt.

Not apples then—nor peaches!  
would tempt her feet to veer;  
wealth, fame, had never changed her  
when, struck that long-gone year,  
the rogue cab killed her here.

She blew away her critics,  
she did not give a damn—  
'Etlanna's Atalanta  
who loved the course she ran,  
here ends where she began.

\*Peggy M. Margaret Mitchell

## Too long abroad

A royal servant hurrying back  
on sweating horse, his cloak fresh sprigged  
with shoots of green, the first wild flowers,  
and all the new birds' murmurings,  
the loyal earth wheels back in Spring  
to greet his liege, the sovereign sun.

Now in the outer court he waits  
uncertain of his Prince's mood,  
above the gleaming gates outrigged  
are ragged banners, rain-swept towers—  
unwelcome in their presagings  
of tempests over tasks ill done.

Yet here's a strange and wondrous thing,  
the Prince relents: the signs are good—  
back from his twelve-months' wanderings,  
the weary long elliptic track—  
old earth renews, and celebrates,  
at one more year of grace begun.

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*. He lives in Maine.

## Termination Shock

Paul J. Healy

They keep appearing  
and appearing. The open sores  
the pustules  
the chancres  
the gray hairs  
the justifications  
the rationalizations  
the alibis  
the partriotic songs  
the political ads  
the sermons  
the market reports  
the financial statements  
the declarations of war  
the federal agencies  
the secret police forces  
the prayers of the faithful  
the abused children  
the cheating husbands  
the homophobic congressmen  
the Jew baiters  
the masturbating pirsts  
the elect of God  
the apocalyptic prophets  
the cancers of the colon  
the overdraft fees  
the home foreclosures  
the bankruptcies  
the golden parachutes

the sales pitches  
the infomercials  
the oil changes  
the fill-ups  
the June weddings  
the serotonin reuptake inhibitors  
the hyperactive kids  
the estrogen-laden drinking waters  
the heavily armed militias  
the black hearses  
the missionaries of Christ  
the DEA agents  
the Political Action Committees  
the wetbacks  
the minutemen  
the mullahs  
the rigged elections  
the contaminated fish  
the terrorists  
the real estate developers  
the winds of oblivion  
the micro processors  
the investment bankers  
the petty dictators  
the Ponzi schemes  
the pontiffs  
the mutated viruses  
the baseball games  
the action movies  
the mushroom clouds  
the ozone holes  
the talk radio hosts  
the neutrinos from space  
the securitizations  
the stock tips  
the colostomy bags  
the hysterectomies  
the board meetings  
the executive compensations  
the loudmouth drunks  
the crackheads  
the junkies  
the speed freaks  
the pot heads



the dog lovers  
the electronic gadgets  
the goons  
the bodyguards  
the card sharks  
the movie stars  
the bestsellers  
the pot boilers  
the poisoned wells  
the fast foods  
the fat heads  
the home invaders  
the cloning experiments  
the born-again  
the women haters  
the school shooters  
the snipers in towers  
the three-legged frogs  
the sports utility vehicles  
the teenage smokers  
the weight loss programs  
the diet plans  
the Wal-Mart Super Stores  
the cell phones  
the government bailouts  
the splinter groups  
the clear-cuts  
the housing starts  
the commodity traders  
the e-mails  
the captains of industry  
the strongmen  
the snitches  
the black-ops sites  
the extraordinary renditions  
the get rich quick schemes  
the three low payments  
the restless leg syndromes  
the super models  
the stealth bombers  
the eavesdroppers  
the missile defense systems  
the UFO sightings  
the ethnic cleansings

the war games  
the strategic interests  
the Jehovah's Witnesses  
the low calorie snacks  
the carbon emissions  
the melting glaciers  
the Styrofoam containers  
the spy satellites  
the Russian Mafia  
the incestuous hicks  
the dirty old men  
the porn stars  
the repeat offenders  
the raped women  
the parking garages  
the dead pop stars  
the acquired brain injuries  
the sugarless gum

ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. The following story was excerpted from his collection, *All Night Gas Bar and Ten Story Autopsies* (New Orphic Publishers, 2011).

## All I Really Want on New Year's Day

Ernest Hekkanen

IT HAD BEEN a fairly crisp night on New Year's Eve, so crisp the service station attendant could see filaments of icy dew sparkling on the pavement beyond the periphery of the lighted canopy whenever he went out to serve customers at the pumps. It had been pretty busy ever since he'd arrived at work at 11 p.m. and nearly all his customers had been in a good mood, owing, he thought, to the fact that most of them would be enjoying a holiday on January 1st—a holiday he would not be celebrating as he had to work, which he didn't mind, really, owing to the fact that he'd be getting time and a half, and, for once, he would be earning a decent wage.

So far, even the drunk customers hadn't been too obnoxious to deal with, but there was still lots of opportunity for that to change between now and the time he got off work at 7 a.m., and he didn't want to hope against hope that it would remain peaceful, fearing he might jinx things for himself. It wasn't until the woman in the sweater and light cotton dress went by a second time on the sidewalk in front of the station that he really started paying her any attention and then it was because she glanced several times at him in the service station office, where he had been reading *Field & Stream*. There were some pictures in the magazine that he would swear had been taken at the Double J Ranch between Princeton and Merritt, B.C., a ranch on which he had worked only a few short years ago, and he was in the middle of a reverie that had to do with that time of his life, when, looking up, he saw the woman go by a third time, and at that point he started observing her a lot more closely, owing mainly to the way she kept looking in his direction. At one point, he observed her massaging her face near her left eye and, quite naturally, he began to wonder about that, too.

Because the service station attendant had been robbed several times, it occurred to him that she might be sussing out the place for a possible

hold-up later on that night, but then he thought, no, she looks too much like Donna Reed of *The Donna Reed Show* of the early 1960s for her to be doing something like that; no, she isn't sussing out the place; no, she's probably just pacing the sidewalk waiting for the westbound city bus to stop at the bus stop; but then, upon seeing her come down the sidewalk a fourth time and, noticing her glance in his direction yet again, he thought: she's not dressed very warmly for a chilly night like tonight, only a thin-looking sweater and a cotton dress and flats on her feet—flats with no socks, for godsake!—no, she's out there because of something else that has happened.

At this juncture, a brown Ford Econoline van pulled up at the near pumps. When the attendant went out to ask the driver what he'd like to be served, the guy, who had a slim, axe-like face, blew on a noisemaker that uncoiled like a snake right into the attendant's face.

"Happy New Year," the guy said. "Nineteen-seventy-four is here at last. Out with the old and in with the new, ca-ca-cachoo, ca-ca-cachoo, I am the walrus, no, you are the walrus, no, we are the walrus altogether, ca-ca-cachoo, ca-ca-cachoo."

The attendant glanced at his wristwatch. "You're late by an hour and twenty minutes," he said. "Party's over."

"Not for me," said the driver. "I'm a big spender, tonight."

He grabbed two five-dollar bills off the cowling that covered the engine.

"Ten dollars of regular, please."

"Ten dollars it is," said the attendant.

"Can's open?" asked the driver, as he pushed back the door of the Econoline.

"As open as the Pope's fly in the Papal lavatory."

"Hey, I like that little saying," the driver congratulated him. "I'm gonna try to remember it."

The driver handed the attendant the two five-dollar bills before rounding the rear end of the van. As the attendant was putting the cap back on the intake of the gas tank, the Donna Reed-looking woman went by again. She stopped at the bus bench and turned to eye him for a considerable length of time. He went into the office to ring the ten-dollar purchase into the till, and when he looked up again he saw the woman approaching the office, with her arms crossed over her bosom and her hands tucked into her armpits.

"Do you mind if I warm myself up in here for a little while?" she said, upon pushing back the door.

"Not at all. Come right in."

He now saw that the woman had some little flakes of confetti stuck in her brown hair and that there was some swelling coming up around her left eye and that, overall, she was looking rather devastated. In the office,

the radio was tuned to a country and western station, which had added some sentimental twang to the reverie he'd been having about working on the ranch between Princeton and Merritt, British Columbia. Back then, nearly every ride he had received in the Okanagan had been accompanied by such music in the cars or trucks or vans.

"A quiet night?" the woman asked.

"Fairly quiet, given the fact that it was New Year's Eve not very long ago and nearly everyone who drove in was a little drunk or a little high or a little bit of both."

"I don't know why New Year's Eve always has to become an excuse for drinking too much," she said.

"Did you attend a party like that tonight?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she said, and zipped her lips tightly into her cheeks.

"No one's forcing you to," said the attendant.

An Eldorado Cadillac that was traveling west pulled up at the near pumps, and the attendant went out to ask what he could serve the driver. The woman driver said, "My engine's running kind of hot. Could you check the coolant in the radiator for me, please?"

When he went around to the hood he noticed what seemed to be smoke billowing out from under the chassis, but he didn't expect to see what he saw when he lifted the hood, namely, that the engine was wrapped in flames.

"Get out of your car, ma'am. Get out quick, you've got a fire in the engine compartment of your car."

"A what?"

"A fire," he yelled, running to the office to get the fire extinguisher off the wall. By the time he got back to the car, the flames were leaping even higher above the engine and the woman driver still hadn't gotten out from behind the steering wheel, which made him wonder if she was one of those captains determined to go down with her ship—out of some misguided sense of honour. He directed the nozzle of the extinguisher at the flames leaping up from the engine, squeezed the handle and blasted away.

"What the hell are you doing to my car?" the woman screamed out the window.

"I'm keeping your car from exploding," he yelled back at her. "That's what I'm doing."

The driver had a plentiful wad of peroxide-bleached hair piled on top her head so it resembled a beehive and she seemed totally oblivious to the danger of the situation, especially with the Eldorado parked so close to the gas pumps.

The service station attendant coated the engine of the Cadillac with fire retardant until, at last, there were only smouldering fumes and a lot

of suppressed sizzling in the engine compartment. By that time the woman driver had gotten out of her car and was hopping mad over what the attendant had just done.

“Look at the mess you’ve made,” she complained. “I’m going to report this to your employer. All I wanted you to do was to check the level of the coolant in the radiator, and now look at this—look at this mess!”

“I couldn’t get to the radiator,” the attendant told her. “There were too many flames.”

“Flames. Why would there be any flames?”

The attendant saw the reason for the flames. Someone had left the oil cap off the spout where the oil went into the engine and the cap had dropped between the battery and the housing of the engine compartment.

“See that,” he said. “Who last put oil in your car?”

“Some guy out in Coquitlam—at a station out there.”

“Well, whoever it was forgot to put the oil cap back on. Oil sprayed all over your engine and that started the fire.”

“Just the same, I don’t like what you did to my engine.”

“I had to do it in order to stop your car from exploding, ma’am.”

The attendant replaced the oil cap and then told the woman to try starting her car. The Eldorado’s engine wouldn’t turn over; the starter motor wouldn’t even engage. The attendant studied the matter more closely. “Your wiring’s fried—due to the fire,” he informed her.

“More likely, it’s due to all that stuff you sprayed on it,” she said.

“It wasn’t due to the fire retardant, ma’am. It was due to the fire in your engine compartment.”

“My husband’s going to really be mad about this, and I’m not the one who’s going to take the blame, either. All I wanted you to do was to check the level of the coolant.”

The attendant saw there was no talking any sense into the woman, but he did notice there was a BCAA sticker on the rear bumper of the Cadillac and asked her if she had an up-to-date policy with the association. She did. He phoned the BCAA for her and gave the dispatcher an account of what had happened to the car, and in less than twenty minutes a tow-truck driver arrived on the scene and the tow-truck driver more or less confirmed what the service station attendant had already told the female driver, namely, that the wiring of her Cadillac Eldorado had been fried.

“It wasn’t due to all that stuff the attendant sprayed all over the place?” she asked again.

“No. See these wires right here? See how the plastic has been melted and how the wires are all fused together? That’s due to the fire.”

“But I only came in to have him check the level of the coolant. I didn’t ask him to set my car on fire.”

The tow-truck driver rolled his eyes. “I don’t think he set your car on fire, ma’am. I think you drove in like that, and when he raised the hood

the flames soared even higher.”

“You mean it wasn’t the coolant, after all?”

The BCAA guy twisted off the radiator cap and stuck his middle finger inside. “The level of the coolant is just fine. It’s the fried wiring that’s at fault, and the wiring got fried because of the fire in your engine compartment. That’s all there is to it.”

During the thirty minutes that the Eldorado was parked at the near pumps, the Donna Reed lookalike had stood in the office with her arms wrapped tightly around her, watching everything that was going on. Once the BCAA tow-truck driver had driven off with the Cadillac suspended from the back of the tow truck, the attendant settled down on the stool behind the counter and tried to calm himself.

“She sure didn’t want to believe that she’d driven into the station with her car on fire,” the Donna Reed lookalike observed.

“I know. Some people just can’t figure things out for themselves.”

“Maybe she was afraid of what her husband would say.”

“More than likely.”

“Do you get a lot of weird people like that coming into the station at night?”

“A plethora of them. Tonight hasn’t been too bad, though, considering it was New Year’s Eve only—” he glanced at his wristwatch “—only two hours and twenty-five minutes ago.”

The attendant noticed that the woman had something in her right hand that she kept squeezing in a rhythmic fashion, but her fist was closed too tightly for him to glimpse what it was.

“I guess I’m just another one of those weird people,” she finally said.

“Why do you say that?”

“I mean, I guess I’m just one more, slightly off-the-wall person you have to deal with.”

“Have I been having to deal with you?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. What I meant—” She failed to finish her thought. “I don’t know what I mean, actually.”

The attendant studied the swelling around her left eye. The skin around her eye was discolouring. The swelling was at a height suggesting she might have been punched in the eye.

“So, what are you doing roaming around at this hour?” he asked her. “You’re not exactly dressed for the weather.”

She opened her hand and looked down at what was in her palm.

“Mistletoe,” she said. “It’s supposed to be romantic on New Year’s Eve. At twelve midnight, you’re supposed to stand underneath it and smooch with the person you love.”

“Is that what you did tonight?”

“No, my husband and I had an argument, and then he hit me in the eye.”

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"He was drunk. He didn't know what he was doing, I guess."

"Was he terribly drunk?"

"I didn't think so at the time, but I guess he must've been."

"Did it happen at a party?"

"Yes. I fled out the back door and I just kept going."

"I'm sorry to hear that. That's no way to start a new year."

"All I've ever really wanted on New Year's Day is a little peace. A little peace and a little happiness, that's all, but it always gets ruined, somehow."

Suddenly, she wept into her hands. The service station attendant felt wretched on her behalf, but then again, he wasn't there to be a psychologist to everybody who passed through the station, now, was he?

"You should leave the guy," he advised her.

"I can't just walk out. I've got kids by him."

"How many?"

"A boy and a girl."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "Not sorry about the kids, I mean, but about your situation. I hope it repairs itself, somehow."

"I keep hoping it will, but I'm almost out of hope now." She looked out the window on the side of the station where the toilets were located, and then she said, "Do I need a key to get into the bathroom?"

"No, we never lock the bathrooms."

"I think I'll go use the ladies', then."

"Go right ahead. The light's to the right of the door."

While the Donna Reed lookalike was in the bathroom, a camper-truck outfit pulled up in front of the bay doors of the garage. The attendant didn't bother getting off the stool behind the counter, figuring the driver had pulled in for some pop or maybe to use the telephone. A handsome, rugged-looking guy of about six feet two inches got out of the cab and came into the office; he looked awfully tired, and a little bit hungover, as well.

"Seen a woman in a sweater and a printed dress out on the street tonight?" he asked the attendant.

The attendant's thoughts immediately went to the woman who was now in the ladies' bathroom. He looked down at the knuckles of the man's right hand. A flap of skin was lifted on one of the knuckles, with a scab of dried blood underneath.

"Can't say I have," he told the guy.

"She's about five foot five. Short, brown hair, a little bit curly, but the curls are from putting her hair up in curlers."

"Why are you looking for her?"

"We had an argument. She took off on me."

The attendant knew the woman had appeared at the side of the station



even though he couldn't see her, because a girl of about eleven years old pushed back the driver's door of the truck and yelled, "Mommy!" The girl yelled with so much fierce longing, he instantly felt concerned for the woman's safety, especially after the driver of the truck looked in that direction and his broad shoulders stiffened with anger.

"Didn't fucking see her, eh! Who's that right there, then?"

The guy stormed out of the office and immediately the woman started to run toward the corner of the parking lot where it met the building next door. The girl of eleven had run after her, and now the driver of the truck was catching up to both of them. The guy grabbed the woman by the shoulder. Her sweater bunched up around her neck, and then he struck her across the face, with the result that she fell down on the pavement on her right side and raised her left forearm to protect herself.

As soon as the guy bolted from the station office, the attendant got on the telephone to the police. "There's a guy smacking his wife around in the parking lot of the gas station at Semlin and Hastings. She's screaming, 'No, I'm not gonna get in the truck,' and he's yelling, 'You better damn well get in the truck or I'm gonna pick you up and throw you inside.' Their daughter's yelling and screaming and now their little boy has gotten into the melee, too. He's hitting his father on the thigh and now the guy is dragging his wife back toward the truck—by her right arm, so her face is now dragging on the pavement...."

"A police car will be there very shortly," said the dispatcher.

"I hope it gets here before anything worse takes place. I'm going to try to intervene. Hope someone gets here soon. Goodbye."

The attendant bolted from the office and ran over to where the guy was dragging the woman across the pavement.

"Stop it," he shouted. "Stop it! Come to your senses, man."

"Get out of my way. You don't have any call to interfere with me."

"Yes, I do. You're beating up on this woman."

The attendant tried to get between the man and his wife. The guy let go of his wife and took a swing at him. The attendant jumped back out of the way of the guy's roundhouse right.

"Get out of my way, kid, or I'm gonna come at you like a grizzly bear and I'm not gonna stop until you're dead on the ground."

"The cops will be here in a little while. I think I can dance with you until then."

The guy laughed—quite violently. "You've got no idea about the nest of hornets you just stirred up, kid. No idea at all."

The guy came at the service station attendant, but the attendant jumped back out of the way, then he ducked out of the way again, then dodged another punch, then, all at once, they heard it—the sound of the police siren. Moments later, a cruiser slammed to a halt in the service station parking lot and an old cop with a ribbon-like scar cutting down into his

upper lip jumped out. A second police car pulled in from the other direction.

“What’s going on here?” the old cop said.

“A little family dispute,” the driver of the truck said. “Nothing wrong with that, I hope.”

“This guy was dragging that woman back to the truck sitting over there, and she didn’t want to go,” the attendant spoke up. “She was screaming bloody murder, and so I phoned you guys.”

Not long after that, an entire contingent of squad cars and V.F.D. emergency vehicles showed up. The cops cuffed the truck driver’s hands behind his back and pushed his head down to get him into one of the cruisers and, in response, the truck driver looked at the attendant as if he wanted to kill him, and then he said, “You just bought yours, buddy. Take that to the grave with you.”

“I think if I heard him correctly, you were just threatened. Rather seriously, too,” the old cop said, noting it down on his notepad.

“I think you’re right about that,” the attendant said. “What a way to start the new year, and here the old one had gone out so peacefully, too.”

“That’s pot luck for you.”

“Sure is.”

A guy from the Vancouver Fire Department was fussing around the woman. He cleaned her cheek where it had been scraped on the pavement and applied a bandage to it while she was sitting wrapped in a blanket on the tailgate of the emergency vehicle, her children on either side of her, gripping her hands.

The gas-bar attendant gave the old policeman a statment in between serving customers at the pumps. After all the emergency vehicles had left the station, the Donna Reed lookalike came into the office with her two children.

“I want to thank you for everything you did for us tonight,” she said.

“No thanks necessary,” he told her. “Might be a good idea to put some distance between you and your husband, though— maybe a whole continent, in fact.”

“Just the same, I want to thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Once the woman and her kids had driven away in the camper-truck, the attendant stood looking out the window for a long time, feeling all carved out inside, waiting for his shift to be over with. All the excitement had left him feeling so exhausted he felt like lying down on the concrete floor of the station office and going directly off to sleep, but, of course, he couldn’t do that.

All I really want on New Year’s Day is to have a good, long sleep, and no dreams that will wake me up, he thought. That’s all I’m asking for.

But what were the chances of that happening?

## *The New Orphic Review*

Slim, he thought, given my noisy neighbours downstairs from me in the rooming house.

The following “autopsy” has been excerpted from ERNEST HEKKANEN’S collection *All Night Gas Bar, and Ten Story Autopsies* (New Orphic Publishers, 2011).

## Story Autopsy # 5

Ernest Hekkanen

THE NEXT DAY in the middle of my morning snooze, I was awakened by a telephone call from my boss, whom I had never laid eyes on, by the way, but who I knew was headquartered out in Coquitlam somewhere. “We had a complaint about you last night,” he said.

“Don’t tell me,” I replied. “She’s a peroxide-blondie, and she drives an Eldorado Cadillac.”

“You know who I’m talking about then?”

“So what did she tell you—that I set her car on fire?”

“Pretty close to it, alright. So what happened exactly?”

“She told me her car was running kind of hot and asked me to check the coolant in her radiator. When I raised the hood, all sorts of smoke and flames billowed out. I had to run to the office to get the fire extinguisher and douse the engine, and then for my efforts, she screamed at me that I had ruined her car. I must admit, I wasn’t thinking anything about ruining her car, not right then. Instead, I was concerned about the fire leaping over to the gas pumps and the whole damn station going up in flames.”

“She said there wasn’t any trouble with her car until you raised the hood. Could she possibly be right about that?”

“No, not for one second. Whoever had last checked her oil had left the cap off. The oil in the rocker box had splattered all over her engine and, I suspect, the heat from the exhaust manifold set it on fire. If you don’t believe me, call up BCAA. One of their tow-truck drivers came to help. He drove off with her and her vehicle when it was all over.”

“She said you were rude to her.”

“I screamed at her to get out of her car—quick. I was afraid she’d go up in smoke with her Cadillac. The situation was that dire. Unfortunately, everything I did for her wasn’t appreciated; she kept blaming me for everything that had gone wrong.”

“I’m glad you’ve cleared things up for me.”

“You’re welcome.”

When I put down the receiver I was unable to get back to sleep so I got up and started working on “All I Really Want on New Year’s Day.” Ann B. and our daughter, Kathryn, had gone out for treats at the Dairy Queen not long before and I knew when they got back home that Ann B. would be annoyed with me for converting my sleep-time into writing-time. I kept telling myself as long as I was getting stories out of my place of employment, it was worthwhile working there, but even I was beginning to wonder whether I was deceiving myself, given the fact that I hadn’t managed to sell a single one of my gas-station stories. Things weren’t going well on the domestic front. Ann B. had let it be known that I was wasting my time working at dead-end jobs, and now the alibi that I was the equivalent of a modern-day social anthropologist doing field studies in the city had begun to wear rather thin with her, seeing how it hadn’t added up to anything substantial, let alone brought in any money. I think women who marry writers should have their heads examined, and I say that with no disrespect to them. Dreams are infectious. I think writers infect prospective spouses with their dreams, but once their spouses have gone through the resulting sickness and are then resistant to getting sick all over again, well, the writer’s dreams begin to look rather paltry and self-indulgent.

As reported in the previous story, I had already been robbed several times at the service station. By the time I finished working there in the summer of 1976, I would be held up six times. Also, there were two attempted hold-ups that were stymied. One guy was very smooth. He bought a bottle of pop at the Coke vending machine and then came into the office to drink it. After he finished it, he put the empty bottle down on the display shelf where we stacked the tins of engine oil into pyramids and stood looking out at the pumps for a long while. I didn’t see his right hand disappear into his blue denim jacket. However, when he whipped around I saw that he had fished out a pistol—one that looked like a Colt .45—which he pointed directly at my face. I reared backward really fast, the back of my skull smacking up against the wall behind me. For an instant that seemed like an eternity, I thought I was going to die.

“Don’t look so surprised,” he said. “Just walk off into the bay and sit down at your typewriter. That’s it. Slowly move along now. Keep your hands up where I can see them. That’s it. Just keep walking.”

I went into the bay and sat down at the typewriter where I’d been trying to finish “All I Really Want on New Year’s Day.” I couldn’t seem to get the ending right, but I wasn’t thinking about that right then, that’s for sure. The hold-up guy rifled the till for the cash that was in it, but cursed because there was so little.

“What’s in this strongbox-looking thing below the counter?” he yelled. “Midnight deposits.”

“Open it for me.”

“I can’t. Only the supervisor has the key.”

He came to the doorway leading into the bay and pointed the pistol in my direction. “What sort of cash have you got on you?”

“Maybe five bucks, if I’m lucky. Want me to look?”

Just then, a customer pulled up at the near pumps and the hold-up guy fled down Semlin Drive. A few weeks later, when I went to serve a customer at the far pumps, I spotted the very same guy again, raising his right leg to climb over the squat guard rail that kept cars from plummeting down the hill to the alleyway behind the station. He had the Colt stuck in the waistband of his jeans and in his right hand he was carrying a red tool box. Instantly, I knew he had come to break into the strongbox below the counter and it was sheer luck that I had seen him.

“Please don’t leave,” I told the driver of the Austin Mini, after cramming the pump nozzle into the gas tank. “That guy coming over the guard rail robbed me a few weeks ago and I think he intends to rob me again tonight.”

Having said that, I now shouted at the hold-up guy. “Get out of here. Fast. I know what you’ve come for. I’m gonna call the cops on you. Get out of here—right now!”

“Fuck you. You won’t have a phone to call the cops with.”

“Fuck you, too,” I shouted.

“No, fuck you,” he shouted back.

He had me in a sort of checkmate, because I knew he would get to the telephone before I could and then he’d yank the cord out of the wall and maybe even throw the phone through the window. Just then, I spied a Dupont Taxi coming down the street at a crawl. I ran out into Hastings Street, frantically waving my arms. The taxi screeched to a halt. I told the driver what was going on. The cab driver got on the radio to his dispatcher and the dispatcher got on the phone to the police and, moments later, I heard sirens converging on the station from two different directions. That resulted in a stand-off, with the hold-up guy holed up behind the counter in the office and the cops outside training firearms on him from two different angles—behind the fenders of two different cruisers.

Two more police cars pulled into the station parking lot and then one of the cops spoke over a bullhorn. “If you look around, you’ll see you’re surrounded. The only way you’re gonna get out is by dropping your gun and raising your hands.” After about ten minutes, the hold-up guy threw down his pistol and came out with his hands above his head. By then, a reporter with CKNW was on the scene describing what was taking place. Later on, when things had settled down just a little bit, he asked me, “This is about the fourth or fifth stick-up you’ve had on your shift. What makes you keep working here?”

The question baffled me. I wanted to tell him that I was a draft dodger

from the States, but that didn't mean I was a coward or that there wasn't some honour in not being pushed off one's turf by every asshole who came along, but I knew the reporter didn't want a long-winded reply like that, so I said, quite simply: "I haven't been able to find another job yet. That's why," and that was the segment that ended up getting broadcasted over the airwaves.

Now, thirty-six years later, I can't be absolutely certain about the order in which I wrote my gas-station stories or whether the order in which they appeared in the original book manuscript was the same order in which they had occurred. However, each one comes with some definite islands of memory that stand out quite starkly in my imagination, and when I am prone to being nostalgic about the past, and think that everything was so much simpler back then, so much more straightforward and, indeed, wonderful, I have the stories to remind me that that sort of nostalgic remembering is due to the distorting lenses of time and nothing more than that.

Later that morning, when Ann B. came home with our daughter from the Dairy Queen on Broadway, she frowned at me sitting at my Underwood at the kitchen table.

"I thought you were supposed to be sleeping."

"My employer phoned me up about something that happened last night at the service station and after that I couldn't get back to sleep."

"What happened last night?"

"Some woman asked me to check the coolant in her radiator. However, when I raised the hood of her car, all sorts of flames leaped out and I had to douse them with the fire extinguisher and the woman complained to my boss about it."

"Are you going to be fired?"

"No, I straightened things out with Kearns."

"Too bad they didn't fire you. You would've had to look for another job—hopefully something more lucrative than what you've got right now."

ERNEST HEKKANEN gave two readings at FinnWest—July 29 to July 31, 2011—at the Scandinavian Community Centre in Burnaby, B.C.

## Today is Good Friday

Ernest Hekkanen

I WAS STANDING at the far pumps, filling up a Ford Falcon with regular gasoline, when I heard what I thought was glass breaking in back of me across the street at the Sir William Macdonald Elementary School. I turned around and squinted in the direction of the school, but because I was standing in the light pouring down from the fluorescent fixtures of the overhead canopy I found it difficult to see anything in the dark that cloaked the school. There was a high, chainlink fence around the schoolyard that made the school look like a reformatory, and because of the way the street light refracted off the links of the fence, it was doubly hard to see anything going on in the shadows of the school grounds.

I finished filling up the Ford Falcon and went into the office to run the guy's credit card through the embossing machine and then I got the guy to sign the invoice. The driver had also heard the breaking glass, and said: "Is that someone breaking windows over there?"

"I'm gonna run over and see," I told him.

I ran across Hastings Street and took a closer look through the chainlink fence and, sure enough, there was a street urchin over there—a boy, I think—using a slingshot to methodically break the windows of the elementary school. I ran back to the service station and got on the phone to report to the police what I had seen, but by the time they arrived some fifteen minutes later to conduct a once-around sweep of the school, the kid had vanished.

"Looks like there were a lot of broken windows," said the old cop who later came into the gas station to purchase some cigarettes at the vending machine. He was the old cop I'd become fairly well acquainted with, the one with the ribbon-like scar cutting down into his upper lip.

"I don't think he could've been much more than nine or ten years old," I told him. "He was hunkered down on one knee and was methodically breaking the windows with the stones he was catapulting at



them with a slingshot.”

“Marbles,” the old cop corrected me. “I’m pretty sure they were marbles. There were all sorts of them lying on the ground at the foot of the building and another little bunch of them out in the playground.”

“I wonder what made him stop when he did?”

“Maybe his mother called him in to have some hot chocolate before putting him down to bed,” the old cop said—in a voice that betrayed his cynicism.

His cynicism fed my cynicism.

“Well, maybe it’s a good thing you didn’t catch him, then,” I said.

“Why do you say that?”

“Today is Good Friday. In honour of this day, the social welfare system would’ve crucified the little bastard.”

The old cop winced. “That was a terrible, and I mean terrible, extremely terrible, joke.”

“I know, but at this hour of the night just about any joke will do.”

“I guess that’s true, too.” He dragged on his cigarette. “Well, I hate to break this important news to you, but I’ve got to get back to work. See you around.”

“Sure thing.”

After the old cop had driven off down the street, I fell to thinking about what might have inspired the kid to break the windows of the elementary school and then I remembered an episode from my own life, back when I had been in 7th grade at Lynnwood Junior High School down in the States. Tiny Thorton, the teacher, who must’ve weighed in the vicinity of 250 pounds, had informed us with a great deal of pride that he had worked his way through university by bouncing people out of bars. My 7th grade class was chock-a-block with all sorts of troubled kids with extremely bad attitudes and, one morning in our block class, Tiny Thorton put me in a straitjacket and gave us a lecture on how our bad attitudes were like the straitjacket I was wearing, and how difficult it was going to be to doff them. He finished the lecture by telling us that our attitudes would destine us to be failures of one kind or another, and wasn’t that a terrible pity—both for us and for society? He had given me the entire block class to get out of the straitjacket. If I managed to get out, he said he’d let me smoke in class for the rest of the school year, but if I failed to do so, well, I’d have to wear a dunce cap.

After reflecting on that episode from my youth, I was nearly angry enough to go across the street and break some school windows, too. My guess was that the boy’s teacher might have made him feel pretty worthless, and that he had broken the windows to get even—at least that was my conjecture.

A little while later, a guy parked his car in front of the bay doors of the garage. He bought a bottle of Coke at the vending machine before coming

into the office to drink it. Not many weeks before, a fellow had come into the office the same way this guy had done. After draining his bottle of pop, he had robbed me at gunpoint. Because of that incident, I was a little bit wary of the current guy.

“God, what a night,” he remarked, “and now it’s almost Good Friday, too.”

“You can say that again,” I told him, trying to spot whether he had a pistol stuck in the waistband of his jeans.

“It’s been a helluva night for you, too?” he inquired.

“It’s always a helluva night when you work the graveyard shift,” I told him. I didn’t notice any pistol making a conspicuous lump in his jeans.

“It’s been a helluva night for me, too, because my dad is dying,” he went on, and I knew right then that he intended to gab about his life rather than rob me—although, given enough time, he might end up robbing me of my patience.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I told him.

“He’s been dying for a long time, but we’ve got him at home with us now—you know, because he didn’t want to die in the hospital—and let me tell you right now, it’s been one helluva roller-coaster ride having him in the living room, dying right there in front of our eyes.”

“Have you got any kids?”

“Two sons, and it’s been a helluva ride for them, too, no two ways about it. It’s been terrible. Just terrible.”

“Were your sons out roaming the streets tonight?” I asked him, thinking that one of his son might have used a slingshot to break the windows of the school.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious, is all.”

“No, they were at home. All night. Seems to me like they were a lot more upset about not getting to watch TV than they were about my dad dying in the living room. That should tell you something, eh?”

“What exactly should it tell me?” I asked him.

“That they don’t really give a shit about my dad dying,” he said. Instantly, his eyes watered up and his voice broke. He steeled himself against his emotions, though. “It makes me wonder if I’ve raised my kids the right way and whether they’d be the least bit upset about not getting to watch TV if it was me dying in the living room.”

“That’s a tough one,” I had to admit. “A real tough one.”

“You don’t know the half of it, but then how could you, eh? He’s not your father and they’re not your kids.”

“You’re right. How could I know? How could I know anything at all, as a matter of fact?”

“I didn’t mean it quite like that,” he apologized.

“I didn’t take it like that. I was just confirming what you were telling me, that’s all.”

While we were talking in the station office, I saw something I couldn’t quite believe, even though I was seeing it with my very own eyes. The guy who was talking about his father dying in the living room hadn’t seen it yet, because his back was turned to the windows. To bring it to his attention, I said: “My God, take a look at that out there. There’s a guy out there with a two-by-four cross that he’s dragging into the station, for fucksake.”

The guy was quite a sight. He had long, light brown hair that might have been a wig with a crown of thorns stuck on top. He was dressed in a tunic-like thing, tied with a rope around his waist, and he had a pair of sandals on his feet—rubber flipflops, I now observed. He leaned the cross up against the pop vending machine, searched his tunic for coins, pulled out a bottle of Fresca, and came into the office.

“Praise Jesus,” he said.

We stared at him.

“Praise Jesus,” he said again, bringing his hands up on either side of his body like he was going to conduct a choir. “You’re supposed to return my salutation by saying ‘Praise Jesus’ back to me,” he went on.

“Praise Jesus,” I said in order to humour him.

“Yeah, Praise Jesus, you fucking weirdo. Praise him up one side and down the other, over and over again, without end.”

The Jesus impersonator tipped back the bottle of Fresca so we could see his Adam’s apple moving up and down. The Fresca must’ve been very refreshing, because he smacked his lips and gave a belch.

“I’ve been dragging that cross out there all over the place tonight,” the Jesus Christ impersonator said. “All over the place, and I’ll be doing the same thing all day today, too.”

The Catholic said, “Why are you doing that, you weirdo?”

“Because today is Good Friday, and people take it far too lightly, that’s why.”

“I’m not taking it too lightly. My dad’s dying and he’ll probably die later on today, so keep your opinions to your own fucking self, why don’t you?”

“I take it you’re not a religious man,” said the Jesus impersonator.

“Not your kind of religious, that’s for sure.”

“What are you—a Jew or a Muslim or something like that?”

“No, I’m a Catholic, a fucking Catholic, the original Christian religion.”

“Why do you say it’s the original Christian religion?”

“Because it was Paul, Jesus’s disciple, who gave us the church—the Holy Catholic church, I’ll have you know.”

“Paul never even ran into Jesus—not in his entire lifetime. They were

never in the same place at the same time. Paul, whose original name was Saul, perverted everything that Jesus stood for.”

“I’d like to see you tell that to the priest of my church—the Holy Roman Catholic Church, too. He’d cut you up into little tiny pieces and make a stew out of you.”

“See, that’s just what I mean,” the Jesus impersonator said, looking at me as though he expected me to mediate between him and the Catholic whose father was dying.

“You know what I think,” I told him. “I think when I finish my shift tomorrow morning, I’m going to go down to the beach and watch the seagulls wheeling around on the air currents. I can believe in something like that, but all this other stuff—well, to me, it sounds like a lot of people squabbling over real estate, that’s all.”

“Squabbling over real estate!” the Jesus guy objected.

“Yeah, and all of those religions in the Middle East, that’s all they ever do over there, squabble over property—you know, over all those little mounds of earth that once had temples built on them, and I mean, how stupid is that, for chrissake?”

Jesus drained his bottle of Fresca. “Me thinks we have an atheist in our midst.”

“Yeah, are you a goddamn atheist?” said the Catholic whose father was dying.

“I’m nothing, actually.”

“Whadya mean by that?”

“I mean I don’t believe in stories that are nothing but fiction. To me, stories are a lot like real estate and nothing more than that—real estate that belongs to this tribe or that tribe—and then those fucking tribes just fight over it, that’s all.”

“There aren’t any atheists in foxholes, I can tell you that much, for sure,” said the Catholic. “That’s what my father always told me, and he should know, too, because he fought on the beaches at Normandy and saw a ton of people dying, over there.”

“This station is a bloody foxhole,” I retorted.

The service bell dinged and I went out to serve the driver of the car that had pulled up on the near side of the near pumps. The guy was busy looking in the pocket of his billfold when I went out. I stood patiently beside the window of the driver’s door. The guy had a thin-looking face and a baseball cap on his head. It took him a little while to roll down the window of his Valiant.

“Eight bucks of regular,” he said.

“Coming right up.”

I stuck the pump nozzle into the intake of his car and started filling up his tank. Because of the way the two-by-four cross was leaning up against the pop machine, I knew the driver of the Valiant wouldn’t be able to get

past it and so I ducked back into the office.

“Hey, Jesus,” I shouted. “How about moving your bloody cross? It’s in the way of my customers getting in and out at the near pumps.”

While I finished pumping gasoline into the Valiant, Jesus came out to move his cross so the long, lower end of it wouldn’t be sticking out into the lane beside the near pumps. When I went to collect the eight bucks, the driver handed me a twenty-dollar bill.

“God, who does that guy think he is?” he muttered under his breath.

“Jesus, I think.”

“Jesus the Delusional, if you ask me. I guess it takes all kinds to make a world, though.”

“I guess.”

I went into the office to make change for the twenty, and headed back out to the car.

“Sorry about laying that twenty on you so late at night, but I’ve got to have some cash for breakfast tomorrow morning.”

“No problem,” I told him. “I’ve got plenty of cash in the till right now.”

When I returned to the office, I discovered that the Jesus impersonator and the Catholic with the dying father were still busy trading insults that had to do with the One True Faith.

Then, all of a sudden, the Catholic turned to me. “What do you mean this station is a fucking foxhole?”

“It feels like one, sometimes.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I’m constantly called upon to defend it against the marauding armies of the night. You name it: guys who steal, guys who hold me up, guys who masturbate in the toilet and leave all the evidence there for me to clean up, guys who have slugged me in the face, guys who do the fill-and-dash boogie, guys who insult me and spit on me, and even worse than that. It’s a constant marauding army out there. And then, to top it all off, there are the people who come in here to bend my ear about this or that or the other thing, a service I don’t get paid for, by the way, because I’m not a goddamn psychologist, or a goddamn priest, or a goddamn rabbi, or a goddamn what-have-you, and it gets sickening, just sickening, after a while—and then there are the two of you! Why are you two here tonight? I’ll tell you why you’re here. You’re here because you want an audience. You badly want and need an audience, otherwise you’d be all alone at home with the thoughts that are crucifying you tonight. So, at some point during the evening, you thought to yourself: I know what I’ll do, I’ll go down to that all-night gas bar at Semlin and Hastings, and I’ll tell the attendant all my woes, but let me tell you guys right now, I’ve heard your stories a million times—a million bloody times or more, and they’re worse than any crucifixion, let me tell you. So, why don’t you

two guys just leave. Leave, for godsake. You,” I said, gesturing to the Jesus impersonator, “take your cross and head down the Road to Damascus. Tip over some money-lending tables in some temples, or whatever you’re intending to do. And you,” I said, now pointing at the Catholic with the dying father, “go home to your goddamn family and watch your goddamn father die and tell your goddamn sons there’s nothing worth watching on television, anyway. But leave, just leave. I want some peace and quiet, for crying out loud.”

The two of them looked at each other, and then looked at me—very significantly.

“I think he means us,” said the Jesus impersonator.

“Yeah, I think so, too.”

“Okay, we’ll give your foxhole back to you. We’re going. *Hasta la vista, ciao.*”

Jesus pulled back the door and invited the Catholic with the dying father to go through first, and then the Catholic with the dying father said, “Can I give you a ride anywhere with that cross of yours?”

“Would you mind dropping me off downtown? At Burrard and Georgia?”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Thanks. I’ll say a prayer for you.”

“No, say one for my father, instead. I’d prefer it if you did that.”

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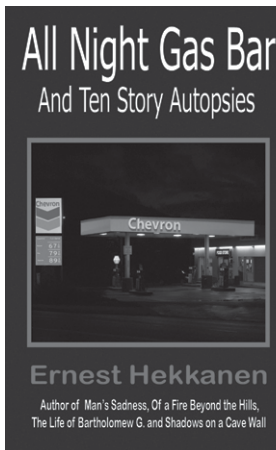
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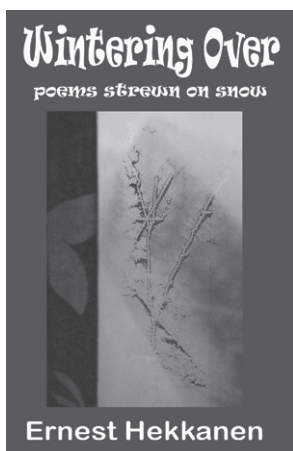
In the early 1970s, not long after arriving in Vancouver as an immigrant, Hekkanen assembled a collection of short stories entitled *All Night Gas Bar*. That manuscript was rejected by nearly every publisher in Canada, and was subsequently consigned to an archival box.

In 2010, Hekkanen stumbled upon the manuscript while throwing out some possessions. The stories seemed a little antiquated, given how much credit-card procedures had changed and how security was now being practiced at all-night service stations, but otherwise they struck him as fresh, evocative of the times and, most importantly, as pretty good tales.

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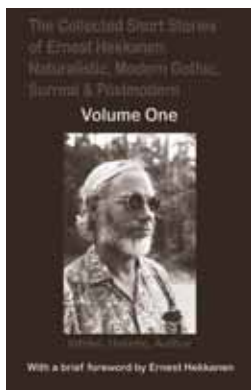
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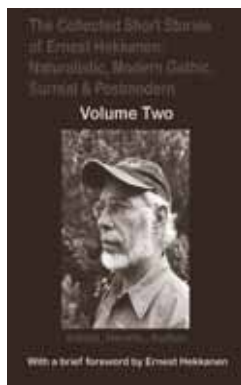
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