

The New Orphic Review

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

Literary Gift Box

Ernest Hekkanen

ONE OF THE PLEASURES that comes of being editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review* has to do with reading the outstanding poems and stories that arrive in the mail. I publish less than an eighth of what crosses my desk. Much of what is sent to me ends up in the recycling box or is enclosed in a return envelope to the author. Sometimes I'm uncertain whether I'll have enough material to flesh out an issue, and then, out of the blue, several gems will arrive, and I'll mumble to myself, "Don't these writers know how truly small and insignificant the *NOR* really is?"

The New Orphic Review is what I refer to as a 'starter' magazine. I receive a great many submissions from writers who are trying to get their first publishing credits, so they can in turn approach more amply funded magazines with covering letters to the effect that their work has been published, because, of course, the *NOR* doesn't pay. It doesn't receive grants or gaming funds, nor is it supported by an institution of higher learning. In a good year, it will break even on the money side of things, but usually the difference is financed out of the editor-in-chief's pocket.

I'm a romantic. When I heard Werner Herzog being interviewed about his memoir, *Conquest of the Useless*, which deals with the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, the Amazonian epic in which a paddle wheeler is winched up one side of a mountain and lowered down the other, my response was: "Bang on! That's what I've been doing all my life, attempting to triumph at something that is totally impractical, totally superfluous!" If the *NOR* were to fold tomorrow, it wouldn't be to anyone's grief. Its death probably wouldn't be noticed by more than a handful of subscribers and contributors, and that's why I enjoy publishing it. It flies in the face of what is necessary, of what makes economic sense, of what is absolutely necessary for daily survival!

Because I accept stories up to 10,000 words, and sometimes pieces of

even greater length, I occasionally receive some truly great material written by some truly great writers, due, I think, to the fact that they can't offload them anywhere else. A few weeks ago, Otto Penzler of *Best American Mystery Stories* phoned me up from New York City. He asked for Thomas J. Rice's phone number, mailing address and email. I was giddy with delight as I plunged my free hand into the cardboard box where I keep my correspondence, apologizing all the while for my extreme lack of orderliness. Thomas J. Rice published a story entitled "Hard Truths" in the Spring, 2011 issue of the *NOR*, an excellent piece of about 15,000 words, one that was a fictional reworking of material that appeared in his memoir, *Far From the Land*. I kept singing my praises of Rice's story as I looked for his covering letter, "Yes, isn't it a great story? The way he handles the shooting of the father and all of that Irish Republican Army stuff, well, that was masterful, if you ask me." I kept running off at the mouth until, at last, I found Rice's covering letter and was able to supply Penzler with the information he was patiently waiting for. Then I added, as a salutation, "You've made my day, absolutely made my day! To think there are people out there who actually read the *New Orphic Review*, well, I'm floored! Just floored!"

As long-time readers of *The New Orphic Review* are no doubt aware, I like to publish material of widely varying approaches and styles, from grueling realism to stream-of-consciousness, from mainstream to more experimental writing. In this issue we are publishing our first-ever suspense tale, "Crossing" by Andre Kocsis. We're also publishing a well-researched story about German prisoners of war in Canada, entitled, quite appropriately, "The Prisoners of War" by Joan Baril. Also, there's a story that seems highly autobiographical, "Cane Wood" by Stephen Howard; a novel excerpt by D. Standfast, "Medicine Rainhard"; a highly experimental story-memoir by my Associate Editor, Margrith Schraner, entitled "Changing Trains" and, finally, an amusing, fanciful little piece by Wayne Cole, "O.C.".

In addition to the above stories, I have selected a number of fine poems by an assortment of very accomplished poets, and one very unusual piece by John Laue that is difficult to categorize, but a joy to explore; and then, of course, there is our Featured Poet, Linda Crosfield, whose poem, "Salty Meringue Madness," is a metaphysician's delight. I like my semi-annual, literary gift boxes to be chock-full of disparately good stuff. Hope you enjoy this issue of the *NOR*.

ANDRE KOC SIS enjoys a peripatetic existence. Though he primarily splits his time between Whistler and the West Chilcotin region of British Columbia, he can regularly be found in other mountainous areas. His work has been published in *The Dalhousie Review*, *The New Orphic Review*, *Skyline Magazine*, *The Oak*, and *Couloir Magazine*, as well as a number of on-line publications. Currently he's working on the fourth (and, he fervently hopes, final) draft of a novel entitled *Canyon Marathon*.

CROSSING

Andre Kocsis

I'D BEEN WATCHING the bear from across the valley for almost fifteen minutes. I first saw him just above the last of the stunted jack pines, galloping along a snowy bench, and heading for the steeps. The slope above him was corrugated by a series of narrow couloirs, and I kept the binoculars on him, wondering what he would do. He hesitated not a moment, choosing a steep, tight channel in the dark rock. The increase in incline did not perturb him; he continued motoring up at a good clip. That couloir was steep—at least forty degrees. I knew. I had skied it a few weeks before.

Where was he going? There was no food up there. And why was he not holed up in a cave, anyhow? It was March—too early for him to come out.

Sometimes bears wake up, go out to explore for a while, and then go back to sleep, but this guy looked like he was on a mission.

An eagle circled far above, soaring on thermals, king of the blue sky.

When I looked back, the bear had reached the top of the couloir, and then he disappeared over the ridge. For a moment I considered putting on my skis and trying to pick up his trail, just to see what he was up to. It would have been a lot easier if I had had a dog. Well, not easier. The bear's tracks would be easy enough to follow. But a man needs a companion to go adventuring.

Someday.

Right now, it was too complicated to take care of a dog. I was up at the cabin less than half the time, and Nelson wasn't fit for humans, let alone a dog. The town was totally overrun by fat, pale tourists.

When I first moved there, in 1975, it was still a funky little place, but a third of a century has elapsed since, and a lot of things change in that much time.

On the other hand, some things don't change. The U.S. is at war again. It took just one generation to forget the lessons of Vietnam.

Ironic, that Pinto had done me a favour by ratting me out to the cops for selling him that dope. He was trying to save his own hide, but in California I still have a warrant for my arrest. I suppose I would have left anyway, when I got my draft notice.

The only thing I regret now is that I couldn't go back to see my Dad before he died last year. He was eighty-one, and he had not visited me since before Mom died, six years ago.

I put the glasses down on the rock where I'd been sitting, and went into the cabin, crouching to avoid hitting my head on the low doorframe. Calling it a cabin was generous. It was no more than a shack. I had dragged every log a couple of kilometers up from the treeline.

I still wonder whether the effort had been worthwhile. The cabin is on Crown land. I had camouflaged the roof to avoid detection from the air, but if any rangers wandered up into the alpine, they'd burn the unauthorized structure.

I was going to turn fifty-six soon. It was time I had a place of my own, but I could not imagine living anywhere except in the alpine. I wanted to buy some land, but my savings were not enough. Guiding was not exactly making me rich, and spending so much time chilling at the cabin pushed millionaire status further out of reach.

I picked up the little plastic baggie holding my dope and papers. It felt light. Moving back to the door, I held it up to the shaft of light and noted that the contents had definitely diminished since arriving a couple of weeks before.

Time to get a new supply. Time to go back to Nelson. Maybe even get some work.

* * *

Owen was an Englishman in his late thirties who ran a "collectibles" store on one of the side streets of Nelson. He sold comic books, hockey cards, vinyl records—anything he could buy for pennies and sell for big bucks. It was unclear whether selling dope supplemented the huge profits he made on the collectibles, or whether the collectibles just served as a front.

"Hey, Sierra, you're just in time," he said as I entered the dusty, poorly-lit store.

"Hi, Owen. Just in time for what?"

"A couple of blokes came in this morning. They're looking for a guide."

My clientele used to consist mainly of backcountry skiers, hunters, or fishers who wanted to spend a week in the wilderness, but in the last few years, Owen had opened up a whole new market for me. The border to the U.S. is quite mountainous in this area, making it ideal for undetected transport of B.C. Bud into Montana. Dope runners paid better than skiers,

even after the hefty commission that Owen took. (I always suspected that he also took a percentage from the clients.)

“How do I get in touch?”

“They’re coming back tomorrow. I was going to use Calvin, because I never know how to find you.”

“I’m here now.”

“So you are, buddy, so you are.” He smiled at me, revealing the narrow gap between his two front teeth. Owen had dark, curly hair, and a broad, friendly face that stood him well with the ladies. He had come to Nelson to get away from his third wife. She was still in England, working the divorce courts to squeeze more money out of Owen.

“What’s been happening?”

“Same old, same old. Bush is threatening Iran to get people’s minds off the fact that he ruined the U.S. economy. Hey, there is a meeting tonight to plan a demonstration. Are you coming?”

“I’m busy,” I lied.

“You’re constantly ceasing to amaze me, Sierra. This country gives you asylum from those warmongers, and then you just turn your back on the people that saved your ass.”

“Save it for someone who cares. I haven’t had a toke in twenty-four hours, and I’m ready to go postal. Can you front me a baggie? I’ll pay you as soon as your clients show up.”

Owen went into the back for a couple of minutes. The store had a relaxing gloom, and I surveyed the racks of comics and cards, all encased in plastic. Junk. But, people were willing to pay for it.

Owen came back, and laid a fat baggie on the counter. I immediately rolled a joint, and we passed it back and forth.

“Tell me, Sierra, have you ever done anything to fight the imperialism of your country?”

“It’s not my country, and not my business.”

“Okay, have it your way, but have you ever done anything?”

“Yeah, actually, I was part of a major conspiracy to stop the Vietnam War.”

Owen perked up at this. “Really?”

“Oh, yeah. There was a group of us in Berkeley. We were dangerous radicals. One time, we got a bunch of identical shoe boxes, like about fifty of them. Then, we took a banana, put it in a box, and sent it by first-class mail to Lyndon Johnson.”

“When did you live in Berkeley?”

“After high school.”

“You told me you were climbing in Yosemite after high school.”

“Sometimes I’d stay in Berkeley for a couple of months.”

“Oh.” Owen looked at me skeptically. “So, you sent a banana to the president of the United States. And that was supposed to stop the war?”

“No, no, there was more to it. The next day, we took another identical box, and put a banana in it, and sent that to LBJ, also by first-class mail.”

Owen took a deep drag on my joint, and handed back to me a much diminished version.

“We did this for over a month,” I continued.

“Wow! That’s perseverance.”

“You don’t get it. After doing this every day, we suddenly just stopped.”

“So?”

I took a drag on what was left of the joint, extinguished it, and put the roach into the baggie.

“That just drove them crazy,” I explained.

“Sierra, you deluded, long-haired midget, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“Well, the U.S. eventually pulled out of Vietnam, didn’t it?”

* * *

When I showed up at Owen’s store the next day, he started in on me again.

“Some people mentioned you last night. They’re wondering if you support the war in Iraq.”

“War is a delusion.”

“What? The U.S. killing people in Iraq is no delusion.”

“I’m saying that anyone who truly believes that a problem can be solved by war is deluding himself.”

Owen stared at me for a second. “I don’t know about that. I mean, sometimes you have to go to war. What if we hadn’t stopped Hitler? Were we deluded about that?”

“The delusion started with Hitler. He thought that by eliminating the Jews he’d solve Germany’s problems.”

“He didn’t believe that at all. The Jews were a convenient scapegoat.”

“Maybe for cynical leaders war is not a delusion. They may have a personal agenda that’s served by war, but for the common man, the one who has to put his life on the line, it’s a delusion. The average American soldier had more in common with the average German soldier than either of them had in common with their commanders and national leaders. They just wanted to live their lives, have enough to eat, keep their families safe. Only the leaders had ideological agendas that they valued more than the lives of their country’s citizens. That’s the tragedy of the 20th century—ideologies that were so important that no sacrifice was too great. It would have been different if the leaders had been asked to be on the front lines.”

“Sure, but you have to take a stand against evil ...”

“Any individual who sacrifices himself for a cause is deluded.”

Owen shook his head. “So you’re a pacifist?”

“Not at all. I favour individual violence. If you attack me, I will kill

you. But I will not do that for an idea.”

Owen stared at me for some moments. He shook his head again. After a long silence, he said, “You can probably bump up your rate on these people.”

“Yeah? How much?”

“Double.”

I didn’t have time to digest the implications, because just then, the door opened, and two men were silhouetted against the strong sunlight from outside. The dust in the store defined shafts of light which seemed to come from their outlines. They closed the door behind them, and the gloom in the shop was restored, the grimy glass in the door effectively blocking the sun.

Introductions were made. George was above average in height, with regular features and a dark complexion. Though he was clean-shaven, black stubble darkened his strong jaw line.

Thanh was short, about my height, and Vietnamese. He looked strong, packing lots of muscle on a small frame. He spoke without accent, but George had an inflection I couldn’t quite identify.

They did not argue with the daily rate I proposed, but there was an issue with payment.

“You’ll be paid when we meet our friends on the other side,” George said.

“Sorry,” I said. “I get paid up front.”

George stared at me, and for a moment I felt fear. There was a ruthlessness in his gaze, something that told me that this was a man who was used to being obeyed.

“Your standard arrangement assumes half the daily rate you’re charging us,” he said. I was starting to get a bad feeling.

“Maybe you need another guide, someone who’ll work for less.”

Thanh, who had not said a word, exchanged a glance with George, and then said, “We can pay half up front, half on the other side.” It was hard to tell who called the shots. Many of the grow-ops were run by Vietnamese, so it was likely that George was just a front. His aggressive manner was compensating for lack of real authority.

There would be six of them, and I would have to carry most of the food, tents, and communal gear, since they would be burdened with “personal baggage”. Another glitch developed when they insisted that I should provide transportation to the trailhead. There was no way that seven people and all the gear would fit into my beat-up Toyota. To my surprise, Owen came to the rescue.

“If we can leave early enough so that I can get back to open the store by eleven, I’ll drive you in my van.”

* * *

We arrived at the trailhead around eight in the morning. It was a clear

day, and the mountains to the south shone in their pristine majesty, but the usual feeling of anticipation that I experienced when heading into the backcountry was tempered by the business-like atmosphere of our expedition. Before driving off in his van, Owen pulled me aside.

“Be careful, Sierra,” he said once more, as we stood on the gravel shoulder of the road, away from the others.

“Jesus, Owen, don’t tell me you’re developing a conscience.”

“Fine. Fuck yourself, then.”

“You fuck yourself, too, Owen.” I smiled at him, he smiled back, and then he disappeared, trailing a cloud of blue-gray exhaust. Needs a ring job, I thought, and then I walked back to my new best friends.

In addition to George and Thanh, there was a burly Russian in his mid-forties, Yuri, and Omar, probably from the Middle East, around forty years old. The other two also looked to be from the Middle East; they were Bob, a big man, around fifty, with a scar running diagonally from his right temple across his cheek-bone, and Gord, who looked soft, and much younger, no more than thirty. Their accents contradicted their names, and I decided that “Bob” wouldn’t mind if, at least in my own mind, I called him “Scarface”.

Their ski equipment looked new and serviceable, but their packs looked like they had been picked up at an army surplus store. They were sturdy green canvas with heavy straps; not ideal for a strenuous trip in the mountains.

Since I carried our communal gear, my pack was heavy; it took a while for my muscles to adjust as we started up the steep trail. However, I quickly realized that my pace was not going to be a problem. A couple of my companions had trouble putting the skins on their skis, and Gord was in poor physical shape and had limited skiing experience. I had counted on making the crossing in three days, but packed supplies for an extra day. I started to wonder whether that margin would be sufficient.

* * *

We trudged up an abandoned logging road for the first hour, and then I cut off onto an old prospectors’ trail that led more directly to the alpine. Large cedars shut off the sky, and we made our way slowly in the silent gloom. I was in the lead, and my charges struggled in single file behind me. Periodically I’d hear someone stumble or curse as their ski became entangled in some underbrush. It was my policy to ignore minor problems. Anyone who ventures into the backcountry should put up with a reasonable amount of discomfort and frustration. Learning is motivated by the desire to avoid exactly such problems.

By noon the trees were getting smaller, and patches of sunlight dappled the snow. I had been stopping every hour, encouraging the group to hydrate, as well as to layer down to lighter clothing. Even though it was quite cold, the effort of labouring uphill with heavy packs caused the

body to overheat.

Because the trail was so narrow, these stops did not allow me to observe anyone in the party except George, who followed right behind me, and Yuri, who was behind him. They appeared to be handling the pace reasonably well, though Yuri's clothing was drenched from sweat. He had ignored my suggestion to layer down.

Around one o'clock we left the treeline behind us, and we were treated to the alpine in its full magnificence. The terrain sloped off to our right, and the steep apron of Mount Veringer rose to our left. The vista ahead revealed a series of flat snowfields intersected by deep gullies, and beyond the plateau, the snow-clad peaks this side of the U.S. border.

I called a halt, and my exhausted troops gathered while I set up my small stove and made lunch. As I waited for water to boil, I tried to assess their condition.

Yuri had changed into some dry clothes, Scarface appeared to be actually enjoying the outing, and Thanh and Omar looked tired but okay. Gord, legs splayed wide, was sitting in the snow, his back against his pack, his eyes closed, his face of a deathly pallor. George was squatting on his heels next to him, speaking in low tones right into his ear. I went over, and George looked up at me in a hostile manner.

"I can take some of his load," I suggested.

"No! He'll be okay," George said roughly, staring at me. Fine, I thought, I don't want to touch your fucking dope. I stood for a moment, looking down at Gord. He was panting rapidly. We were only half as high as we would eventually get, and already he was having trouble with the altitude.

"Is lunch ready?" George demanded.

I walked back to the stove.

Gord continued to sit with his eyes closed while the rest ate. He refused any food, and a couple of times he made dry retching sounds. George had a swift conversation with Yuri, and the Russian took something out of his pack, and then went over to Gord with a bottle of water. I saw Gord swallow something, and within fifteen minutes he made a miraculous recovery. We set out again.

* * *

I kept the group going until sunset, to make up for our slow pace, and thus we managed to cross most of the plateau.

With help from Scarface and Thanh, I made some snow platforms for the kitchen, and started melting snow to make hot tea to revive the troops. Gord was again wilting, but the others seemed in reasonable condition.

After everyone was warmed up with tea, I set up the two tents. George and Yuri hauled Gord into their tent, and put him into his sleeping bag while I prepared dinner. I threw my bag into the other tent, which was occupied by Thanh, Omar, and Scarface. George insisted that all the packs

be piled just outside his tent; he and Yuri made seats for themselves, with their backs resting against the pile. George was using his headlamp to read, every once in a while glancing up to observe our progress in the kitchen. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but I detected hostility in his look.

Yuri had taken off his toque, and I noticed that he had brown hair that started low on his forehead. The hair had been cropped short, but it was very thick, and his hat had flattened it on his head. This, along with his pointed nose, gave him a distinct resemblance to a porcupine I had once known. Yuri had picked up a tree branch somewhere along the way. He now took out a vicious-looking knife and set to whittling a series of perfectly-formed toothpicks. As the evening progressed, I noticed that when George was not looking, Yuri would furtively reach into his pack, and take a large swig from a flask.

The sky was spangled with a profusion of stars, and our open-air kitchen was humming with activity. Thanh, it turned out, was quite the cook.

“I worked in a restaurant,” he said. “That’s the only job an honours degree in philosophy prepared me for.”

“I keep hearing about doctors who come to Canada and end up driving a cab.”

“I got my degree here.”

“So you were quite young when your family came to Canada?”

Thanh did not answer. I noticed that George was glowering at him.

It took George fifteen minutes to rouse Gord, so that he could come out and have some dinner. Despite having his sleeping bag wrapped around him, Gord was shivering, and to me it looked like he had a serious fever. Yuri gave him several pills to swallow with the little food that he could gulp down.

I cleaned up the kitchen while everyone went to bed, except George, who continued to read, and Yuri, who continued to turn out his perfect toothpicks. I figured that by the end of the trip, he would have enough for a large tray of hors d’oeuvres. As I headed for my sleeping bag, I heard Yuri say something to George. I recognized the word “talk” in Russian, as well as Thanh’s name. George quickly came over as I was preparing to enter the tent that held Thanh, Omar, and Scarface. He grabbed my shoulder. I’m somewhat vertically-challenged, and as he brought his face close to mine, I had to look up to meet his glare. There was a crazy ferocity in his dark eyes, and something told me that it would take little to set him off.

“You can’t sleep in there,” he said, as he squeezed my left shoulder with what I thought was unnecessary force.

“You want me in your tent, George?” I smiled in what I thought was a seductive fashion. His expression indicated that the implied proposal did

not appeal to him.

“We only have two tents, George,” I said as I removed his hand from my shoulder.

“That’s your problem,” he said, and he walked back to his perch next to Yuri.

It took me less than half an hour to dig a snug snow-cave. I lined it with a tarp, laid my sleeping bag inside that, put my underclothes in the bottom of my bag, and crawled in. After a few minutes, I was warm, and as I lay on my stomach, I stared out the small opening of my shelter. I could see a slice of the peaks that lay to the south. They were washed in diamond moonlight, with a backdrop of velvet black sky punctured by a sprinkling of stars.

I had to revise my opinion; George was definitely in charge of this expedition. The drug industry was taking on an international flavour. Perhaps the bags were not full of B.C. bud, but a more valuable cargo from the Middle East. Maybe I should have asked for a higher fee. I wondered if Owen knew.

Yuri definitely looked like Russian mafia. Where did they figure in all this? And if, indeed, the drugs had originated in the Middle East, why bring them in via Canada?

It seemed that my meager knowledge of Russian could prove useful in the next few days.

I wondered what Lana was doing at that moment. I hadn’t thought about her in months.

* * *

Though she had escaped her Doukhobor community in the interior of B.C. when she was eighteen, Svetlana had not shed her love of Tolstoy. She taught me some Russian so that I could share her appreciation for the master, in his original language.

Lana was twenty-two, and had almost finished her nursing degree when I met her in Nelson. She was petite, and her red hair reached to her waist. Her dress and her quiet manner still spoke of her rustic origins, but there was a wilfulness, a rebellious defiance toward convention, a core of craggy determination that underlay her gentle exterior. By the time I realized the strength of her resolutions, it was too late.

She gave me six years, six years punctuated by my long absences for several first ascents in the Andes, and for a couple of expeditions to the Himalayas, six years when she never really knew whether I’d come home in a body-bag.

By that time, she was twenty-eight and I was thirty-four. In retrospect, I could see that she was right, that it was time to make a decision. But I was looking at the peaks, and did not notice that my companion was slipping from my side.

When I came back from that first Everest expedition, she had removed

all her belongings from the ramshackle house that her presence had transformed into a home. I should have gone after her. But I didn't. I was convinced that she would be back.

I went on the second Everest trip, and again failed to summit. When I came back, Lana had gone to work in the hospital in Trail. Later, I heard a rumour that she got married, but didn't believe it. I was convinced that the door was still open. By this time, I had developed something of a reputation as a climber, and I used that to tear a swath through the impressionable young women of Nelson.

I was thirty-seven when I returned from my last trip to Everest. I had a broken collarbone, and was emaciated from two months at high altitude. While I was recovering, I drove down to Rossland. I spotted Lana entering a grocery store, holding the hand of a toddler. I was about to approach her when she was joined by a tall, good-looking guy who had an infant with red hair in a back-carrier. I heard the clerk address him as Dr. Whitmore.

I walked out of the store, and drove back to Nelson at well above the speed limit.

* * *

The next day, I started breakfast before the sun rose, and we were on the trail at dawn. Long purple shadows were cast by our figures as we trudged across the snow, and cold pink light licked at the peaks ahead.

My clients shivered as they warmed up from their exertion, but seemed like they were in working condition. Even Gord moved at a steady pace, though he appeared to be something of a zombie. During breakfast, Yuri had given him some pills again.

By mid-morning we were making the first of our steeper ascents. Even I found it difficult. My pack was much too heavy, my back was starting to spasm, and my legs were burning. Maybe I was getting too old for this shit. But I thought about the piece of land I'd buy, somewhere up in the mountains, and the house I'd build.

My companions were all starting to show signs of strain. Surprisingly, Gord shuffled on much as before, his eyes glazed, and with a fixed stare ahead. Yuri was panting, and sweat poured off his face.

The slope was too steep to attack directly; our skins would not hold at that angle, and I had to serpentine back and forth. This served its purpose, but forced us to make sharp turns every ten minutes. As long as we were going straight, not much skill was required to handle the skis, but turns, many of which were almost one hundred and eighty degrees, required experience, strength, and balance. Especially with heavy packs and in steep terrain, it was easy to fall over. Getting up required removing the pack, and even thus unburdened, it took a great deal of effort to get vertical with one's tangled skis stuck in the deep snow. Each such incident was exhausting, and my companions quickly learned that it was best not to

fall over. Omar, unfortunately, fell regularly, and his legs were trembling after a couple of hours. I called for a short rest-stop, and advised everyone to hydrate and eat as much as they could from the snacks I had prepared in the morning. Yuri appeared not to need the encouragement to hydrate, as he took long swigs from his bottomless flask. I wondered how much of his pack was comprised of refills for that little silver container.

We continued on our uphill track through the rest of the morning, and we were now getting high enough so that the view was magnificent. Behind us, the flat snowfields we had crossed the previous day; ahead, a series of peaks etched in cobalt blue. Unfortunately, along with the view came the effects of less oxygen, and now even George and Scarface were visibly panting. Thanh had pain etched on his face, and though he didn't complain, he winced with every step.

When we stopped for lunch, the others collapsed onto their packs while I cooked. I noticed that Thanh took off his boots, and was examining his shins. Yuri, who seemed to be the medic, was called over for a consultation, and I joined him while I waited for water to boil.

"It's just a little bruised," Yuri said.

Both of Thanh's shins were bright red and puffy, and on his right leg, lesions were starting to appear.

"Shin bang," I said.

"What?" Yuri looked at me with hostility. His eyes were bloodshot, and he stank of booze.

"Shin bang," I repeated. "If we don't take care of it, Thanh won't be able to walk by tomorrow."

"What do you suggest, genius?" Yuri challenged. His bristly hair reminded me of that of a porcupine.

"I think we'll have to amputate," I said. When I saw the expression on Thanh's face, I realized that my attempt at humour was inappropriate.

"Just kidding. The problem is that your boot is bruising your shin, and ..."

"I told you, it's just a bruise," Yuri interrupted. By this time, George was also standing over Thanh as he sat on his pack, with his bare feet and legs raised to keep them out of the snow.

"Yes, but we have to cushion it, otherwise Thanh won't even be able to put on his boots."

I went to my pack, took out my sleeping pad, and cut two strips from the end. I put some gauze dressing around Thanh's lower leg, and used duct tape to fix the foam from my sleeping pad against his shins.

"You'll have to keep the top buckles on your boots really loose, but that foam should help," I said. Thanh looked doubtful.

* * *

We continued our climb for several hours, oxygen getting thinner with every step. The sky, which had been a brilliant cerulean blue, was starting

to take on a hazy cast. I observed that on the high sawtoothed ridge ahead of us, major cornices had formed from the action of the wind. Plumes of snow continued to be whipped off the high points along the sharp crest. I pulled my parka a little tighter around my neck, and trudged on, breaking trail in the snow which was becoming deeper as we ascended.

We finally arrived at a bench, and I called a halt. My companions collapsed onto their packs. I went over to see how Thanh was faring.

"It's better," he said, though there was still pain etched on his thin face. His high cheekbones looked white, the skin stretched taut.

Gord looked like a zombie, staring into the distance. Yuri, who made sure that he always sat behind George, took the occasional swig from his flask. George seemed tired, but that was normal.

Scarface's pack was off to the side, but he wasn't sitting on it. I looked around, and saw him standing about thirty meters away, with his back to us. At first I thought he was just being unusually modest in relieving himself, but he stood there several minutes, quite still, looking down at the snow in front of him. I walked over, and stood next to him.

In the snow directly at his feet, there was a small patch of red with a few tufts of dun fur around it, and some black pellets. Aside from our footprints, there were no tracks leading to this scene of violence.

"What the fuck is it?" I said, more to myself.

Scarface turned to me; the thin scar across his cheek and temple were particularly noticeable against the deep tan of his face.

"Rabbit," he said.

I looked around. "There are no rabbits this high. How did he get here? There're no tracks."

"Eagle," Scarface said, pointing.

And, indeed, there was a faint impression where the feathers of one wing had brushed the snow. The raptor had probably snatched the hare below the treeline, but had not completely killed it. Its struggles had forced him to drop it for an instant, while he got a better grip; he then continued on his way to his high aerie.

What terror that hare must have felt, gripped by powerful talons, its struggles futile. Then the instant of hope as the eagle dropped it, immediately dashed as the raptor took hold again. No wonder he shit himself. It was like the Angel of Death plummeting from the sky and snatching us from the life we take so much for granted.

* * *

It was a sorry-looking bunch that pulled into camp that night, but at least I was satisfied that we had a chance of getting across the border before we ran out of food. We camped at a col above a long, steep descent to the glacier below. I would have preferred to camp further down, but I was concerned about the group's ability to negotiate that difficult stretch. There were a couple of cliff bands along the way, and a stumble while skiing

down could result in a disastrous plunge. It would be safer to do this when my charges were well-rested.

The tents were set up, I made dinner with help from Thanh and Scarface, and Yuri kept drinking and making toothpicks. A typical evening in the mountains.

“How are your shins?” I asked Thanh after everyone had settled down.

“Better,” he said.

“Let me take a look,” I said.

He sat down on his pack, and I unwrapped the gauze dressing. There was some oozing of clear fluid on his right shin, but the other dressing was dry. I replaced the stained dressing with new gauze, making sure that it was quite loose, to allow a scab to form.

“Make sure we tape back the foam, before we start in the morning.”

“Thanks, Sierra.”

“You’ll be fine. You come from tough people.”

“You think so?” He raised his eyebrows quizzically.

“I visited the Cuchi Tunnels, Thanh. I have some idea.”

“You were in Vietnam?”

“I went there in 1995. I saw the War Atrocities Museum.”

The muscles in Thanh’s jaw bulged, and his face hardened, but he said nothing.

“The world should know what the Americans did. They talk about what the Germans did, or what happened in Rwanda, but no one speaks of the war crimes in Vietnam.”

“There are some things that can’t be recorded in a museum,” Thanh said, and he stood up, and walked to his tent.

* * *

During the night I dreamt that I was back on Everest. I tried to climb, but my legs would not move, and my lungs burned, screaming for oxygen. I woke with sweat streaming down my face.

I lay in the blackness of my snow-cave, trying to get calm, but I still felt like I was suffocating. And, I was hot, as if I had a fever. I groped for my headlamp under my pack, and when I switched it on, I immediately understood that I was actually suffocating. The opening to my cave was completely blocked by snow.

It took a surprising amount of effort to punch through the snow, and allow some air to flow into my burrow. With the fresh air came a blast of snow, and a high-pitched whine, as if a million banshees were screaming to gain entrance.

I pulled on my clothes and crawled out, to witness a scene of chaos. The wind was howling, and the snow was so thick I could barely see the few meters to where the two tents had been. In fact, I could not see the tents.

But it quickly became clear why. Thanh’s tent was in tatters. He,

Scarface, and Omar, were desperately trying to hold on to their sleeping bags and belongings as the raging storm tried to sweep them off the col.

There was more left of George's tent, mostly because Gord was still inside it, deep in drug-induced slumber, apparently oblivious to the howling chaos around him.

The ear-splitting din and swirling snow made communication almost impossible, but I finally organized them to dig individual snow caves, using what was left of the tents to line them. George seemed more concerned about the packs than his partners, and I had to dig a larger cave in which to store their cargo. George made sure that his cave was right next to the precious burden.

Gord was housed in the same burrow with Yuri. He had slept through the whole ordeal.

Finally, my charges were all settled, and with the storm still keeping up its infernal racket, I crawled back into my sleeping bag. I felt exhausted, with my whole body aching, but I couldn't fall asleep. I knew I had made several serious mistakes which had jeopardized the safety of my clients. This was no recreational outing but a drug-smuggling operation, but that did not mitigate my responsibility as a guide. First, I should have been more aware of the signs that a storm was coming, despite the fact that when we had left, the forecast had called for the persistence of the ridge of high pressure whose benign influence we had been enjoying. Second, I should never have camped on the col. It was too exposed. The choice had been forced on me, by trying to make maximum distance so that we would not run out of food, yet delaying the hazardous descent while my crew was exhausted. But these were excuses. I had fucked up. To top it all off, the wind and snowfall accumulation would dramatically increase the avalanche hazard for the rest of the trip. While we enjoyed the calm weather, the snowpack had been relatively stable.

* * *

When I emerged from my lair next morning, the wind had abated somewhat, but large flakes were still pouring from the sky, and visibility was minimal. As the little group huddled in what was left of the kitchen area, I suggested that we wait out the storm.

"We have to get across the border," George said. "Arrangements have been made."

"Arrangements will have to be changed," I insisted. "You can't navigate in this visibility, and there's high avalanche danger."

The others seemed convinced by my logic, but George was not giving up.

"We can navigate by GPS. How long will the avalanche danger last?"

I had to admit that it could take days for conditions to settle down, but made it clear that I was not willing to jeopardize the group's safety just to meet some artificial deadline.

“If we don’t meet our deadline, you won’t be paid.”

“If we all get killed, there’ll be nobody to pay me.”

He did not reply, but stalked off toward the cave where the packs were stored. I hesitated for a few moments, as the others muttered among themselves, and then went after George to see if I could reason with him. He was on hands and knees, crawling out of the burrow backwards, and I slowed when I saw that there was something black in his right hand. I froze when I realized it was a gun. George got to his feet, facing away from me, wiped the snow from the flat gun, and put it inside his jacket. Before he could see me, I quickly made my way back to the kitchen, and squatted down in the same place where I had been when George left.

Just as he came within earshot, I announced, “Okay, I think the storm is settling a bit. Everyone get ready. We’re leaving in half an hour.” I stood up and went back to my cave to pack.

* * *

I’ve often wondered what causes us to compound an initial mistake with progressively greater stupidity. I had put my group in jeopardy by camping on the col, and despite the fact that I knew how dangerous it was, I had been intimidated into attempting the descent in essentially white-out conditions. Though visibility was zero, all the indications for disaster would have been quite obvious even to a blind man.

Since most of our travel to this point had involved climbing, I did not have a clear idea of how well my group was able to ski downhill. The first part of the descent from the col was relatively gentle. Even with the large packs, George, Scarface and Yuri were enjoying themselves, making large swooping turns in the fresh powder. Thanh and Omar were skiing adequately, though the heavy packs, and the fact that they couldn’t see ahead of them, made them stiff and awkward.

Predictably, Gord was an utter disaster. The dosage of whatever drug they were pumping into him had been obviously reduced, in anticipation that the descent would not require as much energy as climbing. However, the man was at best a weak intermediate skier, and with the difficult conditions, this was simply not adequate. In the first hour, he fell three times. Since I was leading the group, the first time I did not realize this until word had been passed up the line. I directed the others to take a rest, while I climbed back up to where Gord was still floundering in the deep snow. He had exhausted himself trying to get up with his pack still on, and was now lying on his side, half buried. I took off his pack, pulled him out, found one of his skis which was buried in the snow, found his poles, supported him while he tried to put his skis back on, and then carried his pack down to where the others were waiting. I watched Gord ski down, and even without a pack, he was struggling. I kept yelling at him to get forward on his skis, but after a split second, he’d be leaning back again, and the skis would start to run out of control. He’d then make a sharp

turn to slow down. In powder, this is disastrous, and inevitably he'd fall over sideways. Without the pack, he'd manage to get up, but each time he was more exhausted. The ski to the others was short, but by the time we reached them, Gord's legs were trembling. I decided to wait until he recovered, and made some hot tea while we waited. In the meantime, I pondered what kind of insanity had prompted George to include this novice in his group.

I also wondered why Gord's pack was so hard. It felt more like metal containers than compressed dope.

When we set off again, I gave George my GPS, and charged him with staying on the route that I had planned. I stayed next to Gord, and tried to coach him. He fell a few more times, but his stance was improving, and because I helped him to get up each time, this was no longer taking such a toll on his energy. As well, I noticed that Yuri had laced Gord's tea with more pharmaceutical assistance.

In this way, we managed to drop about a third of the way down. The visibility was improving, with much smaller snow-flakes, and the wind had almost stopped. I could see George and the others ahead of us, and was able to ascertain that he was not straying off course. I was actually starting to believe that we could make it down to the glacier below. Crossing the glacier had its challenges, but at least it was flat. Then, there was one more modest ridge to cross, and we would be across the border.

We stopped for a short lunch. Food was getting low anyway.

I instructed the group to put their skins back on.

"What the fuck for?" George asked. "We're going downhill."

"There are some rocky parts ahead of us. It's easier to control your speed with skins."

"That's because you don't know how to ski," George said.

"Look, George, are you here for the turns, or to get across the border?"

He glared at me, but didn't reply. I saw a quick smile flit across Thanh's usually impassive face.

With the skins on, we could no longer just swoop down the slopes. We had to zig-zag to make the descent gradual, and this slowed our progress dramatically.

Despite this, there were a couple of places where we had to make a traverse on a narrow ledge with a steep slope below us. I generally stuck with Gord, and coaxed him through these spots. I kept telling him to look ahead, but somehow he could not resist occasionally glancing down the steep drop beside him. Sometimes his legs would begin to tremble, and then I would tell him to stop, breathe deeply, and would not allow him to go on until his legs were steady.

We were now descending through a light mist, but it had stopped snowing, and visibility had improved to the point that on occasion I could actually see the glacier below. Unfortunately, at our pace, we wouldn't

be able to reach it before dark, but at least I could find a more sheltered spot, in case the wind picked up. I decided to keep moving as long as possible, despite the fact that even the stronger members of our party were starting to show signs of fatigue. I called for a quick stop to allow everyone to hydrate and gulp down some food, and then we pressed on.

Gord was starting to handle the difficult parts better. Given a couple of years in the backcountry, he would probably become a competent mountaineer.

We were crossing a part which was fairly steep. I had asked the others to wait while I went ahead and packed down a firm, if narrow, traverse into the side of the steep slope. There was a cliff band above us, so there was little danger of avalanche from that direction. By cutting the snow pack with my skis, I was testing to see whether the slope below us was likely to go. If it did go, I had little hope of getting rescued by my companions. The one quick transceiver exercise we had done indicated that it would take them far too long to find and dig me out.

The slope did not slide, and I went back and instructed the group to cross one at a time, and wait for me at a protected spot ahead.

They navigated the traverse, and I could see them waiting ahead. Only Gord and I were left. I had to allow him to cross by himself, because the traverse was too narrow for two.

“Keep your weight on your downhill ski,” I said. He nodded, and started across. He was doing well, until he came to the middle. At this spot, the slope above was so steep that Gord could reach out with his left hand and almost touch the slope above him. I suppose the temptation to steady himself was too much, and he leaned in toward the mountain. Before I could warn him, his skis slid out from under him, and he started to rag-doll down the slope to his right, which was equally steep.

An experienced mountaineer would have been able to self-arrest, but Gord was anything but experienced. He kept going, flipping head over heel. While terrifying, the damage would not be severe, since the snow was soft. But, as a sudden breeze blew apart the curtain of mist, I suddenly realized that there was another rock band far below us. The slope was relatively gentle there, but Gord was heading straight for it at high speed. The small figure hit the rocks, and came to a stop. He did not move.

I quickly stripped off my skins, and skied down at full speed. Kicking off my skis and dropping my pack, I ran out into the rocks.

Gord was unconscious, but there was no sign that he had hit his head. The pack had also protected his spine. However, his right pant leg was soaked with blood. I cut away his pants, and nearly vomited. The broken end of a bone was protruding through the skin of his thigh.

I put a tourniquet on his thigh, because the blood was pulsing out of the wound. Then, I used his poles, which had been clutched in his hands, to fashion a splint.

By this time, the others had arrived. I don't know how they had come down the steep slope. In retrospect, I was amazed that we had not triggered an avalanche in the process.

* * *

We made camp on a flat spot nearby. While the rest retired to their individual snow-caves, Yuri and George conferred in Russian about Gord. I noticed that Yuri referred to him as "professor", and I finally understood why they'd bring along someone so inexperienced. They needed him to process the drugs they carried.

I was trying to make dinner from the sparse supplies we had left. Gord was laid out on the flat platform we had dug for the kitchen. Though he was unconscious, he moaned occasionally, and his breathing seemed shallow. We had to get him to a hospital soon, or he would lose his leg. Worse, he could die from shock and infection.

Yuri injected him, and Gord's breathing became more regular, and he seemed to go into a deep sleep. George told Yuri to give him another injection, setting off a rapid discussion that I couldn't follow. Yuri injected Gord again.

* * *

It took me a long time to melt the snow required to make our evening meal. We had food enough for one more day, and at best we still had two days of travel ahead of us, possibly three. The liquid would allow me to stretch the supplies.

As I went about making dinner, I tried not to think about the events of the day. I had fucked up in so many ways on this trip! If my examiners had witnessed this disaster, they would have immediately yanked my guide's ticket for incompetence. Fortunately for me, the illicit nature of the job ruled out making a report, but that didn't change the fact that, in my own heart, I knew.

Gord had been placed into Yuri's snow-cave, and appeared to be sleeping peacefully. The rest of the group gathered quietly in the kitchen to consume dinner, and eventually the big Russian joined them. When he walked past me, my nose indicated that happy hour had already started.

To my astonishment, Omar spoke to him in Russian, and then Thanh joined the conversation. I finally realized that this was a Russian mob operation, after all. Probably George, Gord, Scarface and Omar were Uzbeks or something. Where Thanh fit in was puzzling, but he spoke Russian, so he was definitely part of the organization.

While my mind was occupied with trying to sort this out, the bursts of Russian became an unintelligible background noise, and thus I was surprised when Yuri suddenly jumped on Omar, bringing him to the ground, and started to pummel his face with his big fist. After a moment of shocked hesitation, I tried to pull the big Russian off, but it wasn't until Thanh helped me that we were able to stop Yuri from totally

demolishing Omar's face. Even the two of us had difficulty restraining the bastard—he kept trying to break loose to get at Omar again, all the while screaming what I recognized as curses that called into question the sexual practices of Omar's mother. It took George to finally resolve the conflict. He simply pulled the gun that I had seen once before, issued a terse command in a low, guttural voice, and Yuri slunk off to his cave. The remains of his dinner lay spilled in the snow, so I suspect he supplemented his meal from his flask.

Omar sat on the snow, blood dripping between his fingers as he held his face. Thanh and I convinced him to let us inspect the damage; his right eye was swollen shut, a front tooth had been knocked out, and blood was streaming from his nose and mouth. As far as I could tell, his nose wasn't broken. I fixed him up as best I could. By this time it was dark, and everyone drifted off to their caves to sleep, except for Thanh, who stayed behind to clean up and help with preparing food for the next day.

"Where did you learn Russian?" I asked him.

He looked at me, and for a moment I thought I had made a mistake. "University," he finally said.

It seemed that getting information from Thanh was hopeless, and we finished our task in silence. I was about to go to my cave, but to my surprise, Thanh sat down on one of the seats we had carved out of the snow. He pulled something from his pocket. His headlamp revealed that it was five cigarettes inside a plastic bag. He carefully took one out, found a lighter, and lit it. There was evident pleasure in his features as he inhaled deeply.

"Why did you visit Vietnam?" he asked, looking at me through the tendrils of smoke drifting out of his nostrils.

"I was climbing in Asia, and I had always wanted to see the country. I heard about what the Americans did ..."

His face turned hard, and he inhaled deeply. Then he turned off his headlamp, so I could no longer make out his features. His voice had a haunting quality, disembodied, as if a specter from the past had replaced the material presence that he had presented to my eyes a few moments before.

"You don't know what the Americans did. Nobody really understands."

I was standing near him. I had switched off my headlamp earlier, and I waited in silence, not moving, not even breathing. The dark night congealed around us, except for the orange glow from the tip of Thanh's cigarette. Time stood still.

"I loved my sister. She was ten years older, like a second mother. The American soldiers came to my father's restaurant, and she served them food."

There was a long silence. The cigarette glowed bright, faded, glowed bright again.

“I tried to pull him off her, but I was small, only four years old. He smelled like rotten milk. I didn’t understand until I was much older what the soldier did. When my father found out, he went to the colonel. They offered him money, and my mother said to take it. Two weeks later my sister walked into the river.” The orange tip of the cigarette described an arc in the blackness, and was extinguished. I heard his footsteps crunching in the snow as he headed for his cave.

I stood there, motionless, for a long time.

* * *

I woke the next morning, and lay snuggled in my warm sleeping bag. I could hear that the wind had picked up during the night; the storm had regained some of its fury. I turned over on my stomach, and saw the weak grey light of dawn filtered by swirling snow. I could barely make out Yuri’s bulky form, as he crawled out of his cave, and lumbered toward the cave occupied by George.

The memory of the events of the previous day shot through me as if I had just grabbed a high-voltage cable. We had to get Gord to a hospital right away. At best we were two days from civilization, considering that we would have to carry him in some kind of toboggan. We were running out of food, and the storm would make travel almost impossible. My incompetence had created this crisis.

I shot out of my cave, and was just pulling on my jacket when I saw that Yuri and George were dragging Gord out of Yuri’s cave. I rushed over, and immediately saw that Gord was dead.

“Froze,” George said. Though Gord’s face was as white as alabaster, I could still see traces of dried foam at the corners of his lips. Only once before in my life, during my druggie days in Berkeley, had I seen a face like that.

“I’ll make a toboggan,” I said.

“What for?” George asked.

“How else are we going to carry him?”

George and Yuri exchanged glances, and suddenly I realized how naïve I had been. What did I expect? That they would take Gord to the U.S. authorities for an autopsy?

The realization that I was party to murder hit me with the force of a ten-ton truck. I stood frozen, while George and Yuri dragged the body off into the swirling snow.

I’m ashamed to say that I went back to my snow cave, took off my jacket and boots, and crawled back into the warmth of my sleeping bag. I fell asleep immediately.

* * *

When I woke again, I felt like I had been drugged. My limbs were leaden, and I had lost the desire to ever move again. I lay there for what seemed like a long time, my head pulled into the cocoon of my sleeping bag, my

eyes squeezed shut. I kept hoping it had all been a bad dream, but the howling of the wind outside pulled me back to the inescapable reality of total failure, of my culpability.

When I emerged, the full force of the storm hit me. I had to lean forward to move toward the kitchen, and I couldn't see more than a couple of meters as fat flakes were whipped into my face.

As I got closer, I saw that the whole group was gathered in the kitchen, with their packs in a circle. Were these people totally insane? There was no way we could move in such a storm. I trudged toward the group, and I could hear snatches of loud conversation above the wind, but could not make out any words. I noticed that Gord's pack was in the middle of the circle, and they were dividing up the contents among the other packs. George was just removing something; it looked like a blue metal canister. I stopped. Why would they have the drugs in metal containers? George carried the small canister as if it was quite heavy, in fact as if it was solid metal.

They had their backs to me, and, with the wind howling, did not notice my approach. I quickly retreated to my cave, crawled in, and lay there thinking for a long time. Being an incompetent guide was one thing; there's no excuse for being profoundly stupid.

* * *

I had drifted off to sleep again, and awoke to George yelling at me to wake up. He had stuck his head into my little cave, and was shaking my shoulder with a grip that was unnecessarily rough.

When I emerged, the group was assembled in the kitchen, ready to move. It was snowing, but the wind had died down. There was a small pile of personal gear—sleeping bags and clothes—which George told me to put into my pack.

I tried to talk them out of moving with such poor visibility.

“What do you suggest,” George asked, “that we sit here and starve to death?”

We made slow progress for the remainder of the day. The packs were heavier, the terrain steep, and what had happened to Gord made everyone cautious. I noticed that even Scarface, who was clearly the most experienced in the mountains, was not as fluid in his motions.

Fat flakes of snow floated down steadily, creating a many-layered arras in front of us. But, we managed to descend most of the way as it started to get dark. The curtain of snow had thinned out, and as we stood on a ridge, I saw the vast flat expanse of a glacier below us. Beyond that, I knew, was one more range, and then the U.S. border. With any luck, our ordeal would be over in two days.

* * *

I woke the next morning to find that a dense fog had settled onto the landscape. The view of the glacier from the previous evening had been

replaced by a claustrophobia-inducing closeness.

We had to make do with a sparse breakfast, and I could not hide from the others that beyond that evening, we would be running on empty. Yuri was particularly vocal in his complaints, and he no longer hid his drinking.

Because of the fog, it took us much longer than I had anticipated to descend to the glacier. Dusk caused the mist to congeal around us; we were now on the glacier, but still had most of it to cross.

The setting of the invisible sun was marked only by a gradual attenuation of the already meager light. I dropped my pack, and the others came up behind me, and unloaded their burdens as well. George, who had been at the back of the line saw us standing there, and said, "It's not time to stop yet."

"It's getting dark. I can't see where we're going," I pointed out.

"We have GPS. We gotta keep moving."

"Go ahead, George. You can lead the way."

"How much longer to the border?"

"At this rate, two more days." This raised a chorus of groans.

"Two more days, two more days. You always say two more days. Are we even going in the right direction?" George asked.

"You have the GPS. You tell me."

"We're out of food," Yuri put in.

I turned to him. "Going ahead in the dark is suicide. The glacier is full of crevasses. Better to go slow, and get there alive."

I used up the last of our food to make a thin, confused stew that night. Yuri supplemented his portion with his inexhaustible supply of vodka. He sat there, whittling on some wood that he had picked up the day before. His drinking had never created any signs of inebriation in the past, but tonight the strokes of his knife became more and more savage, and an insane expression gradually suffused his face.

I was cleaning up the dishes, and had my back to the group, but listened to the conversation, trying to pick out words from Russian that would at least indicate the general topic of the discussion. Omar drifted over to help me; his face was still a mess from the beating Yuri had administered.

"What kind of name is Sierra, anyway?" he asked at one point.

"I changed it when I came to Canada. My original name is James."

"You're not Canadian?"

"Nah. I'm a draft dodger."

"From the States?" I turned to look at him. He seemed quite agitated.

"From the States?" he repeated.

"Well, yeah."

"You're American!"

"I've been here thirty-seven years. I'm a Canadian citizen."

Omar stared at me from the one eye that wasn't swollen shut, and then walked back to the others, who were still conversing in Russian. I was

about to head off to sleep when I was confronted by George, Omar and Thanh.

George started, "You're American."

"No, I'm a Canadian citizen. What the fuck's the difference, anyway?"

Their angry expressions told me that there was a difference.

"I came here a long time ago so I wouldn't be drafted."

"But you're American," George insisted.

I decided to change tack. "Look, I have a warrant for my arrest in the U.S. for selling dope, in addition to being a draft dodger. That's why I can only take you a short way past the border. But I'll get you and your cargo there. I don't care that you're carrying drugs. I used to be a dealer myself." I had never before exaggerated my involvement with drugs.

The three of them exchanged glances. Whatever it was that they were going to do next, it didn't happen, because suddenly there was a burst of loud Russian from behind them. Yuri was half standing, knife in one hand, wood in the other, roaring at Scarface. I could make out only one word of his tirade—"Taliban". The insane expression on Yuri's face was terrifying, even from where I stood. His face was a deep red, glistening with sweat, and his eyes were tiny brown spots. His bristly hair stood on end like threatening porcupine's quills.

Scarface was sitting, impassive, except that the scar was like a white lightning bolt against the livid colour which suffused the rest of his face.

Though he was in a posture to spring on Scarface with the knife, it was unclear whether Yuri actually intended to do so. Nevertheless, in a motion which my eyes could barely follow, Scarface reached inside his parka, pulled out a black gun, and shot Yuri square in the forehead. The bullet went out the back of his skull with a spurt of blood, and Yuri, still in a squat, tumbled over backwards.

For a moment, it was as if I were in a wax museum that was displaying a tableau frozen in time. Only the crimson stain seeping from Yuri's head into the snow got larger. Scarface sat rigidly pointing his gun to where Yuri had been, and my three interrogators, half-turned toward him, looked like statues with their torsos awkwardly twisted.

Then, everyone exploded into action. George confirmed that Yuri was dead, kicking the knife in his hand away from the body, and then started shouting at Scarface, who stood with his right arm hanging limply, but still clutching the gun.

They ignored me while they stripped Yuri's body. His skin was as white as the snow around him, but I noticed a large reddish area on his back, as if he had a sunburn. Omar and Thanh burned the blood-stained clothes while Scarface and George dragged the naked body off somewhere into the darkness. The red stain in the snow was covered up, and by the time those two returned, the camp looked entirely normal. Scarface sat down and rapidly disassembled and cleaned his gun, and put it back

together. This was a man who knew his weapon.

Suddenly I was the one who felt out of his depth, as a military atmosphere suffused the camp. George issued terse orders, and the others carried them out without question. They soon turned their attention to me. My ankles and wrists were tied, and George decided that he liked my company after all, because he crawled into my cave with his sleeping bag next to mine. He had a rope tied to his wrist, the other end of which was looped around my throat. I awoke several times during the night to the sensation that I was suffocating; whenever George turned over, the loop would tighten around my neck, and I'd be forced to turn with him. Needless to say, I did not get much sleep. I guess Lana was right—I have issues about getting close.

* * *

When George and I did our synchronized crawl out of the snow-cave the next morning, we were greeted by fog that was, if anything, more dense than the day before. This was surprising. It was rare for conditions to stay stable for such an extended period, because weather systems in the mountains tend to evolve rapidly. True, we were on the glacier, which forms an extended flat area, and is more conducive to allowing a stable system.

Not that I could even tell that we were on the glacier. I could barely make out the openings to the snow caves where the others were sleeping, just five meters from me.

Our remaining provisions consisted of some coffee and a tiny bag of oatmeal, and George let me off my leash only long enough so that I could melt snow and prepare this travesty of a breakfast.

As I went about my tasks, I pondered my situation. I thought seriously about just making a break, and leaving them. Surviving without my pack would have been difficult, but not impossible. In any case, I had little doubt that George would dispose of me once I led them across the border.

However, even if I abandoned the group, there was a chance that they would survive to carry out their mission. Scarface clearly had mountaineering skills. I had to chuckle at my dilemma. Owen and the other self-righteous activists always said that we all have to choose sides at some point. Circumstances sometimes force us to make surprising choices.

As I ruminated on this, my foot came in contact with something hard that was wedged into the crack under a block of snow that I was using as a makeshift counter. I bent down. In the dim light of dawn I saw the dark handle of Yuri's knife that George had kicked away from that inert body. Looking around to make sure no one observed me, I tucked the knife inside my parka.

Later, the process of dividing up the contents of Yuri's pack took place. George tied me up again, leaving me inside my snow cave, but, even in

the mist, it was pretty obvious that it wasn't drugs they were transporting. As I peered out the opening, I could make out another blue metal canister, and something square that must have been a piece of electronics inside a layer of cushioning.

Soon we were underway again. Even under less bizarre circumstances it would have been advisable to rope ourselves together. If any of us fell into a crevasse, the others would prevent him from falling too far.

The storm a few days previously had dumped a large amount of snow over the area. This meant that the crevasses were difficult to detect. Over the winter, a snow-bridge often forms over a crack in the ice. As long as it's cold, these snowbridges are strong enough to support a person crossing them. In spring, the bridges melt, revealing the gaping openings in the deep ice of the glacier. The most dangerous time is in between. The snow hides the traps, but is not strong enough to support someone crossing over them.

We trudged along almost in lock-step, one long rope looped through the climbing harnesses that we all wore. I was in the lead, with George behind me, followed by Omar, Thanh, and then Scarface at the back.

Progress was slow, because of the poor visibility. Scarface had the GPS, and he occasionally shouted to me if I wandered too far from the correct heading. His voice sounded as if it came from another world, muffled by the fog. I could see no more than a couple of meters ahead, and when I looked back, I could see George, but Omar was a dark blur, and my eyes could not penetrate to see Thanh or Scarface.

George called for frequent stops. Their packs were obscenely heavy, having increased fifty per cent as their numbers dropped. Mine, in contrast, got lighter as we used up all our food, since they were unwilling to trust me with their lethal cargo.

In the dull rhythm of putting one ski in front of the other, I had lots of time to consider exactly what these men were carrying. The red marks on Yuri's back looked like radiation burns to my inexperienced eye.

We stopped again after a while, sitting in a circle, sipping from our water bottles. There was some discussion in Russian, which may have concerned sharing the load with me. The only decision made was to put Scarface immediately behind me, thus leaving Thanh at the end. There was a fair amount of loose snow from the storm, and breaking trail made the going harder. The farther back in the line one was, the more packed the trail.

"How much longer until we get out of this fog?" George asked.

"It looks like it's settled onto the glacier for good. Once we start climbing, we'll probably get above it."

"How long?"

"Maybe seven kilometers. Depends on how fast we go."

He scowled, and then gave the order to move.

About a half hour later, as my right ski slid forward, I thought I heard a soft crunch in the snow under me. My numbed brain took a moment to decipher the meaning of this sound, but my body kept its rhythm, one ski ahead of the other, and an instant later I heard a louder crack behind me. Instinctively, I threw myself to the ground, kicked off my skis, and dug my heels into the snow; at the same time, both of my hands grabbed the rope connecting me to the others. There was a violent yank on the rope, only a little of which I was able to absorb with my arms. I was being pulled back, my heels making deep grooves in the packed snow, as I slid toward a wide black opening. On the other side of the gap, I could make out Thanh, in much the same situation. We continued to skid, from opposite sides, toward the edge of the crevasse, pulled by the weight of the three men dangling on our rope.

For a moment, the mist thinned, and I could clearly see the horror in Thanh's eyes as I swiftly pulled out Yuri's knife and cut the rope. Thanh struggled, but even for the two of us the weight had been too much. Thanh's face had a look of reproach as he disappeared over the lip of the crevasse.

I scrambled farther away from the edge, taking my skis with me. I dug a trench parallel to the opening, tied another rope to my skis, and then buried them to form an anchor. Using the rope as a belay, I crawled on my stomach until I could look over the lip.

The crevasse was very deep, and the walls were almost vertical. Not even Joe Simpson could climb out of it. I could barely see Thanh lying face down deep below, on a narrow ledge. He looked to be unconscious, and there was a red smear near his face. I couldn't even see the others.

I crawled back to my pack, dug out the skis, put them on, and started trudging toward the border. I could sneak into some small town, pick up a few supplies, and then head back to Nelson.

The rhythm of my motion provided a hypnotic background to the thoughts swirling around in my head. I had deliberately killed four people, yet I felt no guilt. For one thing, Thanh and I could not have held the other three, so the alternative was that all five of us would die.

But I had to admit that even if there had been a way to save the others, I would not have done it. Like Oetzi, their bodies, along with their lethal cargo, would be spit out by the glacier in a few thousand years. I wondered if any humans would be left to find them.

As a kid, during the Cold War, I had lived with the constant threat of nuclear war. It had been averted, and we believed we had emerged into a new era of tranquility, where we would not have to be thinking about death from an outside, impersonal force. But we were wrong.

Terrorism became the new boogie man. It made me think of Orwell's *1984*; our government always finds some outside threat, so that we stay docile.

I'm tired of being held hostage to someone else's fanatical ideas,

whether it's some desperate character in the Middle East, or some religious zealot in Washington. I'd rather face any danger in the wilderness than be hostage to their insanity.

I thought about what had held those six disparate men together. After all, Yuri and Scarface had most likely fought on opposite sides in Afghanistan. And how did Thanh fit in?

There was only one logical explanation. Their blind hatred of the U.S. was the bond that could overwhelm even their own natural antipathy toward each other.

I wondered what Owen would say now, about my lack of political commitment.

Sometimes we're forced to take sides, even if it's just for a few split seconds. But that doesn't obligate me to buy into the rest of the bullshit.

As soon as I get back to Nelson, I'm heading for high ground. If I'm lucky, I'll have a few years before the serious shit begins.

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Robert Cooperman / Four Poems

Selax, One of Odysseus' Crew, Turned Into a Leopard by Circe

At first, I pleaded in my strange new voice
that roared so fiercely it terrified me.
Too, I shrank from being fed some shipmates
transformed into swine: their cries pitiful
before they were bled, the meat tossed to me.

But I got used to the fare, and used as well
to no longer being a man, but a beast
with a roar that made lesser beasts panic.
Best, Circe and her handmaids would shape-shift,
the witch a black panther so sleek I'd lick
her fur, so she'd purr, before we mated.

Why I wanted to be a man again
I've forgotten, now that shipmates embark
with Odysseus: too many dangers:
their sojourn amid the pampered herd sacred
to Geryon too great a temptation for them.
They'll enrage the god by cattle-feasting
while Odysseus consults Tiresias
in the dark prophetic realm of Hades.

No, far better to remain a leopard.
Let the others sail off to certain death;
I'll lie beside Circe: the fire, star-dancing;
then, she'll call on her maidens to bathe her
in milk, then change into that black panther
and we'll cavort, then listen to her nymphs

play upon golden lyres and make up tales:

some about Troy, so a tear might trickle
down my snout, but I'll forget those lost years,
and purr at the beauty of the plucked tunes,
the music of the words that have nothing
to do with me or whatever I once was.

Leonides, Bard of Ithaca,
Asks To Hear the Sirens' Songs

“Lord Odysseus, tie me to the mast
as well, so I can hear their temptress tunes:
my bard’s duty to judge their trickery,
their songs that other mortals succumb to,
when the jades play on the longings of men
desperate to see their loved ones and homes.

“I can withstand their lies, as a seer
can read the stars, inspect entrails, or study
falcons and doves, to determine men’s fates.
I’ll prove I’m more than the match of women
perched on rocks: vultures amid their own shit;
they’ll never tempt me to beg for my bonds
to be undone and swim to rocky doom.

“Indeed, leave my hands free to pluck my lyre;
I’ll make them weep for their heartless cheap joy:
to coax men to swim to them, to be smashed
on the cliffs that line their treacherous shore.
My songs will shame their lying doggerel.

“Lord Odysseus, I beg you, don’t stop
up my ears, for that would cede the battle
to these smirky vixen-faced temptresses.
No, don’t take my lyre, nor stop up my mouth:
my only weapons against these witches.
You fighters wield swords, but I’ve only words
and songs, and my brain that leaps from one image
to the next like an ibex on rocky cliffs.

“Thank you, My Lord; I’ll make you proud, will pile
honors to the name of Odysseus,
whose bard is the finest in Achaea,
where epics are composed, to please the gods.”

Odysseus Regrets Allowing the Bard Leonides Listen to the Sirens' Songs

Poor fool, filled past the brim with a bard's pride,
and I the stupid agent of his doom
when he insisted I let him listen
to the Sirens' taunting airs and graces.
As his lord, I should've told him to row,
ears wax-stuffed against the Sirens' taunting,
but I wished to command his melodies
to induce them to swim out to our ships
and rid these straits of their honeyed venom.

So I let him listen, left his hands free
to pluck his lyre, but he unloosed his bonds,
and dove overboard, hearing nothing save
the Sirens, their words snaking, licking him—
that he'd find the joys of home on their shore,
that they would give him his wife to lie with,
his children to bounce like fearless horsemen
on his knees, that he'd have rest from his toils.

He found boulders sharper than Hector's sword,
harder than the axe that Aeneas wielded,
swifter than Paris' deadly arrows.
Those hideous sisters dove into the surf
churning as if with scores of sharks, to leave
nothing of poor Leonides, not even
his bones for us to bury, as befits
one who honored us all with his poems,
who'd cheered us with drinking-songs between battles,
helped us mourn dead friends, with tales of their deeds.

When we'd finally rowed past that cliff-lair,
I had my men untie me; all we heard,
the slap of waves, the bullwhip-snap of sails.
Then we shipped oars, to weep and remember.

The Lotos Eaters Begin to Complain About the Presence of Odysseus and His Shipmates

Like all mortals, they overindulge, eat
so much of the sacred plant they collapse
onto our laps and snort the laughter of boors;
thus disturb our rest, invade our soothing dreams
of soft waves; of combing goddess' tresses
before we make languourous love to them.

Worse yet, these louts trample the holy plants,
so ruin future crops, then burst into tears
and demand forgiveness, shove dagger hafts
at our spongy hands: justice too much effort.
Worst of all is their shouts to serving maids
to bring more and more, as if our supply
inexhaustible as Zeus's ambrosia.

Their leader, Odysseus, recounts his exploits
as if we care this Troy was once a wonder
that these creatures helped reduce to rubble.
Always their way: first, they see something lovely;
then, all they can think is how to wreck it.

We close weary eyes, try to shut our ears,
breathe deeply of the peace we remembered
before their wolf ships scraped across our strand.

"Take your tales," we tell them, "of war's glory,
of contending with monsters, of heroes' quests.
Take them all; leave us our dreams of grass waving
like the sea when breezes ruffle its surface,
of maids with kisses sweet as berry juice.

"Surely," we hiss, "your women and children
wait, fretting for your return. Go to them
and leave us, leave us, leave us—in peace."

JOAN M. BARIL's work has appeared in many magazines including *Room, Other Voices, NOWW Magazine, Canadian Forum, Herizons, The Story Teller, The Copperfield Review, Ten Stories High* and *The Artery*, as well as three literary anthologies. For ten years, she did columns in *Thunder Bay Post, Hot Flash* and *Northern Woman's Journal* on women's and immigrant issues. She blogs at Literary Thunder Bay (www.literarythunderbay.com).

The Prisoners of War

Joan M. Baril

AS HE WAKES, the knife blade at his neck shimmers away. His hand flies up to the scars on his shoulder as the sweat slicks across his forehead. Something stops him from shouting out. It's the goose feather quilt. He runs his fingers across it. Soft. Soft as a cloud, soft as his wife's skin and as far away from Camp Neys as the moon is from hell. The rasping of his breath slows.

He sits up, pulling a corner of the sheet to wipe his sweaty face. It's still dark but a grey tint shows at the window. A crow caws and then another. From the barn, the lowing of a cow. Out of the darkness, a rooster snaps the April air awake. He takes a few deep breaths to clear away the nightmare and bring in the smell of the attic bedroom, the soft musk of an old house and the mothball odor of the clothes that Helena set out for him on the chair beside the bed.

"Martin, you landed on your feet, right enough," he thinks.

He remembers the night before, walking up the muddy lane to the lights of the farmhouse that were pointed out to him when they stopped the train. April 16, 1944 and a cold Canadian spring evening. No use trying to escape; he has no idea where he is.

The woman's voice had a gentle lilt, startling in contrast to three years of prison voices. *"Hello, come in. You've arrived at last. Willkommen. Willkommen."* A feminine voice like the song of a bird in the small kitchen and then a child's voice piping, *"Hello, Herr Martin, willkommen,"* and the light in the kitchen dances in a blur. He stands by the door on the woven mat, takes off the grey-blue mackinaw with the red circle on the back and bends to untie his muddy boots.

A family kitchen, the first he's seen for five years or more. Familiar farmhouse smells of burning wood, coffee, leather boots and shoes in the corner. A faint background smell of animals. He'd been told there were a dozen or more cows in the barn. A much smaller kitchen than the one at

home in Germany and much poorer—he understands that at first glance. Standing on the yellow linoleum, he’s surrounded by a crescent of furniture close enough to touch: a painted kitchen dresser, a walnut chest of drawers, a wood stove and, in the corner by the stairs, a small refrigerator, the source of the humming sound that fills the room.

She’s by the wooden table, a small woman in a heavy plaid shirt, brown hair to her shoulders, a heart-shaped face with large wary eyes. Beside her is a boy of about ten, a skinny kid shyly waving one hand at him, a big smile on his face. The child has the same brown eyes as the mother but darker hair, spiky on his head like early summer grass.

“I’m Helena,” she says, pointing to herself. “Sit down here. I’ll get you a bowl of soup. The train was a little late but Ken really wanted to wait and have supper with you.” He understands only the word ‘*soup*’ and sits on the wooden chair pointed out to him.

Danke, danke, she says.

Why is she thanking him?

He can’t help laughing and they both laugh back. *Danke, danke*, they say to each other as he eats the soup and homemade bread. *Danke*.

Now, five years later, in the Arthur Café in downtown Port Arthur, she leans across the booth. “Your English, Martin. It’s wonderful.” The same lilt in her voice but her face looks softer than he remembers, rounder and, surprisingly, more youthful. Her hair is still long and glossy and he wants to reach out and touch it. Again the laugh he knows so well. He must attend to the menu or he’ll break out in tears.

“Everything I know,” he says, “I learned from Ken here and Eaton’s catalogue.”

The boy, half grown now and sitting in the booth beside his mother, stares hard at him.

Martin recites with a slight pause between each word, “Ladies’ bloomers, regulation cotton, for the mature figure.”

“I remember, I remember,” Ken says. He imitates a German accent. “Extra outsize, 48 to 51.” They laugh. “You memorized half the catalogue,” the boy says. “And Parcheesi, do you remember playing with me? I was crazy about that game. I could play all night.”

“I recall a game or two,” Martin says.

“More like half a million.” Ken runs his hand over his shock of dark hair. “So much happened after you left, it just blew a lot of stuff out of my mind.” He glances at his mother as if for permission and then resumes. “First Karl and Beth going off and then you leaving and then Bonnie was born. It all changed so fast. Grandpa died. I went to live in town. The war ended and Uncle Marc...” His voice trails away.

Bonnie?

With a quick glance at the door, she puts her hand out and strokes his

upper arm. She's on the lookout for her husband, he thinks. It's very quick and the hand is withdrawn.

Danke, he says but he shouldn't have. Now *her* eyes hold the tears.

A man comes in the café with a blond girl about five years old. "This is my husband," Helena says "and this is my daughter, Bonnie."

Martin stands and shakes hands with the tall heavy-set husband, at the same time thinking this guy couldn't be the farmer, the knife-faced fellow whose photo was on the wall in her bedroom. He manages a smile for the little girl, searching for a resemblance. She's about the right age but she's thin and small-boned with startling blue eyes while he is as dark-haired as a raven and as hefty as a tank. *Of course, looks prove nothing*, he thinks. *Oh God, what next?* His heart feels as if it's taken an electric shock.

The husband leans into the booth and drops a quick kiss on Helena's hair. "I'm taking Ken off to get his school shoes," he says to his wife, "so you and Mr. Mueller here can catch up. And I'll get Bonnie a milkshake to calm her down before she falls over." The little girl is twirling on a stool at the counter but brakes with both heels when she hears the word "milkshake." Ken slides out of the booth and Martin sees how tall he is now, close to 1.8 meters, he estimates, a good height for a 15-year old. The youth waves on the way out.

He turns back to Helena and they both speak at the same time. "What happened to Karl?" she says. "Did you ever find him?"

"What happened to Beth?" he says.

He was a German merchant seaman and, in August 1940, taken off the coast of Africa, sent first to Britain where prisoners got 1000 calories a day and then to Neys Camp 100, wherever that was, he's still not sure. Somewhere on the shore of Lake Superior. Plenty of rock, bush and sky and above all food: piles of flour slabs called pancakes, a sweet sauce on top, big glasses of thick milk with the yellow cream floating, apple schnitzel as good as his grandmother's made by the German cook, slabs of roast pork as big as the plate. Paradise was a potato mountain dripping with gravy, an archipelago of blueberry tortes in a line on the side table, a river of coffee.

A few weeks later, when he became a lumberjack working for the Pigeon River Timber Company in Camp 67 somewhere inland, he saw the Canadian guys leave food on their plates. He sneaked the half-eaten bread and the crust end of pie back to his bunk and hid them. After a week, he realized his foolishness; in Canada, paradise was unending. When he thought no one was looking, he threw his collection of moldy crusts and bits of squashed pie into the trash bin.

They made fifty cents a day cutting a cord but he often worked on into the evening cutting more, and the company foreman, Smokey Grannis,

was happy to slip him a dollar and slap him on the back. "Give'er Martin. You giv'er shit." These were his first English words. He sent for a shirt from the Eaton's catalogue, one that did not have a red circle on the back.

This was before the Category Blacks (mine Über Fuehrer Dieter Arnim and his Afrika Korps thugs) arrived in the camp. Soon Arnim had them all Heil Hitlering to each other out in the snow with their cross-cut saws.

"You'll be Heil Hitlering to the goddamn horses next," Martin said.

"Jew lover," Arnim sneered when Martin told him the war was lost. "We are advancing, we are winning," but he and his hangers-on could do nothing, not with the Canadian Veterans' Guard guy lounging on a log within earshot and Smokey Grannis driving in the horses from the other side of the clearing.

"Hamburg is now rubble, thanks to you," Martin yelled back. "Flames higher than the tower of St. Michaeliskirche, a firestorm covering the city and sucking the air out of people's lungs. Folks on the street bursting into flame, flaring up like torches. Then, then..." he paused to grab a breath, "the RAF drops a burning jelly that sticks to your skin. You die slower." He raised his arms to the sky. "Oh, thank you, Herr Hitler, the saviour of the country, the protector of the German race..."

"Shut up," Arnim screamed. "Shut up with your Jew propaganda."

Martin turned his back, raised his arm, Heil Hitlered a spruce tree and then lifted the ax. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Smokey laughing.

But, that evening, while he ate in the mess hut, someone searched his bunk for the little radio, found it, smashed it and stuck the pieces under the grey blanket. His friend, Hans, also from Hamburg, who translated the English news broadcasts for him, trembled and changed immediately from a Category White to Category Black. "For the love of Christ, Martin, you've got to keep your head down and your trap shut. They're fanatics. They'll kill you if they get a chance."

He decided to hell with it and set about scrounging for new radio components but this time without help. Everyone was afraid.

The war would be over in six weeks at the most. He'd just keep doing the extra work, save up the money and get so damned tired at night he'd fall asleep at once without thinking about his wife and parents on the farm not three kilometers from Hamburg, or his sister with her three kids living a block from the Jungfernstieg. There might be a letter the next day; that was the only thought he allowed himself. *There might be a better tomorrow.*

But there wasn't a better tomorrow. Smokey's cough turned out to be tuberculosis and not the result of a weekly flat fifty of MacDonald's Fine Cut. Overnight, the lumber camp was closed. They were marched to the train, taken to Port Arthur to be X-rayed and then back to Neys. Arnim was appointed Camp Leader and the Blacks took over completely. Martin and the few others like him who were classified as Whites or anti-Nazi

knew their lives were on the line; those classified as Grey's turned a bit Blacker every day. The smell of fear in the huts was nauseating, especially after lights out.

They got him at night. They pulled him out of the bunk and all he heard, before he started to fight back, was: "Are you ready for your trial, Jew-loving traitor?"

Thankfully he was strong from the good food and outdoor work and the noise alerted the Canadian guards. They were all decent, friendly types but they seldom came into the barracks, preferring to leave the day-to-day management of the prisoners to the German officers.

When they burst through the door, the Africa Korps bastards scattered like rats but the guards rounded them up for a roll call and then searched the hut with unusual thoroughness. They found his few bits of wire for the new radio, but they also pulled out one of Smokey's tin cigarette boxes, flattened and pushed between two floor boards. It startled him; the thing could easily be shaped into a weapon. How many more were hidden somewhere?

It was not a complete surprise that the next time they came for him, they had a knife.

After the soup, the barn and thirteen cows. She hands him a pail and they milk and Ken carries the full pails outside to the large milk cans set on a wooden cart. *Danke*, he says after the first pail. "Thanks".

The husband is one shitty farmer—all dirty, even the cows and the floor encrusted with cow shit. Junk here and there although the pails seem clean. When they're finished, they stand outside the barn looking across the dark snowy fields towards the road, waiting for something. It's the first time he's had a chance to stand close to her and even in the sharp air he can smell her—milk and soap.

Tiny bells jingle in the dark and a work horse emerges into the lantern light. Two people are riding high up, one of them a slight blond man who jumps off as lightly as a circus performer and then reaches up towards a woman who leaps into his arms with perfect confidence. Like the lady on the trapeze, Martin thinks.

The young man clicks the heels of his boots. "Able Seaman Karl Hansen, Merchant Marine," he says, spinning round to show Martin the red circle on the back of his jacket. "Willkommen, dear comrade-in-arms, and Heil fucking Hitler to you, too." Out of his startling relief to hear German spoken and also to find a comrade, Martin discovers himself without a word in his throat. He's barely able to snap out, "Chief Petty Officer Mueller, Merchant Marine."

"Yes sir," the young man says but with a cheeky grin on his mobile face.

"Right, right," Martin says in German. "We're at the end of the known

world here and also both politically as white as the Canadian snow, I believe. *Du* if you please,” making the relationship instantly informal.

Danke. The blond acrobat makes a sweeping bow towards the woman who came with him on the horse. “This is Beth Cloutier, Helena’s sister.” Beth, a small and shapely figure in the lamplight gives him a little wave. “Helena and young Ken, you’ve met.”

Within five minutes, Karl has the little milk cart hitched to the horse, waves and calls out in rapid English to the three Canadians, motions Martin to come along and, holding the horse’s head, they move off down the track. When he looks back, Martin sees the circle of lamp light move toward the house and three elongated shadows sliding beside three silhouettes.

Karl and he haven’t far to go, just across the road to the train tracks. There, as Buddy, the horse, waits patiently, they muscle the milk cans onto a high platform. Although the sky is dark, the white snow gives off enough light for the task. Snow is the light of the Canadian world, Martin muses. At the same time, he listens to Karl’s rapid talk.

“Grew up on a farm in East Prussia, joined the Merchant Marine as soon as I hit eighteen and was captured when my ship was torpedoed off the coast of Greenland. Just like that. One, two, three. So then,” Karl pauses to take a breath, “two years in a prison camp in Scotland before ending up in Canada and, in a sort of fluke, they were looking for farm hands and I’m sent here. Luck can hit you like a bolt of lightning.” He laughs. “I was the tree.”

He takes out a pack of Players, holds out the open end to Martin who refuses. The match flares and Buddy turns his head snuffling out a puff of steam. “Great cigarettes here,” Karl says as he blows white smoke into the clear air. “And nice liquor. It’s called rye. We’ll have some later. Good food too, not as varied as the camps because a lot of stuff is rationed, but the girls are terrific cooks. And tonight,” he gives a few skips in the trampled snow beside the tracks, his cigarette tracing light streaks around him, “we’ll play cards. We’ll teach you canasta and maybe a few English words to boot. And then,” he says, “after the kid goes to bed, bath night for Beth and me.”

“Bath night?” The guy is like a firefly, dancing in place, his cigarette end swooping here and there.

“Yeah. Have you seen the bathtub that Helena’s husband put in? And the monster electric water heater as well? You could wash a cow in there. Lousy farmer but he liked his comforts: fridge for his beer, no electricity in the barn, you get the picture.” The cigarette flashes in a circle.

How young he is, Martin thinks, not more than twenty-two or -three. He feels large and old beside him. “Where the hell are we?” he says.

The younger man laughs. “It’s not downtown Danzig, let me tell you.

The entire area is called Rowan. The sisters grew up in the bigger farmhouse that way.” He points the cigarette end down the road. “Going the other way a couple of kilometers along you come to the train station, Ken’s school, a pathetic broken-down store with nothing much in it and four houses, three of them boarded up because everyone is moving to town to pick up the good war jobs.

“Beth and her husband, Marc Cloutier, ran the farm with the old father; the mother dead long ago. They’ve got two boys, young teenagers, who live in Port Arthur with the father’s sister and go to high school there.

“Anyway, comes the war. Cloutier joins and gets captured almost as soon as his outfit lands in Hong Kong. No luck there. So the old man and Beth try to run both farms with the help of Helena and her useless husband. But it gets too hard for the old man so Beth goes to town to ask for a prisoner-of-war farm worker.”

He takes a long meditative drag on the cigarette.

“That’s when I arrive. Two years back. Everything O.K until three weeks ago when all hell breaks loose. Helena’s husband gets the big money job and buggers off to Ottawa—as a farm expert, if you can believe it. Has some kind of degree in agriculture.” He shakes his head. “Incredible.

“A week later, the old man has a stroke and has to be moved to the hospital in town. And that’s where you come in.” Karl cups the cigarette, holding it with his fingertips to get the last drags. “Helena, this time, heads off to the Current River Camp in town and asks for a farm hand.”

Martin shakes his head, confused. “You’re telling me we’re alone out here—no husbands?” All along, he was expecting a man or perhaps two men to materialize from somewhere.

“Nope. No husbands.”

“What? We’re the enemy, right? And they trust us out here with two women and a boy?”

Karl tosses the cigarette butt into the snow. “God knows how they think, but here we are. Maybe they think the grandfather is still living on the farm.” He pauses. “Helena omitted that scrap of information—the fact the old man’s in hospital. She told them he was sick, can’t do much work, that’s all. Anyway, they don’t record where people are living. These Canadians have no organization. They don’t keep track of things. It works in our favour, in fact.” He pauses again, taking a few steps, spinning back. “On the other hand, maybe they don’t give a shit. Canada’s food production comes first, as they say on the radio. We’ve got twenty-five cows out here. That’s what’s important to them.”

“I still don’t get it,” Martin says. “It would be a snap to escape. Why haven’t you done that, Able Seaman Hansen?”

“You want to escape, Chief Petty Officer Mueller, go ahead. If you make it, the dear Fuehrer will reward you well. A nice trip to the Eastern Front where you’ll be captured by the Russians who’ll slit your throat

like a dog. As for me, I'm definitely planning to escape. I'll be heading west to Winnipeg, but not now. Later."

"Later? What do you mean?"

"When the war is over, Colleague, when it all stops. I'm not going to be repatriated, thank you, and certainly not to East Prussia which I hear from the radio will soon be a Russian colony and therefore a pile of corpses. Look, when you land in paradise, you sit down. I'm in paradise now. My English is getting better every day. When the final whistle blows, I'm melting like a lump of lard into the big Canadian goulash out there."

The blinding eye of the train lights up the spruce trees and arrives in a roar of steam. It slows for only a few minutes, shaking and huffing, just time enough to get the heavy milk cans on. It starts moving out even as the empty cans for the next milking are pushed off.

Their boots crackle the freezing slush as they lead Buddy and the rattling cart of cans up the ruts of the drive. Martin is still trying to puzzle things through.

"What I don't understand is why work two farms," he says. "Why not move into one until the husbands come back from the war?"

"Can't," Karl says. "Houses are too small and neither barn would hold twenty-five cows. No building materials available to do anything about it. Your farm has the good well and plenty of water, ours goes dry in the summer. We have the big fields enough for both and, believe me, you need lots of hay in this climate to get those cows through the winter. Helena has the chickens; we have the pigs. What could be better?"

Later, when he thinks back to his life in Rowan, his first thought is Helena, her small body curving under his, her brown hair on the pillow like angel wings, her large eyes shining. Next, his memory arrows into the sheer heart-stopping joy of that first evening in Helena's kitchen.

No night on the Reeperbahn, no evening at the wildest beer hall in the Port of Hamburg could compare. The wooden table is pulled into the middle of the floor and they all hunch around it, cards in hands. The bottle of rye sits in the centre beside a plate of cheese sandwiches. Another plate with butter tarts is within arm's reach on the kitchen dresser. The coffee is on the woodstove. The card game, an incomprehensible Canadian concoction, creates a lot of yelling and slamming of cards. Karl gets so excited when he wins, he runs to the end of the room and does a little polka and then a present-arms routine, clicking his heels on the linoleum like a Prussian officer.

Young Ken sits beside Martin to help him with his cards. The kid plays as well as the adults, and Martin soon amasses a pile of Canadian coppers. However, at the end of the evening all these riches go back into a big jar they call the kitty, ready for the next game.

When the boy is sent, protesting, off to his bed, a tiny cot in the miniscule living room, all four adults cram into the bathroom under the

stairs to watch the vast claw-footed tub filling with hot water from a heater that stands as high as the ceiling. Karl sits on the toilet seat to take off his socks; Beth slips the bobby pins from her hair, putting them one by one on the shelf over the sink. The smell of the hot water and the women so close are overwhelming him. Also, it's obvious Karl and Beth will be bathing together. The tub is big enough for both. His thoughts are glued on Helena. She's wearing a dark red dress and she looks much slimmer than in the heavy work clothes she wore in the barn. He wants to smooth his arm around the curve of her waist, undo the sash at the back, the buttons rounding over her breasts in the front. Instead he sips some of the strange rye from his glass and decides he likes its sharp bite.

"Gut," he says lifting his glass. "Ya, gut." He takes a drink. "Give'er shit," he says using his single English sentence. They almost fall over laughing.

* * *

The days are exactly what he needs. Plenty of work. He soon has the barn cleaned and the cows as well. He shovels a mountain of fresh manure out the back and spreads the old stuff on the snow covering the vegetable and flower gardens. He repairs the pump house and cleans the pump and splits all the wood in the wood shed, piling it in Canadian fashion as he was taught in Camp 67. No letters from Germany are forwarded from the Red Cross.

Spring evolves. The snow disappears. The cows spend their days outside in the high rolling fields or clustered around the pond near the road. Their milk is thick and full of cream, almost like the milk at home. A big rhubarb plant beside the house unfurls and Helena cuts the stalks to make a tart-tasting pie and a strange jam with walnuts in it. Ken eats the bitter stalks raw by dipping the ends in sugar. The air smells sappy from the new buds on the poplars beside the house. The first black flies arrive.

Everything needs painting inside and out. Perhaps, he asks Karl to translate, the next time Beth takes the train to town to visit her father in the hospital and her boys at the Aunt's place, could she bring back some paint? He has visions of a clean white barn like those at home, the floors washed down every day.

He finds the rusty tractor that Helena's husband parked in the bush without even a tarp to cover it. It takes him a week to get it going but now he can take their milk cans to the train himself. Usually Karl is there before him, anxious to fill him in on all the war news from the radio. A second front is coming. Karl is certain the allies will land in France somewhere. "And one of us at least got some news," Karl says, holding out the letter from his parents dated three months before. They and his sisters are at the port of Memel on the Baltic waiting for a ship to take them from East Prussia and the advancing Russian armies.

"God help them," Martin says. His own family has fallen away into a

pit of silence.

On the other hand, four weeks of work and the farm looks good, he thinks. That morning he takes the tractor and cart to get gravel from the pit past Beth's house at the end of the road. He shovels it onto the drive to make a roadway instead of the clay quagmire it became with the melt. On the way to lunch with Helena, he feels he's walking through air as textured and soft as a blanket. He's moving into the centre point of his day, the hour after lunch in her double bed. Later, he'll remember every move, every smell and curve of her body. He'll recall every inch of the bedroom, the peeling pink calcimine, the crocheted curtains, the blinds that let strips of sun run across their bodies and the trembling wind sounds of the poplars outside. He plans to wallpaper that room. He wants to cover the walls and ceiling with flowers.

It started two weeks before at lunch, the laziest part of the day with just the two of them at the table because Ken ate at school. Their conversation consists of single words, his English working overtime. He can't help watching her mobile face, her darting smiles. He reaches for the cream and, without paying attention, pours it on the table cloth missing his coffee cup completely. They both jump up for a cloth and then, at the same time, start to laugh. Now, they're standing a few inches apart in the tiny space between the sink and the table and her eyes stare into his. He practiced his English for this moment, looking up the word "bed" in the catalogue and memorizing a few other words supplied by Karl, but now he remembers none as he reaches for her hand. *Bitte*, he says, and his voice is gravelly. *Bitte. Please.*

* * *

On the evening of Friday, June 16, 1944, Karl walks into the kitchen. To Martin's surprise he's wearing a topcoat, a fedora and carrying a small briefcase. He looks like a junior clerk at the Hamburg City Hall. Beside him is Beth in heeled shoes, a little blue hat on her head and also carrying a small case as well as her purse.

What the hell?

"We're taking a little trip to town," Karl says in German.

Martin stands up so fast his glass of rye shoots across the catalogue. "What? What kind of a damned fool are you? We're not supposed to leave the farm."

"I want to practice being a Canadian."

Martin mops at the spill. "You could be stopped on the street, asked for your papers."

"This is Canada, Martin. People are not stopped on the street and asked for papers. People don't even carry papers. We're flagging down the fast train at midnight and we'll be back tomorrow evening. No one at the Rowan station will see us; there's no one there most of the time anyway. We'll stay at the Aunt's place, and tomorrow I'll walk around the town,

be a Canadian, go into Eaton's, buy something, have a Stan and Si at the Arthur café. Beth'll be at the hospital seeing the old man. Then, in the afternoon, I'll take Beth and her boys to the Lyceum Theatre to see Deanna Durbin. It's all planned. A normal Canadian Saturday enjoyed by a normal Canadian family."

"You're an idiot." Martin is close to shouting but mindful of Ken sleeping in the next room.

"It's a trial run. The war'll be over in a few weeks."

"Shit." Martin moves forward to grab Karl by the collar of his stupid coat and shake him around the room, but the two women stop talking at that minute. Helena's eyes appeal to him; Beth looks cool and determined, as if she were on a mission.

They don't have a clue, he thinks as he sits back down. His English is not good enough to reach them.

During the next twenty-four hours, fear and fury drive him like a train—cows milked, barns scrubbed, gardens weeded. But at midnight, the pair shows up on time carrying two gallons of white paint, a box of donuts and a Hardy Boy book for Ken. Helena throws her arms around her sister. Two more glasses are brought out. He can only shake his head.

All the next week, Karl can't stop talking about the trip to town. "To walk down the street like a free man, you can't imagine what it's like, Martin. You float, you swim, you're like a fish swimming with other fish. Just another fish. Moving along. And you can breathe. I realized something. For the last five years, I haven't taken a real breath."

They stand in their usual place by the tracks, waiting for the milk train. At seven o'clock on a June evening, the sun rides high in the sky. "I'm completely confident now," Karl says. "I never looked over my shoulder, just strode along. Even the policeman at the Eaton's corner didn't faze me. I passed him by as casually as they do." He takes out his package of Players, tosses it high and leaps to catch it. "It's all coming to an end." He means the war. The Normandy landing had occurred ten days before. "It's just a matter of mopping up but I hope they get to Germany before the Russians take it all. And I'm ready to bugger off. One more practice trip and I'm gone."

Martin glowers at him. "One more?"

"This weekend, the big one. We're going in Friday night and staying at the Mariaggi Hotel. We'll check in as Mr. and Mrs. Cloutier. Next morning a leisurely breakfast in the hotel dining room, a stroll around downtown, some shopping, another fabulous Stan and Si at the Arthur Café and this time, the Marx Brothers at the Colonial Theatre with the boys. We'll bring you back more paint for your wonderful barn."

"You're a god-damned fool."

Karl tosses the cigarette pack once more and catches it by climbing halfway up the milk platform. When he drops to the ground, his face is

grave. "It's for Beth really. A good-bye. Something to remember me by."

That Friday night in bed, Martin's nightmare returns for the first time in weeks. The knife is slicing into the base of his neck once again and ripping down his arm as he struggles to break free. The Neys doctor is bending over him saying in German, "We'll have to get you out of here," and then he's walking the wire fence at the Current River Camp and looking at the citizens of Port Arthur who come out on the streetcar to gawk at the men in the cage.

The sound of a car on the road wakes him up. It's an unusual noise in a land of rationed gasoline and he sits up knowing as he does so that the sound is too low-pitched to be a car. Not a car but military vehicles, two, maybe three. They're coming for him.

He's dressed by the time the headlights turn up his beautiful graveled drive and a minute later hears their boots crunch to the back door. He meets Helena in her robe in the kitchen. "Martin, who is it?" she whispers. Ken is standing at the door to the living room looking scared.

"Mom?"

Martin touches her hair and then opens the back door before they knock. He doesn't want them to break it down.

"Mrs. Helena Robertson?"

"Yes."

"Your sister, Mrs. Beth Cloutier, is in the Cooke Street Jail in Port Arthur. You can visit her in the morning. Chief Petty Officer Mueller, you're to come with us. Get your things."

Helena reaches for young Ken and holds him close. "What are you doing here?" she snaps at the uniformed men. "What's going on? Why is my sister in jail?" But they don't say a word more. One of them goes upstairs with Martin and takes a good look around the attic as he packs his kit bag. He hears the other one walking around the three downstairs rooms. Ken is crying wildly, his arms around his mother. One look and then he's out in the cool night air and heading to town.

In the Arthur café, Helena smiles at the waitress. "I'll have an orange and onion sandwich, Alma," Helena says. "And a pot of tea."

Even as the waitress is writing the order on her green pad, she's gawking at Martin. And no wonder. He's still as handsome as hell, Helena thinks, even though he looks older than his forty years. His skin is greyer, the cheeks drawn. Life was rough in Germany after the war. But the same intense eyes, the same cropped black hair and tough-looking face, the muscular body that takes up half the booth. Alma's pencil is poised; she can wait all day.

"I'm going to do it," Martin smiles at the waitress. "Bring me, please, the famous Stan and Si." He looks at Helena and shrugs. "No idea what it is. And, no, don't say. I want it for the surprise. And," he says to Helena

as the waitress moves off, “I stayed last night at the Mariaggi Hotel. It’s nice. They told me all redecorated since the war, so it doesn’t resemble that night...”

Helena winces. Even after five years it’s still raw.

She had a few letters from Martin after they took him away. He spent two years in a camp in Halifax where he started his engineering studies and worked on his English.

Another letter arrived from Hamburg in 1948 saying he was looking for Karl and, through the Red Cross, found the entire family: parents, sisters and even the grandmother. They’d all managed to get out of East Prussia. They were living in Munich and getting along pretty well, considering they were refugees in a country of refugees. But of Karl, they knew nothing, heard nothing.

She leans back and looks at him. He’s staring at Bonnie who’s sitting on a stool at the counter demurely sipping her milkshake. She makes a decision. He has a right to know the child is not his.

“Beth and Karl never actually stayed at the Mariaggi,” she starts. “They were arrested in the lobby, just after they registered.”

“Who turned them in?” The dark focused eyes, the same concentrated look that once flipped her heart upside down.

“I don’t know,” Helena says. “Someone on the train? Someone at Rowan Station? Maybe a neighbour was spying on us all the time?”

He nods. “Possible.”

Helena’s mind careens back to that final second when a khaki-covered arm reached back, grabbed her kitchen door and slammed it closed. She remembers the white shock that took over her brain, the grind of the trucks on the drive, the frantic hunt for a sliver of calm to soothe Ken, take him to bed, rock him to sleep and, after bathing her face, taking the first step into a blurry dawn to tend to the cows in both barns in time for the seven-thirty milk train as if it were a morning like any other.

Now, in the café, she clasps her hands together on the table. He reaches out and touches them lightly. Then, she tells him the rest.

At nine o’clock that morning, she and the boy stepped off the platform at the Port Arthur station and walked up the hill to her Aunt Maeve’s. In the backyard, she knelt by her son, whispering to him, telling him he has to stay outside for just a little while and play ball hockey with his cousins. Beth’s boys waited, leaning on their sticks. One held out the goalie pads as an inducement.

To her weak-kneed relief, her sister Beth was hunched at the kitchen table holding a shaky tea cup, her face as white as Aunt Maeve’s bone china. Her good suit was rumpled, her hair sticking every which way.

“I look like an unmade bed,” Beth said, standing to hug her, “and I don’t know why because they didn’t give me a bed, just a cell with a chair in it.” The hockey yells of the three boys outside threaded through

her sobs. "I'm charged with aiding the enemy. But it's okay. Mr. McIssac got me out."

A gnome-like man in a bomber jacket rose from the table, a hand extended. Helena recognized him as a lawyer friend of her Dad's. Aunt Maeve must have called him at home.

"We got to the Mariaggi Hotel, no problem," Beth said, sitting back down beside the lawyer who was taking notes on a yellow pad. "In the lobby, I started laughing because Karl signed the register with a big flourish. That's the moment when these two soldiers jumped out from behind the counter and grabbed him. I saw the pen spin across the carpet. They shoved him out the door so fast I couldn't catch a word he said. Then two policemen came from somewhere and shoved me out the door too. I looked for Karl on the street, but he was gone. Just like that...."

Later, when the lawyer drove them all back to Rowan, he talked to Beth's two teenagers who sat on the front seat beside him. "Now lads, your Mom is in a tight spot and you've got to look after her. Some people may come along who want to talk about that prisoner fellow who was staying out at your farm. Just say nothing. Simply say, and politely, mind, that you're not allowed to talk about it. Okay?" They both nodded. "That way you can really help out."

He half-turned to the sisters in the back. "You gals stay out in the sticks, you hear. Hunker down. We're not home free by a long shot."

Just after eleven that evening, in Beth's farmhouse, with the late June twilight shadowing the fields between the house and the road, Helena stood at the front window, the .22 rifle that had belonged to Beth's husband Marc, in her hands. She was on the watch for another cruising car. The three boys were asleep upstairs. Beth's soft sobbing in the downstairs bedroom had stopped.

When the first vehicle had honked past the two farms ten minutes before, Helena wondered if the local radio station had broadcast the story. As the headlights turned at the dead end just past the far field and cruised back, she saw the car doors open and heard voices yelling something unintelligible. She ran for Marc's .22 rifle stored deep in the cupboard under the stairs and, in the dim room without a light, carefully lined up a few bullets along the edge of the fern stand.

As soon as the car sped off with a grind of gravel, she ran out the back door and down the darkening drive. The old rusty gate leaned half fallen in the alders, but she managed to yank it out and stand it in place. Tomorrow, she'd make two NO TRESPASSING signs, one for each driveway. Turning back, her eye was caught by a white paper sticking out of the mailbox.

Under the back porch light, she read, *Why don't you whores move to Germany and spread your legs for Hitler?*

Inside again, she stood at the window watching a second car and then

a third go by. Or perhaps it was the same vehicle; it was too dark now to tell. Thank God for gas rationing, she thought.

The boys had helped with the milking but only she and Beth walked old Buddy and the cart to the train stop. That was when Beth told her about being pregnant. Helena sighed, shifting the rifle to the other hip.

Worries flew around like the night hawks swooping over the far meadows. What if the authorities found out? Would they take the baby away? And Martin—where was he? Most likely at the Current River Camp but what did it matter, after all? He'd never be allowed to come back. He might as well be on the moon.

“Where did they take you when they took you away?” she asks him five years later. The orange and onion sandwich is on the café table with a second pot of tea. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Alma behind the counter creating the Stan and Si.

“Twenty-eight days’ detention at Current River Camp. Bread and water,” he says. “Not a lot of bread but, on the other hand, as much water as I wanted.” He smiles, and then his face saddens. “The odd thing is this. Karl was not at Current River and I never found out where they took him. Over the next two years, I asked everyone, but no one saw him at any of the camps.” He shakes his head. “He vanished like a puff of smoke.”

He nods in the direction of Bonnie who’s standing at the juke box looking at the flashing lights. “So she’s Beth’s girl?”

“Yes. But everyone, including my new husband, thinks she’s mine.”

Alma slides the Stan and Si in front of him and Helena sees his shoulders shoot up in amazement. “Good God,” he says. “What is it? It looks like a gravy mountain.” He leans forward breathing deeply. “No wonder Karl loved these things. The smell alone.”

Alma explains. “It’s really just a hot sandwich four layers high. Good thick slices of pork and onions and lots of gravy as you can see. The fries around the edge keep the entire kit and caboodle from running off the plate. It’s a Port Arthur invention,” she says proudly. “You won’t get one anywhere else.”

He cuts a small piece out of the corner and lifts it carefully to his mouth. “Wars,” he says after a moment, “could be fought over a sandwich like this.” He cuts a larger bite.

Helena takes a nickel from her change purse and goes to the juke box to show Bonnie how to press the buttons for the music. The Andrew Sisters blare forth and, after a minute, Bonnie begins a swaying dance in the neon bars that swirl across the floor. She adds a few hops and then a twirl. Her blond hair swings, her eyes close with joy.

Back in the booth he looks up from his plate. “Was Beth arrested?”

“Not really, no. She was charged with aiding the enemy but the charge was stayed. She couldn’t leave Rowan, but the kids were allowed to stay

at the farm. We sent them to Aunt Maeve's when school started."

She feels her courage failing; her husband and Ken will be back any minute. It's an effort now to make her voice loud enough. She describes how the auctioneer came out and sold off all the cows except one they kept for themselves for the winter. They even sold old Buddy, the work horse.

"The boys were upset, but we had to do it," she says. "We'd plenty of money—that was the one good thing. The dairy business boomed all through the war with nothing to spend it on. We got a swell price for the cows too. We ordered our groceries and other stuff from Eaton's and it came out by train."

In September, a letter arrived from Aunt Maeve full of sinister hints. *"I am sure there is always someone listening on my party line. The lawyer came by this morning and said under no circumstances should you girls come to town. There's a mean mood about. The newsreels have been showing the opening of the camps in Germany and it's getting people mad. So don't tell anyone about anything. It may fire people up against you.*

All three boys have settled in and are doing fine at school. They send their love. Your dad's weaker, I think. He's wandering in his mind.

Be careful my darlings. Love Aunt Maeve."

Helena breathes out a whooshing sigh. "They burned down my little house, Martin. I was outside after supper bringing in the clothes. When I saw the greasy smoke full of flames, I knew exactly what it was. I could hear them shouting even from so far off."

"My pictures, all the furniture..." *And your bedroom*, she almost adds, *and your bed*. Sometimes, she had gone into the attic to lie down on his bed and press her face into his pillow.

"We didn't dare go over till the next morning," she continues. "And guess what was left? That bath tub." She tries for a steady tone. "Do you remember it? The Good Ship Rowan. There it was, in the middle of the rubble, a big black cast-iron thing like a burned-out boat."

"So," she shrugs, "we hunkered in for the winter. When Dad died we didn't even go to the funeral. Beth was showing by then, and I was the one who was supposed to be pregnant."

His face sends the question.

"Why did we do it that way? Mainly, it was for Beth's boys. The other kids would have hounded them out of Collegiate.

"And then there was Marc, just liberated from that terrible camp in Hong Kong. How could he come home to a baby? She couldn't do it to him. And Beth's court charges—stayed but not dropped. We were afraid if the authorities found out... afraid of people coming out, social workers, the police. Maybe they'd take the baby away. So we decided I would be the official mother."

He leans back waiting until she finds words again. “Bonnie was born at the farm just before Christmas with me as midwife,” she says slowly. “I registered her as my own and my husband in Ottawa as the father.”

“When he wrote me and told me about his Ottawa girlfriend and he wanted a divorce, I was over the moon. I never did tell him about Bonnie.” She gave a half laugh. “He said I could have the house, didn’t know it was a pile of ashes. I didn’t even have to go to Ottawa.”

The music stops and Bonnie runs over, jumping up and down. “Please, Mummy,” she begs, “another nickel.” Martin hands over a coin and Helena goes to start the music. Bonnie insists on the same song and the Andrew Sisters flare up again. Bonnie starts to twirl.

“We sold up completely the next summer,” she says to Martin when she slides back into the booth. “Beth took her boys to Vancouver even though leaving Bonnie broke her heart. But she wanted a new life and she got it. Marc came back from Hong Kong half blind—something to do with malnutrition. But he’s all right, he’s working. So we all came through. Except for you. You lost your family.”

He nods.

“They were killed in the air raids.”

“Yes.”

“You married again too, you said in your letter.”

He nods again. “Her name is Inge. She’s a nurse. She comes to Winnipeg when I get settled at my Winnipeg job.” Now, she sees him glance at the clock above the counter. She knows the train for the west leaves soon. The shot of pain she feels makes her grab the edge of the table.

“I should maybe write?” he says.

“Christmas,” she says.

The café door opens and her husband and Ken come in.

“Write at Christmas.”

Martin uncaps his gold-tipped fountain pen. *Dear Helena*, he writes on the blank side of a Christmas card, his mind, as ever, sliding back to the bed in the downstairs bedroom in the tiny farmhouse, the lines of sunlight playing across her body. He can still see her brown eyes fixed on his. The memories sink into his chest. Ah, that first night playing cards in the kitchen. And the meeting in the Arthur Café five years ago when he first come back to Canada. She was so much the same—eyes, hair, voice. And her laugh. She came through all right, he thought. *All right, in spite of everything.*

He recalls his shock at the sight of the Stan and Si but also remembers his impulse to wrap the extra fries in a serviette and put them in his pocket. Instead, he pushed the plate aside. His old compulsion returned in Germany after the war and sometimes, even now, he wants to save bits of

food. When he left the café that day, after shaking hands all around, he took a last look at them in the booth. *Just a normal Canadian family on a normal Canadian Saturday.*

Once, he thought he saw Karl. It was on Hastings Street in Vancouver last summer. He'd gone there on business shortly after opening his own engineering firm in Winnipeg. A slight blond man on the sidewalk who flipped a pack of cigarettes in the air and caught it with a little jump. When the man turned into an office building, Martin ran from across the street but no one was in the lobby.

Now, at his desk in his beautiful new office overlooking Portage Avenue, he realizes his hand is jamming the nib of the pen into the paper creating tight spirals on the thick matte. He tears the card up. In war time, he muses, everything disintegrates, even lives, especially lives. They get patched together somehow, but only patched, after all.

He starts a new card carefully penning his standard Christmas opening.

“Dear Helena, My best wishes to you and your family for the coming year....”

ANNE CHAMPAGNE fell in love with poetry in the 1970s when she read Dylan Thomas. She combined her twin passions for creative writing and nature in an undergrad degree in English and Environmental Studies, and a master's degree in Environmental Studies. Her writing has been published in a book about Ontario's parks and wilderness, in magazines and newspapers. After many years working as a writer/editor/researcher for environmental groups, she now runs Green Words Writing and Editing (www.green-words.ca).

Boneyard

Anne Champagne

In the liminal space
between the Rockies and the Purcells
a brief meadow emerges
from forest banks,
cups sun-bleached branches—
a boneyard for trees

and I feel a shift
slow and solemn
of long roots from either shore
nudging their ancestors' bones
as elephants will
with sisters, parents and children
grieving

the ghosts of grey withered skin
dreamed whole
over skeletal husks

hoping for release
from the pain of mortality
in one last gesture

of love.

Featured Poet

Linda Crosfield



Salty Meringue Madness

LINDA CROSFIELD lives in Ootischenia in the West Kootenay. She has published three chapbooks, *Ways to Get to Here*, *Generation Dance* and *Etiquette* and has had poems in *Room of One's Own*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Labor*, and an earlier issue of *The New Orphic Review*, in several chapbooks edited by Patrick Lane and in a number of anthologies, most recently *Use Your Words* and *Rogue Stimulus*.

Poetry as Conversation

Linda Crosfield

ONE OF MY FAVOURITE people in the world doesn't like poetry. She's been forthright about that since I met her three decades ago. "Who the hell buys poetry books?" she asked the other day. I admitted I do, that in fact I have several shelves of poetry books at home. I didn't mention the chapbooks I collect, didn't mention that I have a new one of my own. I know it's not her thing. "It's too personal," she shudders when I attempt to find out (yet again, for we've had this conversation more than once over the years of our friendship), why she despises it so.

What is it about poetry? Why is it so important to some of us, and so completely reviled by others?

When I was eight years old, I discovered the power poetry has to make you sit up and take notice. I was doing a puzzle on the living room floor, half-listening to CBC radio. "Here's a poem by Eugene Field called *Little Boy Blue*," said the radio voice. I expected to hear the nursery rhyme that talked of meadow sheep and haystacks. Instead, I was caught up in a story about a child who dies, leaving his toys to mourn him. As soon as the reading was over, I headed for my parents' bookshelf to hunt down a copy of the poem that had transfixed me so. I still have the book where I found it, and I've been collecting poetry books ever since.

Around this time I wrote the first of my own poems, a practice I continue to hone six decades later. Occasionally words come easily, spilling out of my pen and onto the page as fast as I can get them down. Sometimes it can take months to get a poem right. Sometimes the muse is completely absent from my life and I go years without writing anything of note. This used to bother me, but I've come to accept it as part of my process. In order to write I crave silence, most of the time. Sometimes music is right, as long as it's the right music. Newly forming words, I find, are very particular about what accompanies them into the light.

Poetry is a form of conversation, a language that, while it utilizes

words in whichever language is employed, somehow, by an alchemy of assonance, rhythm, rhyme and metre, becomes a means of communication between the poem itself (as opposed to the poet) and the person reading or hearing it. This conversation is unique to the parties involved—the poem and its audience—and cannot always be explained to the satisfaction of a third party. I think this may be one reason there is resistance to poetry, resistance that dates back to an attitude that says, “I hated it in school because no matter what *I* thought a poem meant, I was always told I was wrong.”

Some poems smack the reader/listener up the side of the head, get their attention, make them sit up and take notice! They linger in the mind, provocative, brash, for long periods of time, sometimes forever. Other poems gently nudge the reader/listener towards a new awareness, a new way of thinking about the world.

Perhaps this is why some of our politicians seem to revel in arts-bashing. They fear a) what they think they don't understand and b) anything that may cause people to question the agenda they are preaching. I'm thinking of the Poets Against the War movement, specifically the Iraq War, where thousands of poems were sent in to a website and subsequently put into an anthology that was delivered to the Bush White House after Laura Bush invited a number of poets to a symposium to celebrate “poetry and the American Voice”. One of the invited poets, Sam Hamill, declined to attend and instead invited fifty fellow poets to reconstitute a movement that began during the Viet Nam War. In four days he received protest poems from over 1500 poets.

Writing poetry allows me to poke at some of the political and ecological mysteries of our times. In *How Poems Come to Be—How Come* I refer to an incident in Arkansas where 3000 blackbirds fell from the sky one New Year's Eve and to the oil-spill fiasco in the Gulf of Mexico. *What's Best For Us* is my response to the Canadian government still allowing asbestos to be sold to third-world countries even though we now know it causes a nasty form of lung cancer and no longer allow it to be used here. Writing poetry lets me examine my conflicted feelings around incidents that have happened to me personally, as in *Arguments Were Usually Over Small Things* and *After the Wind*. Sometimes I write a poem as a way to deal with things that concern me, as in *Ten Ways I'd Prefer Not to Die*. Sometimes my surreal side takes over and I write a poem just for the fun of it, playing with disparate images that want to bounce off each other. *Salty Meringue Madness and the Traveling Fair* is one of those.

Although everything that can be written about probably has been, the never-ending quest for a fresh take on an old subject keeps me writing. For me, poetry serves as a kind of linguistic shorthand that allows me to engage in a conversation with the inner reaches of a mind. Sometimes the mind belongs to the reader and sometimes it's my own.

How Poems Come to Be—How Come

Write a poem—

as if it's easy to lift a car off a whimpering dog
its eyes round brown clots of startled love.

Right, a poem.

Marshall pen and paper, thesaurus, mint tea,
Absinthe if the mood is right, pretty maids all in a row.

Write a poem—

as if it's fun not to find a child who's missing
its parents wild-eyed and wanting.

Right, a poem.

Tread water so murky it's really treacle
as a cold hand waves you past the accident scene.

Write a poem—

as if birds raining down from the sky are enough
to fill the bellies of the homeless.

Right, a poem.

Ball up wads of paper, throw them at the wall,
that's you, star pitcher, World Series, the finals.

Write a poem—

as if it's a snap to cap the crap coming out of a geyser
at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.

Right. A poem.

As if.

Ten Ways I'd Prefer Not to Die

i

Not for me Virginia's stony stride
through sweet-sipped waters
meant to cool the brow
slake the thirst
streaming veil the cresting waves'
white dress—white death

ii

Not for me the sound of my own bones
crunched in some heedless mouth
wrapped 'round my head.
Don't care if it's protecting young
or its next meal
let not that meal be me

iii

No fall from trees or towers
no plummet to the ground
my fifteen minutes' fame
reduced to a couple of lines
on page fourteen of some newspaper
no one reads any more

iv

No snow-swept hills
no avalanche for me
I carry no transceiver

v

No rattler will reduce my flesh to sponge
its spring-thaw poison coursing through my veins
the horror of the strike
making all that follows
the lesser nightmare

vi

No luring me from stagnant streets
with promised treats that never come
no bits of me served up as slop
some pig's demented entertainment

vii

No zest, no zap
I'll not be rooted to the ground
arrow shot from lightning's bow
I'll not illuminate the way
to whatever happens next

viii

Not by the hand of another
no rope from which to dangle
no gun exploding in the dark
no blade to slice me fine
like a razor through a cat's eye

ix

No stampede by crowd nor beast
will crush the air from my lungs
erase the light from my eyes

x

No bombs, no flames, no filthy heat
to sear my skin to bone
the last thing I smell
my own self, roasting

Salty Meringue Madness and the Traveling Fair

Tattoos forget how first the skin looks
chewed, angry, each tiny line shrieking red
as though someone forgot to close
the window that faces the sun
while an ancient speaker crackles,
rips through a cascade of songs
and the merry-go-round reels
from the weight of the joy it carries.
Mothers bake, grandchildren ridicule
each other and giggling girls show up
with stories best forgotten,
ponytails a-twirl in the carney lights.
Far from the city, horses at the edge of the ocean
wince as waves whip themselves to a salty meringue madness,
a crown for the driftwood that arrives each day with the tide.
Somewhere a son studies the perfect sandwich,
chunks of bread and cheese coming together like a kiss.
Somewhere a piece of jade admits
to loving glacier-fed lakes for their colour.
Somewhere a stream escapes the collar of its banks
and rushes off, triumphant, to the sea.

Arguments Were Usually Over Small Things

I put a plant on your table, the one we saw
in the back of that roadside second-hand place
in the Laurentians, our first dirty weekend—
you said you were going to reel me in like a fish
but I'd already caught you.
First time I saw you quibble over the cost of something.
Hard to imagine you now, nothing but bone.

Can still hear your *don't, you'll mar the surface,*
you and your pseudo-antiques—
bamboo umbrella stand, cradle phone,
buckets your grandmother used for sugaring off.

How I loved you at first,
our third floor walk-up in Dorval,
fake beams you installed to make it look old,
and in the bathroom, glass shelves
that always needed cleaning.

Arguments were usually over small things—
you wanting to save face, me trying to placate you,
a list of platitudes I knew by rote,
your compulsive need for drink, your raised fist
only raised, only once, and I left.
Strange how these memories surface from time to time
like kids of the kids we never conceived
cascading down the hill on their toboggans.

After the Wind

The morning after a great wind
takes my apple tree in its teeth,
worries it like a dog with a rabbit in its mouth
and spins it to the ground
I find my neighbour pulling apart
the snarled downed branches with a rake,
a gentle man whose huge mechanic's hands
once cradled a flicker trapped in my chimney
before he let it fly.

I think *too bad about the apples,*
there'd have been a good crop this year
as he teases branches into a neat Pick-Up Sticks pile.

A tiny sound wafts up from the ground,
together we see the fallen nest, the fledgling robins
reaching skyward with open, stupid mouths
as if the quick, descending rake means food.

What's Best For Us

Chrysotile

sounds like a semi-precious stone
an island off the coast of South America
the name of an exotic dancer
and in a way it is
the way it skips
on the edge of breath
to unsuspecting lungs
where it clings like a pole dancer
in tights adorned with feathers
performs predictably
while suits in the audience
quaff drinks, count money
convinced they know
what's best for us

STEPHEN HOWARD is a writer and professional land surveyor who lives in St. Albert and works in Edmonton. Born in New Brunswick, he grew up in Nova Scotia and, in 1993, moved with his young family to Alberta. In addition to holding a B.A. degree at St. F.X. University and being a field surveyor, he has worked in pipeline construction, gold exploration, underground mining and pulp mill production. His short story “Saturday” was shortlisted for the Howard O’Hagan Award for Short Story, at the 2011 Alberta Literary Awards.

Cane Wood

Stephen Howard

WE DEVELOPED a daily routine almost immediately. I would get up at five or so, to beat the heat and to get some physical work done, and he would get up around seven, wash up, and be at his breakfast by eight. Then I would come in to join him and report on my progress. “I got the cherry tree down and limbed. Where do you want the little branches?” “Just cut them up so they’ll fit in the back of the truck and then we’ll take them out to the shore.”

The paper would be in the box once breakfast was over and then the two of us would read it section by section in the living room. I think that was the best part of the day for both of us. It was for me anyway. The heat wasn’t on yet, we weren’t hungry, thirsty, or tired, and we could find out what was going on, at our own pace. I always took the chair in the corner by the big window and he, of course, always sat in his chair by the middle of the same window. We could pass the paper back and forth without getting up.

Around ten or so, Maggie would arrive and find us. Me, in bare feet, a T-shirt and shorts, and Jake in a long-sleeved, button-up shirt with pockets on both sides, his tan-colored long pants and wool winter socks. The place would come alive on her arrival. Instead of our send—receive, send—receive talk, there would be a pleasant flurry from Maggie. “How are my two handsome young men this morning? Did you take your pills, Jake? He hasn’t been cranky yet today has he, Mike? Look at these strawberries! My sister dropped them off last night so I thought it would be good to have some at lunch. I know you like them, Jake, but how about you, Mike? Anyway, I’ll let you finish the paper. Is today the day you go to the bank? Oh, here’s your change from the groceries yesterday. I’m going to do a wash right now—have you got everything in? More

coffee, Mike? There's a bit left. OK, so you guys should be good. Looks like you already emptied your bag, Jake, so I'll leave you alone."

Errands were run before lunch or just after. We got bits and pieces of groceries, returned items, picked up items, bought flowers, took garbage away, got building supplies and so on. Most times we took the truck. Jake's truck, with his stuff in it—maps, a saw and an axe, ropes, compasses, flagging tape, and measuring tapes—that kind of thing.

By two or three in the afternoon, both of us would be pretty tired and it would be hot, so we might be outside by the shade of the garage. He would sit in a lawn chair with a cold water and I would do close handwork like stemming strawberries or painting scratches on the car. There were many little jobs undone and I think it gave him a bit of comfort to see them get looked after.

When he had visitors come, I would take the opportunity to check my email and keep in touch with Cass at home, Darren and Lynn, and the office. I wrote daily reports for the family so they could know the progress on the many fronts: veterans' benefits, doctor visits, home care options, banking, the new-found book club shipments, insurance vouchers, and newly supported charities. The business of it.

By nine at night I would be tired and tense and ready for bed. He always stayed up later, never tiring of yet another rerun of his favourite police show at the needed high volume. I went to bed, but I often didn't get to sleep until after he had gone down. I would replay the day in my mind and score it. Things that had gone well and things I could do better. You only get one chance at some things and I wanted to do good by everybody on this one. This was the first time for me to spend so much time with someone dying whom I had known and liked my whole life. Grandparents had always been ancient beings all along, high school mates had never grown old and I hadn't spent the time with Ivy. The difference was that I knew of the strong vital person that had come before. We had done things as master and student, mentor and protégé, and finally in concert as equals. So I would lie in bed at night, the bed that Ivy had died in, and score the day.

Not being experienced, I didn't know what to expect, and I'm sure he didn't know what to expect either. What happened was that neither one of us talked about it, even though we both knew the score. Maybe once or twice it came up. "Now my hip really hurts this morning. That must be that cancer." Otherwise, we just went along. "It's late in the season, but MacPhee's may still have some flowers. If anybody does, it'll be them." "Do we need to get gas?"

Generally, my two weeks passed quickly, each day much the same. A few things stand out, but mostly it was always the same routine. There are things that stick in my mind, though. One day we planted annual flowers in all the beds at the front. I remember thinking this would almost

certainly be the first and last time that I ever planted flowers. I remember “Norma next door” passing by and the look on her face. It was the same look you see when a mother watches her kids play in the sand. I remember another time when I found him on all fours on the living room floor. After I had helped him up he wondered “What’s the point?” and I didn’t have an answer. One day, early on, we took a long walk by the river and I remember his sparkle. He chattered and chirped as we walked, totally at ease and happy. Then there was the day he inadvertently took the call from the minister I was trying to get for his funeral. He had said in passing that the minister who had done the service for his father had done a good job so I was tracking him down. It was an awkward thing, but like I said earlier, we both knew the score.

I couldn’t tell you the day, but one day near the middle of my two weeks, Jake and I went to the woods. He had always included it in his list of things to do, but I kind of viewed it as not possible, and futile. “If we don’t get there soon, they won’t peel easy.” “Christ, it’s only a quarter mile to it.” “I suppose I could scrape them with a broken bottle.”

My mind was always on the practical. He couldn’t walk a quarter of the distance around the house let alone a quarter mile. Nobody was going to make anything from the wood anyway—certainly not Jake. What would we do if something happened while we were out there?

After thinking it over though, I changed my outlook. He was going to die soon anyway. What did it matter if it was the result of a fall in the woods or a blocked catheter in the bed? Why would you begrudge a dying man his wish? When I really thought about it, my reservations were about how it would affect me. Others would be quick and sure to condemn. “What were you thinking?! Taking a fragile old man to his death?!”

Jake never let it go either, so in the end, I said the hell with it and said I’d take him. I told Maggie my plans and she seemed to get it. She did suggest that we take her cell phone and I took her up on that. Jake wanted to take the truck but I didn’t go that far. Its battery was iffy and I insisted on the car. If the road was too much for it, we would have to turn back, that was all.

So we broke our routine and instead of reading the paper, we both geared up and eventually were seated in the car, ready to go. “Did you take your pills?” After a long pause and a confused darting of the eyes, he said, “I don’t know.” It was simple enough for me to go check and bring them to him, but it underscored the magnitude of the chance I was taking. The odds of something not going well were high.

The road we were looking for was only about fifteen miles away and on the main highway to Antigonish so it wasn’t a long trip. I had never been there so Jake would have to point it out. I zeroed the odometer at the entrance to the highway and then let him puzzle it out.

“It’s at the top of a hill and then it goes down slowly.”

“Victor and I saw five deer in that field one night. It was frosty and you could see the steam off their backs and from their breath.”

“Slow down, it’s along here somewhere.”

“We’re past it.”

The odometer said we were surely past his estimate as well, so I turned at the gas station past the high school and we retraced our route. “That looks like it—slow down.” This time I pulled right over to the edge, went very slow, and waited for his eventual abandonment of the search. “Now, if this is it, the road should be on our left going up the edge of that hardwood.” There was an old road where he had hoped the entrance was, and I stopped opposite it. “Is that it?” More confused darting of the eyes, prolonged consideration, and finally, “I think so.”

I backed up, waited for a transport truck to go by, crossed the highway and edged onto the hard, dry, but heavily rutted dirt track. “This looks like it.” Then, “Henry Needham shot a partridge right there by that apple tree and the whole tree full of them flew away. We counted seven of them, I think.”

The road dipped down and then went straight up a fairly steep hill with a field on the left and hardwood on the right. When we got to a place on the hill where it got less steep, Jake said “Anywhere here is good.” It was a hard place to turn around, so I went on in until I found a push off and after jockeying back and forth several times I got the car turned. Jake figured I could do that after, but I wanted to make sure we were pointed towards the highway.

Just getting out of the car was an effort for him and he would never wait until I was in a position to assist. I wasn’t too experienced at this either so I didn’t know how close to hover and how much to help. The narrow road and uneven ground combined to create an obstacle course. In the end, I steadied the door, while jammed in the bushes, and he was then able to navigate out of the car and back along it, hand over hand, to the trunk.

It was sad to see him like this, hampered from head to toe. Hearing aids were on each ear. His glasses were tied on and through his shirt you could see the implanted battery and pacemaker. At his feet, you could see the catheter bag attached to his right ankle. He was thin and he was stooped.

After I had tied his boots and tucked any loose ends in, we shuffled off. I was on his left side to take advantage of his better ear, and I would scout ahead to ensure a minimum of obstructions. We left the shovel and ground axe in the car. He found some good cane wood about a hundred feet from the car, so I left him there and went back for the axe and shovel.

I pretty much ran to the car and back. I was very concerned about him tripping. I felt two very bad things could happen if he did. He could go

headlong and hit his head on a boulder, or he could snag the catheter tube and have it rip from his penis. Both thoughts were horrifying and so I ran. As it turned out, nothing happened. I found him at the same tree I had left him. On a certain level, he knew the risks he was taking too, though he never let on.

After that, we moved slowly from tree to tree cutting out the cane wood we wanted as we went. The trees we took were all about an inch and a quarter in diameter. For some reason their roots ran parallel to the ground before the stem exited straight up out of the ground. The result was perfect wood for making canes. It was a very strong hardwood which had a ninety-degree bend for the handle.

It was worth the risk and my fretful torment to see him in such a transcendent state. Real sweat was dripping off his nose. Real fly blood peppered his neck. Real dirt was scuffed on his real boots. He, totally immersed in the task, was unaware of it all. With deliberate purpose he made focused assessments of the saplings, traced their source below ground, and then directed me to harvest the best ones with the ground axe.

For a few moments, he was a man again—no longer castrated. Just like the wireless air gunner of before. Just like the flying officer, the timber cruiser, the prospector.

After getting only nine or ten sticks, his fatigue was clear and we repeated our walk in reverse. It took me three trips back to find and get all of the sticks, plus the axe and shovel, and it was the same mad rush because I half expected him to try to get back in the car by himself. To his credit, he did not, and a half an hour later we were both back in the car and heading towards town.

It was a bit early for lunch, but he obviously had a plan. “There’s good shade under this tree for lunch.” I had done the lunches. Peanut butter and jam for me, sardines and buttered bread for him. Two guys eating their own bland sandwiches. Probably the best part was the ice water with lime. Generally we didn’t talk much when we ate. Food was always just a fuel to us. We enjoyed it, but we usually were concentrating on what we would do next. I know that day I was anxious to get back and complete the mission. Fifteen or twenty minutes later and we were on our way. We even saw a deer on the way back. After, I thought it was kind of fitting that I was with him when he saw his last deer.

Maggie was her usual buoyant self when we arrived. You could tell she was relieved but genuinely approved of the whole affair. She seemed to see through the decayed shell to the man. That afternoon as we sat in the shade, we both were in an afterglow of exhausted contentment. The kind you get after winning a championship or finishing a school year. I gave the day a good score.

The night before Darren had to leave, after his two weeks, Jake made

like his mind was gone. Then, the day after Darren and Edie got back, word came from Maggie that Jake wasn't accepting any food or drink. I'm not sure whether he kept taking his pain pills or not. Regardless, I phoned Maggie to try to get a feel for what game he was playing and eventually got him on the phone.

I was fairly short with him and gave him quite a rigorous interrogation on what was going through his mind when he was giving Darren the confused act. He said all that was on his mind was he wanted someone to keep care of him. I didn't let up and stressed that he had to do his part too. He had to eat his meals, drink his drinks, and take his pills. Otherwise people wouldn't be able to keep caring for him.

He was unworried and cheerful when he replied. "O.K., Mike, I guess you're right. I'll pay more attention. I'm really glad the four of you are going to get a hike in this summer. Enjoy yourselves and I'll be talking to you when you get back." I thought it odd at the time. Usually he would hit back.

When we got back two days later he was bedridden, and a day after that he was dead. I think he made it happen that way—his last act of will.

Good for him.

DANIEL J. LANGTON's work has appeared in *Poetry*, the *Dalhousie Review*, the *Atalantic Monthly*, *Vallum*, the *Paris Review*, *Fiddlehead* and similar journals. His seventh collection, *During Our Walks*, will come out this year. He teaches in San Francisco, where he lives with his wife, Eve.

Daniel J. Langton / Three Poems

Fin

You came in twos, your eyes, your hands, your breasts,
you were movement; quick, flashy, quirky, deft;
you were the first among us to die of AIDS.
One day the easy stopped, the gruelling tests
began, the nights, the corridors. You left
the way a European movie fades.

Once no one anywhere had seen a flick,
for us it was our time, how it began
in darkened rows, Liv Ullmann, von Sydow
(pronounced sea-dove, you called Liv 54).
You wanted to be Jeanne Moreau, learn each trick
of her trade, traipse in Paris with Gabin.
You were one of those who led me to love,
one of those who showed me what life is for.

The Woman I Bed

It hasn't made me haughty, more like proud,
watching her hold the hemline of her dress
before it sails in shimmers to her head
and softly drops toward me from her hand.
I know my sight goes dark, my heart gets loud
and I become immortal, more or less,
and yet I know, when all is done and said,
that there is nothing there I understand.

I've taken her to Rome, and to Alaska,
should I even try, do I even dare,
to catch up, to catch on, to catch-as-catch-
can; what on earth, I think, can I ask her
as her eyes tell the truth, as she lies there,
the way the fire waits inside the match.

They Were Alive When I Started

I could see Frost from the window
Jim Wright went by on his bike
Williams delivered babies
Ezra Pound nattered
Neruda encompassed the earth.

I wrote them all, they answered
with new poems, infused by reading
my letters, a new way to see,
to look at the stars Dante saw,
the sky as blue as in Shakespeare's day.

What a world we all lived in,
innocently adding to beauty.

Since the publication of “Dream Dig,” which was chosen for inclusion in the 2001 *Journey Prize Anthology*, MARGRITH SCHRANER has been breaking new ground. The following piece could be termed auto/bio/geography, mapping the seminal moments of experience as they interface with a landscape of imagination, memory, and invention. She has been the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review* since its inception fifteen years ago.

Changing Trains

Margrith Schraner

Just the same, I'd be damned if the glory of literature was in the metaphor.
- Morley Callaghan, *That Summer in Paris*

Prologue

The train pulled into the station late at night. I was the only passenger on board; none of the other seats in my compartment were occupied. I lowered the sliding window and stood peering out across the tracks, at the small cubicle of a waiting room bathed in a yellowish light. I was searching for the sign that would tell me the name of the station, and now I spotted it—there, further back along the deserted platform, past the station clock—a configuration of letters that looked unnaturally crisp and white against a metallic rectangle of charcoal blue. I hastily tried to combine the letters to make a word, even as the train gave a sudden jolt and began to move forward, cool night air brushing against my face. Already, the white letters were losing their shape. However, I caught the word as if by chance before the letters dissolved completely.

ONE

Chambéry. I had no trouble locating it on the map. I started with a point of familiarity in the southwestern part of Switzerland, *Lac Léman*, referred to internationally as Lake Geneva. From there, my finger followed the Rhône River in a southwesterly direction. It was unknown territory to me; the *Savoie* region borders on Italy to the East says one map, but the Rhône River follows the lay of the land in a half-moon curve. If one were to look at it from an aerial perspective, it would recall the arc of an eyebrow

whose outer edges are located in France on the side that is closest to the root of the nose, and in Switzerland on the side near the temple. The arc, or eyebrow, looking bunched up and bushy, was dark brown on the map, a *massif alpin*, or an alpine range as it would be called in English. Massive seems to be the operative word, here. Massive—as in colossal, larger than life. In the swoop of the Alps with their nonchalant strides across borders I recognize the propensities of my heart. This was a region I don't recall ever having set foot in, except in dreams, maybe. Chambéry belongs to the country of my imagination. I had taken down the spelling of its name as I was waking from a dream. In order not to forget it, I had tried to approximate how it would sound if pronounced by an English speaker. It came across as a caressing wave of silk: *Sham-Bray*.

TWO

I prefer map number two, the topographical map that depicts the landscape's undulating, sculptural complexity, elevations alternating with plains, wildly unpredictable, unencumbered and free. It seems more real to me, more holistic than map number one that cuts everything into neat little pieces, some colored light green, or pastel pink, others yellow, or purple, in a tradition that must have originated with someone who was obsessed with systematic representation, creating an abbreviated reality: Napoleon, perhaps, whose arbitrary moods dictated military shifts, a despotism willfully shifting inhabitants, grouping them now with this region, now with that. The tip of a pencil that could leap across a river to take possession of lands, definitive ownership finalized, its proof the neat, geometric shapes now laid before us on maps, uncontested. The illusion, at least, that territorial disputes have been settled once and for all. And a suggestion that it is final—written as in stone, no less, and as hard as rock—as in the rock of the ages, the rock of the Alps, even. I failed to get good marks in geography; I was even worse in history, which seemed to require a unique kind of memory. Only the grade eight boys in my class seemed to be in possession of that special gift. Only they were capable of endlessly repeating dates—the battles of 1798 or 1897; I could never tell which was which—repeating names and locales that got pointed at by a long wooden stick, tapped gently on the large map that had been pulled down from the ceiling. For me, a map is hardly a truthful representation; as a two-dimensional version of reality, it seems both constricted and abbreviated. I much prefer the geography of my imagination, which relies directly on what I see when I pass through the landscape, looking out the window of this train: There are views of a lake—although I didn't expect to see any lakes when I set out on this journey—and then, unexpectedly, a close-up view of a charming little corner in some small town, picturesque depictions that are characteristic

of so many postcard views, the architecture dating back to the 18th century, perhaps even further back than that: patched-together façades of ancient stonework, intriguing alleyways, cobbled pavement stones on sidewalks outside restaurants, hanging shields over café entrances, their designs elaborate and artful, wrought iron or brass, it hardly matters. Baskets of freshly harvested vegetables on a ledge, potted herbs near a door sill, an ambience I would call Old Europe. Quietly elegant, it is Switzerland and France, wrapped into one.

THREE

I had had to change trains; that's what I remember. I had descended from one train with only three pieces of hand-held luggage, two flimsy nylon bags with zippers, and one plastic see-through bag into which, at the last minute, I had managed to stuff my already damp folding-umbrella. The train had pulled in on the underground level of the station, and I would have to proceed to the platform located above, at ground level, to continue my journey. I had only twelve minutes to transfer between trains. I hastily took stock. In addition to what I carried in my handheld luggage, I had only the clothes on my back. I didn't have a suitcase with me, it seemed. Had I had one with me at the check-in counter? I don't think so. I couldn't remember. I was glad to be traveling light, unencumbered. Besides, I would have to ascend to the next level. I saw there was a staircase next to a small cubicle occupied by train attendants, officials wearing dark blue uniforms, baggage handlers and such. *Concierge*, they are better known as, to tourists and travelers staying in hotels. It just so happens that this one man wearing a traditional, smart-looking driver's cap was legally blind. Standing next to the narrow staircase that was made of metal and might just as well have led up into the interior of a commuter plane, he sensed that I hesitated, but he egged me on by gesturing toward the railing. I felt extremely weak in body and wary in mind. The first tread of the stairs seemed too high off the ground. I hesitated. I saw him lift his chin ever so slightly as he turned his head first toward me and then toward the staircase, as if to say, *Go ahead; you can do it*. I decided to follow his prompting.

FOUR

The staircase was crowded. There was hardly enough room for the people who were descending. There didn't seem to be a railing on their side of the stairs, as I remember, but the oncoming pedestrians were young and without concern—possessed by an *insouciance* of sorts, what Milan Kundera might have meant when he spoke of the unbearable lightness of being. None of them were encumbered by luggage, and they were polite

enough to give me sufficient space to ascend, allowing me to climb up one slow step followed by another, the metal of the stairs reverberating under my feet. I was glad I didn't have to carry a suitcase. After the initial shuffle, it was all an orderly process, predestined to run smoothly, much like lanes of traffic going in opposite directions.

FIVE

My right hand grips the railing of the staircase. My wrist is in a cast—has been, for several weeks, already. It is history, by now; an integral part of my history. Reported history, oral history, reminding me of a time around age four, riding my tricycle in the early part of spring, when in blatant disregard of borders—in this case the paved pathway that ended at the top of the cellar steps—I was hurtled forward and disappeared into another region, the abyss. Shielded from sunlight, the stairs had been invisible, utterly hidden from my sight. Jolted by the sudden eruption of concrete steps that were coming toward me, my heart responded with an accelerated flutter. The earth had opened up below me. Even now, my heart is in a flutter; my right hand refuses to let go of its grip on the handlebar. *Don't move, stay right there*; that's what Mamma had said. But already then, at an early age, I had disobeyed her. I must have had my head in the clouds. A boundary crossed inadvertently, an unspoken law transgressed, and I was swallowed up as though by an earthquake. I disappeared into a country of no borders, into the topography of the uninitiated. A pavement tsunami.

SIX

The landscape has changed imperceptibly. There are lakes, now; I glimpse two of them from the compartment window of the train. Below me, the rhythmic clackety-clunk of the rails. The train wends its way along a river. Is it the Rhône? I've only ever followed its course on a map. I'm not even sure of the direction in which the river is flowing, nor of the country that may have laid claim to its origins. I wonder: Is the river flowing away from, or toward Switzerland? It is difficult to tell, as I am in flatland, now. Everything is greened by leafy trees—it must be spring. The door of the train compartment slides open and the train conductor looks in. He is of formidable build; in fact, his chest is so large it takes up all the available space in the compartment door. He must duck his head to enter. *Ludovic Tézier*, I think to myself, immediately recognizing the world-renowned baritone born on French soil—in Marseilles, to be correct. His mouth has been shaped by his speaking of the French tongue, but the curl of his lip is most certainly from elsewhere. When I saw him in the role of the villain in the March 19, 2011 performance of Donizetti's opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor* (live-streamed from the Metropolitan Opera,

New York), with black hair that flowed in curls down to his collar and his nose in profile, which looks not aquiline, but Roman, he ceased to be French altogether. It may have had something to do with the fact that he sang in Italian. But his gestures spoke to me more loudly, of other origins. I suspected that more likely than not, he had other tribal affiliations—not exactly to the indomitable *Astérix le Gaulois* of the popular cartoon series, forever holding out against the Romans with his warriors—but to something more remote, a far-off mountain range in Romania, perhaps? It was mere conjecture to begin with, but now I'm suddenly convinced. He is a descendant of a certain Romany tribe; he belongs with the gypsies. And before that—further removed, still? Who were his people? Perhaps we should all map our origins, trace the flow of our present lives back to our ancestral headwaters. But wait a minute: Am I on the right train? My gaze is drawn to the polished brass buttons on the conductor's uniform, each one bearing a miniature insignia resembling a coat of arms. The conductor nods at me, full of vigor, punches a double hole in my ticket, and hands it back to me: *Mais oui*, he tells me. It is at this very instant of his reassurance that I'm able to connect the dots. *Bien sur*—quite naturally. It is true: My ancestral brain has always known that rivers originate somewhere high up in the mountains. But the word *mountain* seems all too generic. I replace it with another word, reach for something more heartfelt: *The Alps*, the place of origins, where rivers have their beginnings. Headwaters, as the dictionary describes them, the source of tributary streams. I lean back against the upholstered seat. Yes, I have boarded the right train, after all. And now, at this moment, I am comfortably seated in the compartment of the train that seems to roll back in time—back, toward the country of my origins. Back, toward Switzerland.

SEVEN

Still, I find the topography confusing. The outer territory doesn't seem to match my inner map. "But the mountains are *behind* me," I try to tell the conductor in my dream, insistently, as if I had been called upon to defend myself. At second glance, the conductor isn't Ludovic Tézier, after all. He has an astonishing head of hair; its hues, blue-black and gorgeous, bring out the blue tones in his uniform. Obviously an inherited trait, his hair speaks loudly to me of his ancestry. His looks are Indian, I decide—not East Indian, as from the country of India—but American Indian, or Native Indian, as we used to say. Later, the word became *Aboriginal Peoples*. *Indigenous Tribes*. Or *First Nations*, as in *Sinixt*. Over the course of the forty-two years since I set foot in the country of Canada, many other words have been added to my vocabulary. Designations have changed a number of times, along with their connotations, to suggest a change in meaning, to reflect a new understanding, a shift in consciousness.

My respect grew exponentially. My vocabulary expanded. It stretched my memory, deepened my appreciation of the caretakers of this land, the ones who were here before us. Of those who were here first: *First Peoples*. Tributary tribes. Tribal tributaries. A river formed by ancestors.

EIGHT

Quite often, we are brought to that which we must know by a circuitous route. I look down, at the spots of dried blood on the sleeve of my grey coat. “Just think, Granny, you could have lost an eye.” My grandson is referring to my recent stumble against the edge of the sidewalk, right in front of Waits News in Nelson, at the corner of Baker and Ward. He wants me to count my lucky stars. “You’re so lucky, Granny. You could have had a concussion. Your nose could have been scraped off by the cement.” I shudder at the thought of my *schnozzola*, gone forever—envisioning the entire side of my face chipped off, as from some marble statue of Greek antiquity recently rescued from a shipwreck in the Aegan Sea by the deep-sea diver, Jacques Cousteau. The day my face hit the pavement was March 11th, 2011. The horror of my crash against the pavement is compounded by an instinctive fear of disfigurement. It overlaps with a trauma of an infinitely more ferocious kind. The news that hit the newsstand that very day, at the corner of Baker and Ward, are of a devastating 9.0-magnitude earthquake and tsunami striking Japan. I wake as if from a nightmare. Yes, I feel lucky, indeed, and I vow to put it to good use over the next little while. When I wake from a dream, I note it down as a way of trying to catch up with myself, of not losing the connection with where I’ve been. The daytime adds dreams of its own, and at night, preparing for sleep, I fervently wish for a sequel.

NINE

So far, no sequel has come. Except for the almost accidental discovery I made while glancing at a map that the place where the waters of the Rhône River join the Mediterranean Sea happens to be Marseilles—*Massalia*—the oldest city in France, founded by the Greeks in 600 B.C. This fact, by virtue of the logic inherent in the language of dreams, seems to further the illusion that there is a coherence, an integrity to the events that have been unfolding, especially in view of the motifs that have cropped up so far on my journey by train. I fall to thinking: Marseilles, the actual birth place that gave rise to Ludovic Tézier, the baritone who performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, happens to be, at the same time, the very place where *Rhodanus*, the mighty Rhône, ceases to have an individual existence. The river gives up its life when it flows into the Mediterranean—which, if I am to continue with my line of reasoning,

brings me to the realization that the train I had boarded in Chambéry is moving—as if in confirmation of the logic of paradox generally accepted only be dreamers in a dream—in a direction that is opposite to the flow of the river. *Against the current*. Before me stands the train conductor. *Mais oui*, he nods, as if to affirm that it is only natural, after such a lengthy absence, for individuals to be motivated by the desire to return to their origins, much like the lengthy journey undertaken by the salmon upon completion of their life cycle, backward, from the ocean to the river that spawned them. The question still remains whether the map I consulted in order to locate Marseilles was in actuality a real map. I may have imagined it. And to carry my premise a step further, I may have dreamt it up one night, not too distantly in the past.

TEN

During my waking hours I ache for closure. I seem to be going around in circles. The plot seems flimsy at best, and the characters hardly have a life of their own. Only the train seems real; it serves as a vehicle, a means of transport between life as I may have imagined it and life as it takes shape on the page. In that sense, the rails may also function as a possible thoroughfare to other dimensions of writing; the whole becomes an exercise in divination, a means of revealing its ultimate purpose or goal—destiny and destination wrapped into one. The fabric of fiction, far from being flimsy, now seems substantive. It mimics life with all its disparate elements, yet by virtue of its cohesiveness, it is all of one piece. The need to check up on things is a uniquely Swiss trait. I reach for the atlas, double-checking to verify where, exactly, the Rhône merges with the Mediterranean Sea. As it turns out, that place isn't Marseilles at all. Fastidiousness is another Swiss trait. I discover the exact place to be the width of two fingers west from there, translating into a distance of roughly a hundred kilometers. *La Camargue* is the name of a marshy delta region formed by the two forks of the Rhône, home to an ancient, sturdy breed of small horses who, over centuries and possibly thousands of years, have adapted to living in harsh surroundings. It is here, amidst pastures, salt flats and wetlands that the white ponies run free. The black and white photographs collected in a book about this small corner of wilderness fell into my hands when I was seventeen. My imagination was fired by the images of the horses, their manes swept up by their own, wild running. Before that, unbridled passion had been something I may have been yearning for, but had barely dared to imagine. These images gave license, made conscious my own, still sublimated desire to be as free as the wind—like the gypsies, *les Gitans*, on their annual pilgrimage to the Camargue. Here, in the seaside village of Saintes-Maries, they have gathered to honor Black Sara, the mythic patron saint of the Romany people. Her statue,

wrapped in gold cloth, is escorted from the crypt of the 12th century Romanesque cathedral in a grand procession by men wearing black hats and carrying lances. I am lost in the crowd. From where I'm standing, I catch a glimpse of Black Sara, whose boat is said to have washed ashore here, long ago, and who, legend reveals, set out from Upper Egypt after the Crucifixion. I watch her being carried out to sea by riders on white horses, high above the crowd. The jubilation around me grows ecstatic, reaches a crescendo as horses' manes and flaring nostrils are momentarily lost in the waves, and the Black Madonna is reunited with the sea. I feel a spray of champagne droplets landing on my forehead. Exuberance is the color of sea foam. It is carried into the bars at night, erupts into bursts of flamenco guitar. Captivating Hungarian strings, jazz riffs, tunes squeezed from accordions, husky voices belting out songs in French and Catalan. A gypsy woman plays her tambourine. Fierce laughter surrounds me, and everywhere, in the gleam of dark eyes, I see reflected candlelight. What is Ludovic Tézier, the baritone, doing here in this crowd? The bar is filled with smoke. I reach for the package of *Gitanes* cigarettes someone has left lying on the small table in front of me. I have come to party with the gypsies.

ELEVEN

Time appears to have stopped in Chambéry. The house, built by Jean-Jacques Rousseau for his mistress, Thérèse Le Vasseur—who later became the mother of his children, and whom he married only some ten years before the end of his life—dates from the middle of the eighteenth century, an era of great artistic awakening referred to as the French Enlightenment. The house is very *Savoyard* in character, one could say. Rousseau is considered one of the greatest figures of the French Enlightenment. I came upon his great statue in a public garden situated on a small island in Lake Geneva when I was eighteen—a seated figure classically alluding to Socrates, his philosopher's robes emphasizing that he was a man of learning. But Rousseau's family originally hailed from France. The statue erected in Chambéry in Rousseau's honor depicts him as a historical figure, standing atop a great, sculpted rock, his right hand in the pocket of his tailored button-down coat, as was the fashion of gentlemen of the eighteenth century. As the train nears Swiss soil, it occurs to me that I will be crossing a border that may, in fact, have been non-existent in Rousseau's lifetime. The *Savoie* region, a former duchy of southeast France, western Switzerland, and northwestern Italy, did not become part of France until 1860—almost a century after Rousseau's death. I feel great reluctance at the thought of leaving France. It is the country of my second language. But it comes first when I think in terms of love affairs; my first love affair happened to be with French. I refer to the map once

more: What connects Chambéry with Geneva is quite obviously the Rhône. The name is written in italics—*Le Rhône*—implying that this particular river is considered to be of the male gender, whereas the French word, *la rivière*, implies that all rivers are of the female persuasion. My finger traces its undulating course. Having learned to trust in the inverse and sometimes paradoxical language of dreams, I remember that all rivers have the ability to flow backward with imaginative ease.

TWELVE

Geneva was the place of my first contact with the French language. It appealed to my imagination, fitted my temperament, and gave me a chance to reinvent myself. I would even go as far as to say that I received my first taste of freedom *en français*. There, in a remodeled seventeenth-century house located on the outskirts of Geneva, in the village of Vévrier, at the foot of *Mont Salève*, I lived as an au pair girl with an architect's family. We would cross the mountain by car early in the day to shop in France, where butter and honey were cheap to buy. Our return necessitated a brief, verbal declaration, after which the border official would nod, issue a stamp, and allow us back into Switzerland. It was as easy as that. It was my job to procure a slender crust of French bread—*la flute*—along with the daily newspaper, *La Tribune*, at the corner kiosk. I learned to say, *Bonjour, Monsieur Burky*, and *Au revoir, Madame*. But I felt utterly stumped when it came to learning the French word for vacuum cleaner. *L'aspirateur*, translated quite literally, as the inhaler. No, I told myself, its job is neither to *inspire*, nor to *aspire*, but rather to suck up dirt—every day, except on Sundays.

THIRTEEN

Memory is rather forgiving of the small instances of our imprecision. Far from being precise, fiction succeeds by its ability to dip into the vast region called memory. It succeeds by its verity. Like *cinéma-vérité*; its function is to document facts that cannot, ultimately, be verified. In fiction, the improbable is made to look probable. In that sense, it is representation, an approximation of reality. The date of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami remains indelibly inscribed in my memory. It happened to coincide with the day I hit my head on the pavement in front of Waits News at the corner of Baker and Ward, the location it has occupied since the 1940s. Something hidden from my sight stopped me; I stumbled and lost my footing. I felt as if I had been intercepted; I had been felled by unseen forces. I returned as if from battle: seven stitches; a warrior's eyebrow. Similarly, the powerful news of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan had assailed me. I felt compelled to stop. Fiction may give us the ability to jump over the gap, making the unthinkable thinkable. It creates a bridge

from the personal to the unknown, to what is elusive, to consequences yet to be imagined. Cut from the same cloth as dreams, it challenges the conventions of reality. By veering toward the mythical, it explores our *ideas* of reality and much like surrealism leaves us to grapple with the open-endedness of metaphor. It has the ability to leap across borders; it can shake us up like an earthquake by making known to us aspects of reality we had considered beyond the parameters of experience. It is heroic in its capacity to describe what is essentially indescribable, and by that very process, paradoxically, carries within it the threat of our annihilation.

FOURTEEN

I should have paid attention. I should have been more awake during our lessons in geography, when our secondary school teacher, Mr. Meng, would hold forth, tracing the course of the Rhône River on the large map of Switzerland with the help of his long, wooden stick. Consulting the much smaller version of our school map, which has survived countless moves and travels since then, I come upon the city of Chambéry quite unexpectedly, this time. The place, recorded in bold, capital letters, is located beyond the confines of the Swiss border, almost out of sight, in the lower left-hand-side corner of the map—relegated to the bottom as it were. The thick, red line indicates the train route that more or less follows the course of the river, while the dotted interruptions speak of the presence of tunnels. To travel by train is easy. The distance between Chambéry and Geneva is a mere forty-six miles as the crow flies. Even if I were to navigate in dream country, it should take no more than a couple of hours, at most.

FIFTEEN

Several months have passed. I look down at my wrist, no longer held stiffly in its cast. I have made a good recovery. On that long-ago night in May, in the seaside village of Saintes-Maries, I must have been dealt some lucky cards. I congratulate myself: The stage has been set. Do I hear whispered comments coming from the wings? *Your use of the dream as an instigator to your writing is nothing but a ruse; a clever piece of artifice designed to pull in the reader.* Pull the reader—into what? On the contrary: I have managed to *locate* the reader on the map, and at the same time, I have positioned my life within its confines. The story seems to have a shape—a shape that can be identified. *But your characters are constructs,* the whisperer persists. *You've got a tin ear for dialogue.* Wait a minute. Characters—what characters? *Touché. My point, precisely.* I light a match, draw on my cigarette; I pick a stray filament of dark tobacco off my tongue. This conversation is starting to remind me of some clever,

academic exercise. I smoke my *Gitanes*, its packaging emblematic, alluding to whitecaps and the Mediterranean sea, to the silhouette of the gypsy woman with her tambourine, black against the firelight—images held fast in perpetuity, as is possible only by the hand of memory. But the train and the rails it glides upon, I venture to ask, now blowing out a languorous breath of smoke; wouldn't you agree that they provide the story with a narrative line? There is, at least, an illusion of forward momentum. *The story is forever on the verge of taking shape*. Like the dream that gave rise to it, the story must remain an open gesture. It beckons the reader with a promise that sown into every departure there is, already, the seed of an arrival. The only thing I am certain of, at this moment in time, is that the train is bound for Geneva. And I'm almost certain that my arrival there will be greeted by a certain personage—someone I've known all my life. By then, of course, I will no longer be the only character in my story.

SIXTEEN

All trains in Switzerland arrive on time, every time, without exception. It is this absolute punctuality that makes it possible for someone like my mother to be able to climb on board a train in Geneva and to find me there, comfortably seated in my compartment. An impromptu rendezvous, you could say.

"Imagine, I had only ten minutes to change trains," she says, still breathless, but pleased. "Look what I found for you." Reaching into her purse, she pulls out a white paper bag from the *Confiserie Carousel* in Geneva, and spills out the entire contents onto her lap for me to admire. Foil-wrapped chocolates, very colorful; the wrappings feature famous literary and artistic personalities from Switzerland. She hands me one of them. "Ah," I say, recognizing the image of the historic personality clad in his philosopher's toga, but my mother is much too busy now, deciding what to order from the man who is inching his service wagon along the aisle.

"Two café lattés," she orders, without bothering to consult with me, which she rarely does, anyway.

I peel the foil-clad chocolate and smooth out the image on my knee. "Well, if it isn't Jean-Jacques Rousseau," I say, hoping to pique my mother's interest. I hadn't expected him to be turning up in Geneva. But then, again, why not?

"Rousseau?" My mother has bitten off the head of her chocolate personage—Paul Klee, I believe. "The *Cointreau* cream filling is the *Confiserie's* specialty," she says, scrunching up her foil wrapper with hardly a glance. Her deep-set eyes look at me inquisitively. "I always thought Rousseau was French."

“He was born on Swiss soil. In Geneva, to be precise.”

My mother shakes her head, sips at her latté. “Didn’t he have something to do with the French Revolution?”

“Rousseau made a strong case for democratic government. His political philosophy influenced the French Revolution. When he died, Napoleon Bonaparte was just nine years old.” Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I recognize another reason why Rousseau may have chosen to put in an appearance in this manner, so late in my writing about train travel. “Do you know that Rousseau is considered to be the forerunner of the modern autobiography?” I add, thinking that the mere mention of him will somehow validate the increased focus on subjectivity and introspection that appears to have crept into my own writings of late.

My mother has placed a little pillow behind the curvature of her back to make herself more comfortable. “But it’s memoirs, not autobiography, that are all the rage these days, I thought.” She has picked out another literary personality from among the small handful left in her lap—Max Frisch would be my guess, judging from the trademark presence of his pipe—and pulls off the colorful wrapper. “Is yours vanilla or mocha?” she asks, pointing her chin to indicate my chocolate Rousseau.

I look closely at the filling. “Rousseau? He is neither, I think.”

And thus, thanks to my mother, this relatively short segment of my journey is allowed to end on a rather sweet note.

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Dead Crow and the Spirit Engine

Sean Arthur Joyce

—for Barry Lamare

Prologue: Dead Crow

There is a medicine story that tells of Crow's fascination with his own shadow. He kept looking at it, scratching it, pecking at it, until his shadow woke up and became alive. Then Crow's shadow ate him. Crow is Dead Crow now.

—Jamie Sams & David Carson, *Medicine Cards*, (Santa Fe, NM; Bear & Co., 1988)

Dead Crow. Jackdaw crook. Split-tongued muse. Dark rook in a bleak rain.

Time has filed down my voice with a rasp. Spells, incantations, and alchemy interest me not at all, except as artifacts of what I already know. Blood-cloaked loner on a trail of fingerbones, my only interest in bones is to pick them clean. My eye black as the womb before star-seeds snap life into being. Black as the feathers that fly straight from the eye of God. Caw! I speak and it is so.

Dead Crow. Shadow eater. Blackfeather acrobat. Walks with a slight limp.

In my realm, stones on the beach are black embers, barely cooled. Leaves raven-sheeny in red moonlight. That sound is not wind but souls drifting past. Wind a deft pianist and every leaf another key. I've given up flying because thought is faster. If I only need to go short distances—hell, the walk will do me good. Reality here moves like mercury, not iron. Stare into my left eye—Caw! I dare you. See what happens.

Dead Crow. Charcoal sunfire. Bleak prophet. Speaks with a slitted grin.

In my realm, thought translates directly into reality. Karma stops lying on its ass in front of the TV all day. Equal forces are met with equal and instant reactions. You think you hate your enemy and want him dead, and Caw!—he's dead. You wonder one summer afternoon why grass isn't orange instead of green. The entire landscape turns Mandarin Impressionist before your eyes. You think something insulting about the person you love and she cries. Suddenly loving becomes much, much simpler. Then again, maybe not.

Dead Crow. World sculptor. Michelangelo of tongues. Sings in a broken key.

Once I was white as Antarctica, but no more. My body black as a sky scattered with a star's ashes. Once, my world was green and full of flowers, just like this one—meadows alive with birdsong. Skies clear as mountain crystal. Then one day Skunk came by. Be careful, Crow, she said. Be proud of your thought magic and all the wonderful things it makes. But be careful! It was then I began to realize—Caw! I was a god.

Dead Crow. Stone render. Planet furnace. Semen of dusky angels.

Every day, Skunk would come by and warn me, Be careful! At first, I just laughed her off. But my patience flaked away like mica. Finally one day, when Skunk came into my sight—Caw! I exploded. My mind darkened—a total eclipse of rage. I saw a world engulfed in flame and it was so—every living thing charred black. Now I was Dead Crow, King of Shadows.

Dead Crow. Black curtain slasher. Hell-delver. Well of constant sorrow.

You can imagine the comedown—from Sovereign of Shades, Alchemist of Secrets, Magi of Creation—to carrion eater. From a thousand languages to a hinge's rusty growl. Exiled to a single planet, no less. Worst of all—Caw! A scavenger kicked around by humans, who shit their own nests. You want evolution? Give me somebody who can think before they act. Still, I take consolation from the poets, who translate straight from Earth's core. Her signs and wonders are not in vain.

Dead Crow. Arbiter of secrets. Dimension-bender. Shaman incognito.

Emperor of the Crossroads, I nest over the forked path. The Book of Secrets is bound in crow feathers. You want all the arcane equations? Hyperspace, wormholes, time travel? Caw! I've seen the universe spread in every direction like strings of pearls. Every pearl another world, another dimension skating sideways across time. Past, present and future nothing more than thought. And every thought another world budding on the World Tree.

Dead Crow. Stormcloud dancer. Paradox miner. Constellation surfer.

You think this world is everything there is? Caw! We look at the stars from the bottom of a well. This reality we signed on for—this world order? We made it all up. We can agree it has failed and sign off. Make up a new one. Dead Crow grins that long-beaked grin that has been the envy of every great smart-ass since the dawn of Time. But then again, I could be lying. Why not find out for yourself?

1. Birth of Crow

Creation's womb swells
with stars
colliding—

black blood drop
falling through space
is blessed by light

and becomes thought
without form.
And falling

into Earth's atmosphere,
thought is blessed by air
and becomes feather,

to skiff the ponds of heaven
and eventually
become wings.

And falling through cloud
wing is blessed by rain
to become body,

the strength to rise up
out of Hell
and ashes.

And falling
through snowtipped wind,
body and wing

are blessed with breath
that they might speak
and continue living.

And landing
on the topmost branches
of Ararat's ancient cedar,

Crow is born.

2. Afterbirth

Crow plucks the afterbirth of light
from his wings
and starts cawing for answers.

Why? Why here? On this planet?
His voice—a bag of charcoal
dragged over dry stone—

irritates the other animals,
who refuse to talk to him.
When the gods make Man,

Crow begins to realize the enormity
of the task before him—
hunching his shoulders

for the long haul, the sticks
he knows will be thrown at him
every time he opens his beak

to warn of another Rome or Babylon.

3. Arrival

Once I was white as Antarctica, but no more.

Just call me the Crab Nebula outlaw.
Dog star wild card.
Cassiopeia's Twilight Angel.

The two-by-two of paradox
makes poor food for a Crow.
A word to the wise. Never

let yourself go at a banquet
of the gods. You're bound
to end up the goat to somebody's

trickster, like I did. I'll never
get that goddess's laugh
out of my head. *Caw!* Inanna, Aphrodite,

Madonna, they're all the same to me—
walking Chernobyls, with faces
to die for. Enough to melt a god

in his lead boots. I never
should have looked into that magic
mirror. Next thing I knew,

I had a whanging headache
like a hangover on speed,
and found myself on Earth.

How I got here from the other side
of the galaxy is a complete
conundrum. In a heartbeat,

an exile hurled from the sun.
Bloody gods stole my perfection
of white feathers.

Had to find a glacier lake
to see myself in. Black
as The Makers' black humour.

Still, as planets go,
this one ain't bad. Plenty of water,
hazelnut trees dropping fruit,

dead bodies everywhere.
I can see their spirits rise
in morning mist.

It's what keeps me alive, this beak
that can sniff out the dead
from forty miles away.

I began to see what the dead see,
began to feel I was wearing
their eyes. And—*Caw!*

What's my mission here?
To scratch off the days
foraging for clues

in a holocaust boneyard?
To chew up liver blood-raw
in the desperate hope

it'll spit up the omens and cures?
Besides, who listens to prophecy,
these days? Don't be fooled though.

I know what I'm doing. I've stared
long enough into the water
to see what's on the other side.

4. Hunger

Dead Crow, tell me about this ache.

You want to know what hungry is? *Caw!*
When you don't stop at the bone 'til
you've sucked out the marrow. Just try

going without food for a few days.
After awhile, you'd eat your own stomach

to stop the pangs. And don't give me

shit about *you are what you eat*, or
I am what I am. Moses stole that from me
to give to that maniac Yahweh.

The truth is somewhere in the middle.
I am what I am and what I am
is a little bit of everything.

Once I ate the cast-off skin of a snake
and my black belly ached
for the touch of cool green grass.

When I ate my first deer—*Caw!*
I could feel speed twitch in my wings
and knew what it was to be hunted.

I recall a buck watching me
through grieving eyes, antlers
pivoting a eulogy and a warning.

I decided not to risk being flattened
and scooped an updraft.
The hieroglyph of a meaty ribcage

signalled from glacial rockface.
But as I slid Earthward, I saw the hunched
spring of Eagle, ready to weave the air

into blade-tipped hurricane.
We eyeballed across the shale,
the smashed body. But I blinked.

I'm no match for the gold-fired
inferno of those eyes. Lucifer, indeed.
I've stared into his abyss

and let me tell you, he's nobody
special. You, me or anyone
on a hellish day—*Caw!* Slipping from

marital spat to burning down city hall.
You want to walk the material world,

you pay a price. You walk

with a star furnace in your belly
whose flames you'll feed the rest of your days.
The stomach and the womb are the sun's twins.

5. Empires

The stomach and the womb are the sun's twins.

One thing about humans,
you generate some tasty garbage.
From the time you were still squatting

around campfires to the day
you started slotting yourselves
into steel and glass cubicles, that much

has never changed. *Caw!* The bigger
the village, the bigger the garbage pile.
Don't get me wrong, I'm not ungrateful.

You and I have what we might call
a symbiotic relationship—where
you find Human, you find Crow.

Children sometimes watch me
tearing tendon from bone. Their eyes
seem to ask: *Why do you eat the dead?*

Listen kids, our spirits forget
they're tied to bodies and need meat
to survive. But the children are relentless,

and need to know *why*. The apple buds
of their minds have yet to open
to the stark paradoxes that govern reality.

And anyway, what could prepare them
for the meat carnivals of empire?
Blood for survival soon becomes bloodsport

and all bets are off. *Caw!* I've lost count

of how many times I've watched empires swell
like jewelled sores and then implode

into bone-licking sandstorms in the desert.
To have ghosts here would imply presence
in these fractured obelisk avenues

slumping from the weight of legend. Egypt,
Babylon, Rome, Britain, America—the voices
spiral into my ear to grieve for endlessly

repeated horrors—the dead all around me
desperate to undo karma's time bomb.
But it's useless. Over and over again,

things slide backward into filth
crushing innocents in fists of ash. At least
I have plenty of brothers and sisters now

to help me scour the battlefields clean.
Again and again I've asked The Makers: *Why?*
and, *Why me?* But no reply, as usual.

The empty hands of prayer focus the mind
and still the anxious heart, but answers
are few. Even the temples are silent,
altars cracking in the clash of ape gods
hammering at the invisible
for some way out of this blank purgatory.

I never wanted this assignment in the first place.
Yet here I am—Crow—God of Shadows,
siren of the soul's departure, unwilling pariah.

Outsider of all outsiders.

WAYNE COLE, born in Minnesota in 1944, immigrated to Canada in 1968. A retired librarian and educator, Wayne has directed academic and public libraries, learning centres, and has chaired two college English departments. His writing includes “Canadian Railroad as a Symbol in Literature” (*Canadian Literature*) and “Al’s Story” (*The Romance of Libraries*). His memoir, “The Hole,” about the Civil Rights Movement, is required course reading in the School of Social Work curriculum at San Francisco State University.

O.C.

Wayne Cole

WHEN HE DIED, he died hard. He was standing in the hallway, phone in hand, making a call. Something popped inside. Maybe it was his heart. He fell. Hit the bare wood floor. Hit it with a bang. She heard a loud thud, came to look, and phoned the ambulance. “Dead before he hit the floor,” she said later at the funeral. That’s what the paramedics had told her.

No suffering. That was his way. Could sleep astride a picket fence, he used to say. Never dreamed, either, he said. Everyone dreams, she scoffed. Not him, he said.

What did he want to do now, they asked, when he reached the Bardo.

The Bardo? Where was he? This wasn’t Heaven or Hell or even Purgatory? Had they sent him to the wrong place?

No, he was here in the Bardo where he was meant to be. He could stay if he liked. Or he could go to a place called Nirvana, which was like heaven. Or, he could go back, go back to Earth. Which did he want to do?

He wanted to go back, to look after her, his wife. He loved her.

But go back how? As what?

Not as a man, he decided. She’d never remarry. She didn’t even like men that much. She loved cats, though. He’d come back as a cat. Then she’d love him, finally.

So he did.

The cat went back.

But he was a stray, an alley cat, the same as he had been when he was alive, alive as in his old life as a man, that is. Modest and ordinary, without airs or pretensions. Now he was just a humble alley cat because that’s all he knew how to be.

She, however, was into fancy cats, long-haired Persians, Siamese, and other highbreds. Alley cats she had enough of in her life.

So she named him ‘O.C.’ for ‘Outside Cat’ and never let him in. She

fed him, though. That is, she put a dish of food out for him, out on the back porch each morning. Where and how he got his water is anyone's guess; for there were no lakes or rivers nearby. He mewed and cried, and even tried to sneak inside once or twice when she opened the back door to hang out laundry or to sit and read in the shade on warm summer afternoons. He wanted inside. It was, after all, his own house he wanted into.

But it wasn't really his any more.

It's okay in fairytales to get to go back, but that's not how things work in real life. In real life, you don't get to go home again, not really. The past is a place that's in your heart. It's not out there. And you can't crawl up inside your own heart. It's too hard. It can't be done. If you try, you'll just die all over again.

So, the cat went back, but he couldn't go home again.

He sat on the back porch and twitched his tail and mewed. But his cat voice couldn't say what he wanted to say. It sounded like any other cat's mew; it sounded like a cry for food, a cry to be petted, and if kept up, the cry of a pest, not of a husband who had died and was trying to explain to his wife who he really was.

Not roughly, for that was not her way with cats, but gently she'd pick him up, scooping her hand under his belly and carrying him to the edge of the porch where she'd let him drop a foot or so down into the soft grass below. She told him he had to stay outdoors; that's where he belonged.

When she sat outside on the porch—at the table he had built for her with his own hands two months before he died—sitting, doing her crossword puzzles, he would jump back up on the porch and rub the sides of his body against her bare legs, as cats will do. And he purred. That's not what he wanted. He wanted to talk, to tell her everything. But a purr was all that would come out of his throat.

He wanted her attention. He wanted her to pet him. He would hop up into the chair next to her, reach up and place his front paws on the table and butt his head against her hand, the one holding the pen that was trying to write letters in the little white squares on the crossword puzzle. And he would mew softly. And she'd sometimes stop writing letters in the little boxes long enough to reach out and pet him a bit, pet him absently while she read the next crossword clue, and, always, with a cigarette dangling from her lips.

Then he would smile inside to himself, and maybe if you were to look close enough, you could even tell he was smiling. It's hard to tell with cats, though. They always look like they're smiling, even when they're not.

When he was alive, when he was a human, he used to smoke cigarettes too. But then he quit when Health Canada finally admitted smoking caused

cancer. Quit cold. Definite, like everything else he did. She never did, though. She never quit. He asked her to, but she wouldn't. It was okay when he was alive, when he was a man. But now it was too hard. Cats don't like smoke. Soon, he stopped climbing up on the chair, and stayed down on the ground instead where there was less smoke, and contented himself rubbing his body against her legs.

That was during the summer, during July and August and September. And then it starting getting cold, and then she no longer came out to sit on the porch. He still came around, and she still put out food for him every morning, and he still mewed his greetings to her when she opened the back door to stoop down to set out his small bowl of food.

But it wasn't the same.

It wasn't what he had expected it would be, and after a while he stopped coming.

Once, in December, she saw his paw prints in the snow outside the back door and then nothing.

On a clear, cold December night, he walked out into the middle of the highway and sat down, and waited.

She died in the spring.

D. STANDFAST was born in Alliston, Ontario and raised on the Manitoulin Island. After high school, he moved to Toronto, then later to Kitchener. He's worked as a labourer, a field archaeologist, an office furniture installer, a customer service representative and a mail processor/claim assistant. In April 2010, he graduated from the Educational Assistant Program at Conestoga College. The following November, the Waterloo Region District School Board hired him as a supply educational assistant.

Medicine Rainhard

(Excerpt from a Novel-in-Progress)

D. Standfast

WHEN LUCY McCOMAS looked into the bathroom mirror in the morning, she wanted to go back to bed and never get up. She'd seen shit that looked better. She asked herself how in the hell she was going to go anywhere. She had an appointment with Mrs. Faraday downtown in an hour and a half.

She slammed the mirror with the side of her fist, rattling the bottles behind it. She was tempted to call her cousin Ray and have him come and check out her face. She knew it wouldn't change one thing about it, but was certain it would feel good in one way to have him freak, and then if not hammer the crap out of Larry Peterson, at least make a respectable effort. What stopped her was the memory of Ray's bulging eye from the last time he and Larry had danced in their own reckless way.

She showered, blow-dried her hair, then pasted on a thick coat of make-up. But it was like trying to hide criss-crossing cracks in a window with Scotch tape. The four Aspirins she swallowed were about as effective for the pain.

Matthew and Timothy were sprawled on the living room floor watching TV. She fed them Sugar Crisps and sat down on the sofa drinking coffee and stared at the TV herself. They looked sideways at her, but said nothing about what they saw.

Larry had shown up last night. He'd been working on a car at a friend's house sixteen miles away and another friend had called there and told him Dozy Fournier was hanging out with Lucy. By the time Larry's Cougar skidded into the driveway, Dozy's Dodge was gone. He found empty beer bottles and an ashtray heaped with butts on the coffee table. No drugs in him, just four beers, he and Lucy fought, Matthew and Timothy huddling upstairs. The fight lasted less than five minutes. He hit her twice in the face, and she broke the middle finger on his left hand, split his

upper lip, bloodied his nose and kicked him in the balls. Throughout it all he didn't mention Dozy. Just called her a slut repeatedly. Dozy supplied him with drugs, and he owed Dozy money. She knew where his allegiance lay.

Twenty minutes before her appointment, ten of which it would take her to walk to the Town Office at the other end of town, she had intended to deposit the kids at a neighbour's house, but her eleven-year-old cousin Medicine Rainhard rambled in before the kids were ready to go. Freshly mussed as if she'd just rolled out of bed, which was the case, Medicine filled a bowl with Sugar Crisps in the kitchen, her first food of the day, and sat cross-legged with it on the sofa.

"You wanna watch these guys while I go downtown for a bit?" Lucy asked. "Just keep them off the street. I don't wanna have to scrape anybody off the pavement when I get back."

"Ten-four," Medicine said, something she'd heard on part of a movie about truckers that she'd watched on TV last night. She tried not to look at Lucy's face, noticing the damage there the minute she'd walked in. She suspected the reason for it, but didn't have the nerve to ask.

She burped, the milk in her cereal tasting sour, and watched Lucy flip on sunglasses and carry the damage out the front door.

* * *

The Town Office occupied the second floor of the two-story fieldstone building across the street from the liquor store behind the Shell station. Getting to it demanded a longer walk than Lucy preferred, and not because of the distance.

The main street was not excessively busy, but bubbled with enough activity to itch against her skin. Walking fast, she passed glittering cars and a sputter of pedestrians, some of whom she knew. She grimaced more than smiled, but said not one good morning or how are you. There was not a place in her that she could not feel her heart beating.

The sunglasses obscured her swollen, blackening eye, but not the red lump on her left cheek. It glowed like a light bulb under the shell of make-up.

It did not occur to her to take a different route.

Mrs. Faraday was Lucy's mother's allowance caseworker. Lucy climbed the stuffy stairway to the office and sat in one of the three padded chairs in the waiting room. The middle-aged woman, the secretary, at the desk at the side smiled at her and said good morning, how are you. Leaving her sunglasses on, Lucy said she was fine, then picked a *Chatelaine* off the glass coffee table and stuck her face into it. At exactly nine-fifteen, the door beside the secretary's desk opened, and Mrs. Faraday asked Lucy in.

* * *

Lucy sat with her bare knees together, hands clasped in her lap. And did

not remove her sunglasses. She stared at the front edge of Mrs. Faraday's desk. The top half of the wall behind Mrs. Faraday gleamed with the morning. Light flowed through the air like fluid. The parts of it that touched Lucy's face seemed to wash away the crust of makeup, exposing Larry's artwork with startling clarity. Mrs. Faraday's eyes had locked onto it the instant she had poked her head out to Lucy in the waiting room. She focused exclusively on it now.

Mrs. Faraday was spindly and in her early fifties. She had compassionate eyes, and except for the slightest of eye shadow, wore no make-up. The light from the window knifed through the frizzy tips of her wavy grey hair. After sitting for half of a minute observing Lucy silently, she removed her gold-framed glasses and cleaned the lenses with a Kleenex from the box on her desk. Lucy knew what was coming, and waited, huddling more than sitting in the chair. For the seventh time since stepping into the building, she told herself that she should have cancelled the appointment. But like many things in her life, she said to herself now, it was too fuckin' late.

"Not a pretty picture, is it?" she said, wanting to get the show on the road and head out. Silence wasn't what she craved right now.

With great delicacy, Mrs. Faraday finished cleaning her glasses, dropped the Kleenex in the wastebasket beside the desk, then returned the glasses to her face and settled a sad and disappointed look on Lucy.

"Well now," she said quietly. "To whom can we blame the injuries on your face? The usual culprit? And I suspect injuries, not injury. Bright as it is in here, sunglasses aren't exactly needed, are they?"

"Can't fool you, can I?"

Lucy hesitated for a moment, then peeled off the sunglasses. She was sure she saw Mrs. Faraday wince. The swollen eye looked like a crushed plum.

"Have you seen a doctor?" Mrs. Faraday asked.

"I'm not sick."

"You know what I mean. Are you in much pain?"

Lucy shrugged and watched her hands turn the sunglasses in her lap, her left eye blurry. "Some. But nothin' that I can't handle. With a little help from Aspirin."

"Can you see out of the eye?"

"Not as much as I would like. But I don't think I'll miss anythin' the next few days because of it. Nothin' my other eye won't catch."

She heard Mrs. Faraday sigh. It was always the same when she met with Mrs. Faraday and displayed evidence of an encounter with Larry. She couldn't help being a smart ass. She didn't know how else to approach it. Taking it too seriously seemed a waste of energy.

Shortly after the sigh, Mrs. Faraday's chair creaked. Lucy hoped she wasn't getting up to walk around and get a better look at today's state of

affairs. Mrs. Faraday had never been emotional in the office, but Lucy was a firm believer in the cliché: there's always a first time for everything. She couldn't stomach anybody's tears this morning.

"Would you like me to call the police since I'm sure you didn't?" Mrs. Faraday asked, leaning forward and resting her hand on the phone on the desk. "A creature like Larry Peterson needs to be treated the way he deserves. Which, I'm sure you know, the police are very good at."

Lucy smiled at the word 'creature'. It was the first time Mrs. Faraday had used it in relation to Larry. She hoped she would remember it the next time she saw him.

"I'd like nothin' better than for him to be treated the way he deserves," she said, and glanced at Mrs. Faraday. "But as I've said before, the bounce back from that would make what you see today look like a few scratches. And I just might have to kill him. Then where would we be?"

Or Ray would kill him, she thought. Same piece of shit in the end.

Mrs. Faraday sighed again and sat back from the phone. Lucy wanted to tell her that the world didn't follow straight lines, but lost interest. She'd probably told it to her more than once in the past. She hadn't come to the office to discuss Larry and the myriad spin-offs from him anyway. The appointment was to get her mother's allowance cheque bumped up to cover the nine-dollar increase in her rent. She re-hung her sunglasses, slid forward in her chair and pulled the new lease out of her back pocket. One who seldom carried a purse, she'd stuck it there.

* * *

Thinking straighter, she walked most of the way home on the street that ran parallel to the main street. The traffic was close to nothing there.

As soon as she entered the house, she headed for bed, telling Medicine, who was playing Monopoly with Matthew and Timothy on the living room floor, that she needed a nap. "Mind watchin' the kids some more?" she said on her way to the stairs. "This life is killin' me. I need sleep more than I need a million bucks right now. Wake me in an hour, okay?"

She didn't wait for an answer.

Medicine was losing at Monopoly, and figured it would take about an hour for her to possibly get in the vicinity of winning, so hanging around longer possessed a small elegance.

* * *

She wondered about the damage to Lucy's face, and got to hear about it in the evening. When Lucy climbed up out of her nap, not needing to be woken, Medicine returned home and read for the rest of the afternoon, then biked back after a supper of peanut butter sandwiches and blueberry Mr. Freezes.

A little later, Ray floated in on some of his mother's Codeine, Sarah Nehgahboh absent. He'd sifted away the afternoon with her, then had dropped her off on the Cleverstone Indian Reserve, hoping to get her

home before her father noticed through his alcoholic haze that she was somewhere else.

As soon as Ray saw Lucy's altered face he flew into a spittle-flying rage, the sweetness of the Codeine swooping aside. His own face had healed enough from his dance with Larry so that it was difficult to notice anything had been wrong without examining it closely. The pale markings that remained could have been discolorations due to the sun or his crappy lifestyle. When he stopped swearing enough to express a more detailed opinion about what had happened to Lucy, he blamed Dozy as much as he did Larry.

"Why do you let that asshole in the house? Give me one fuckin' even half-good reason you even let him in the yard? I've stepped on shit that's got more goin' for it than he has. Jesus Christ, Lucy—"

Lucy sent Matthew and Timothy out of the living room at the beginning of his tantrum. Medicine sat hugging her knees to her chest on the sofa, Lucy at the other end, Ray flailing around in front of them. When Medicine had lived in Toronto, she'd encountered nothing like what she had here, except on TV. Violent and shouting adults traversed no part of her life. Her parents had seldom disagreed about anything in front of her, and then never with raised voices. She understood few of the reasons for any of the conflict at Lucy's house, but suspected it concerned a dark region of adulthood that she would soon grow into, if she weren't careful. There had to be ways to avoid it, she was sure, but what those were, she had no clue. She hoped that by listening to it all something might materialize. As terrifying as it sometimes was to witness the fighting, she also couldn't help finding it exciting. She hated Larry, but whenever he'd started raising hell in the house she had never considered leaving even for a moment.

At the beginning of Ray's tantrum, Lucy had been electrified by the idea of Ray inflicting noteworthy wreckage and pain on Larry, but as the tantrum crashed on, she changed her mind. The images of Larry broken and bleeding that popped like flashbulbs in her head worked like an antidote on her anger and left her feeling sick in her stomach. She didn't have a lot of affection for Larry anymore, but what was there made it difficult for her to condone Ray's planned actions. He ranted about taking an axe handle and pounding some tender loving care into Larry, but the probable crunching as that wood connected with flesh and bone failed to generate the pleasure that she'd foreseen for herself this morning. She shifted uncomfortably on the sofa, leaning forward to the coffee table to tap ash off her cigarette more often than was necessary.

For a few moments, she stopped listening to Ray, then jerked forward and mashed out the cigarette, and stared fixedly at him.

"Stay out of it," she said icily, cutting him off. "You complain a lot about him, but he's nothin' to you. And think about this: Do you know what it's like to be hit by someone close to you?" She gave him time to

respond, but nothing came. “Well, it’s a lot different than just anyone off the street doin’ it,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean I need you and any army to look after me. I said I can handle it. Nothin’ you’d do would make a difference anyway. You know him. He’d just give it all back to you, all right?”

Her face was harder than the floor he stood on. From the expression in his eyes he looked as if she’d slapped him.

“All I’m fuckin’ tryin’ to do is help,” he said, hurt. “You want me to stand around doin’ nothin’—fine. Take care of yourself then. See if I fuckin’ care. Let assholes make themselves at home here. It’s your house. Burn it down, if you want.”

It took her nearly ten minutes to talk him down. Getting through to him that she appreciated his concern and didn’t mean to offend him chewed up all of her patience and gave her a headache.

The kicker that got him to settle down the most was her offhanded comment that Dozy had left two beers in the fridge. It jostled him into a rosier zone.

* * *

On his way to the kitchen, Ray followed his memory back to the perimeter of nothingness, and found no moment where anyone close to him had laid a hand on him in anger, even his father Ford. All he could find to examine in that volatile region of the universe were incidents in Lucy’s life, and Sarah’s. Thinking of those, especially the ones involving Sarah, jacked up his anger, but as the first beer settled into his stomach it dampened some of the fire. What the fuck business was it of his anyway? he asked himself. He had cascades of shit to crawl out from under every day without adding Lucy’s. If it wasn’t Ford heaving the shovel, it was Sarah’s dad. He scowled at the fridge and levered open the second beer. “Fuck it,” he said, and drank, then stood the bottle on the table. He wasn’t some superhero anyway, he pointed out to himself. If he were, he wouldn’t be stuck under all the godforsaken junk ramming down on his shoulders right this minute.

* * *

“You got anythin’ to say about it, ‘cine?” Lucy asked, looking at Medicine down the sofa, Ray at the fridge in the kitchen.

Medicine had never told Lucy that she hated Larry, and didn’t now. As to whether Larry’s treatment of Lucy wasn’t Ray’s business, she wasn’t sure. She scratched the freckles at the side of her nose and looked over at the TV, which, in a rare moment, was silent.

“Is he coming over, tonight?” she asked finally.

Lucy smiled. “Not unless he’s blind and can’t see Ray’s car out front. And do you really think he’ll leave before midnight after that blow of his?”

Medicine didn’t need to think about that before she responded.

* * *

She switched on the TV, but couldn't concentrate on it. Ray was sprawled in the easy chair drinking the second beer and going on about the two women who were missing, the first time Medicine had heard about them. He said the women were probably dead and buried in the bush somewhere, just stinking flesh now. Raped and who knows what else. Lucy said that they had probably run off and would turn up in a while. Medicine found it all interesting, but since she didn't know the women she felt too disconnected from them to feel much. She was drawn more to Ray's conclusion though. It sounded like something she'd read once in a book. Looking at the TV but not seeing it, she wondered if either of the women had someone in their life like Larry Peterson.

* * *

Medicine biked home at nine o'clock, Ray still in the easy chair. She left him more cheerful than when he'd arrived. The two beers he'd drunk had linked up with the remnants of his mother's Codeine still kiting around in him, and he was coasting across a smooth continent on a map that only he could follow.

As was her habit, she shared with her father none of what she'd learned at Lucy's house. She had a vocabulary more extensive than most kids her age, but wrapping any of the crap in that quadrant of the family into a logical sequence of words was beyond her ability. That, combined with her fear that her father would end her association with Ray and Lucy if he heard about any of the crap, stiffened her tongue more than adequately.

She intruded upon him in the living room, where he sat reading on the sofa. She halted a step inside the room and stood watching him, waiting for him to notice her. Two minutes passed, and his eyes did not rise. What she had to say wasn't on any deadline, but she preferred to get it out tonight. She took the proverbial deep breath and proceeded.

"Did you and Mom ever fight?" she asked without preamble.

The words seemed to have fallen into a crack somewhere. Then her father stirred and raised his head. He looked at her for a while, his eyes still not fully unfocused from the page he'd been reading. Waiting and thinking about her question, she could remember no loud words between him and her mother. But her memory could only encompass what she'd heard. It was what had been said out of her hearing that concerned her most.

"Not exactly fight," he said uncertainly, his eyes coming more into focus. "Your mother and I weren't like that. We aren't—weren't shouters."

"Did you have big arguments?"

"Depends on what you call big—but yes, I'd say sometimes. That's normal. As long as they're not vicious. What's got you thinking about that?"

He closed his book and laid it on the cushion beside him. His question

filled her mind as if composed of hundreds of more words than he'd used. She looked down at the coffee table.

"I just wanted to know is all," she said.

Expressionless, he watched her. A bony girl with freckles and tousled hair. She rubbed her nose.

"You been thinking about her a lot lately," he said tenderly.

"She belongs here."

"Yes, she does," he said unequivocally. "I've never wanted anything else."

"I'm glad you didn't fight."

"I'm glad too. I'm glad—" And the rest of the air that he needed to finish whatever he was going to say left him silently. If Medicine had been looking at him she would have observed a man who seemed to have shrunk physically.

His hands shaking and his face flustered, he picked up his book, opened it and reset his eyes onto it, but did not read.

Without being told, she understood that the conversation was over. But that was all that she truly understood tonight.

* * *

Four days later, Sid McComas looked uncomfortably upon the still colourful remains of his daughter Lucy's wounds and asked reluctantly about them, and heard what he expected. Larry Peterson's name sounding out nowhere, except everywhere between the lines. Anger pumped through him, but stayed under his skin. The last time he'd let loose to her about Larry because of a similar display of damage, they had argued hotly, and all that he had achieved was a headache and an upset stomach. This time he stared at her in silence, his face overflowing with knowing, the thoughts stamping around in him reflecting his nephew Ray's solution to the situation. She turned away, the shame in her eyes more prominent than the bones in her face.

JOHN LAUE's most recent poetry collection was the 2007 chapbook, *COLMA (City of the Dead and Elegy for Skeptics)*. His memoir, "My Mother and Me," was published by Outsider Press in the anthology *Different People, Different Voices*. His book of over 200 European and American three-line poems, *Head Lines and High Lights*, was recently published by Pudding House Press. His other main interest is mental health. He has served as member and co-chair of the Santa Cruze County Mental Health Advisory Board. His chapbook, *A Confluence of Voices*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

Flow, Big Mind, Jazz, Poetry, and Me

(A Memoir/Essay in Prose and Poetry)

John Laue

A CAVEAT: I don't have credentials as a psychologist or priest. When I speak about psychological topics (*the conscious mind, the preconscious, and the subconscious*) and Eastern topics (*Big Mind, etc.*) I speak only as a lay person, a reader, a writer, a thinker, a poet, and a human being. This essay is essentially a memoir. My intention here is to tell some of my own experiential truths. You can take it or leave it as you please. I'm writing this for the pleasure of doing it and am not attached to the results.

The Unfinished House

I discovered that in planning for my house
I'd neglected many fundamental features:
not so inviting to live in a place
with no carpets or cushions on the floors;
not even window shades or drapes had I provided
though there were huge, translucent beds and sofas.

I'd have given an arm for a hotplate then
and some pots and pans and dishes
instead of those powerful pieces of sculpture
so full of agony and fervor
but inappropriate for ordinary living.

It's taking me years and many reversals
to move into my house on decently comfortable terms.
Because of my earlier vast ignorance
I've even had to tear down major parts of it.
Why couldn't I have realized that a house of poetry

needn't be a palace of pretentiousness,
a garish castle built exclusively from glass?

My initial contact with multiple levels of meaning occurred when I was a very young child. Marcia and Anne, the lesbian goddesses of my childhood, told me about the Dutch boy who saved Holland by putting his finger in the dike. As I grew older and got more experienced, I began to see other levels in stories they'd told me. Later many people were to remark that I had an *old soul*, a label I took as a compliment.

Starting at 11 or 12 years old, I studied the clarinet with Chester Boles, my seventh-grade teacher, who gave woodwind lessons on the side. He had me learning to play from written notation. I continued on my own, playing both the clarinet and alto saxophone by ear. I loved this because of the immediate feedback, spent many hours sounding out different melodies. The type of jazz then called *bebop*, exemplified by the playing of two genius musicians, Charlie Parker (*Bird*), and John Burkes Gillespie (*Dizzy*), appealed to me greatly.

Since I played alto saxophone, *Bird* became my idol. I loved his style, which featured barrages of superfast notes in complex baroque patterns, and tried to emulate that in my own playing. I soon found out that to do this, I had to bring myself into a state of intense concentration. I began to integrate very fast passages into my improvisations. I had flights of fancy where I played faster than I could think, especially when we played blues in certain keys I had rehearsed. (I'd practiced playing within the limits of blues chords more than other types of music.)

When I abandoned thinking about what I was improvising, put myself into a concentrated *flow* state, I found I could insert whole palettes of colorful note combinations into songs. Like *Bird*, I could play richer and faster improvisations so long as I stuck to the proper chord sequence, and return to it when required. But I only seemed to have two speeds, very fast and very slow.

Hubris
(To a Drummer)

Hercules,
hold me off the ground.
See if you can do it.
Not that I'm Atlas,
but I've too heavy a burden
on my troubled sore feet.
I'd like to fly,
soar like a helium bird!

Hercules, lift me,
hold me up
as long as you can.
Don't say you don't understand,
or aren't that strong.
Sling me over your head!

That's the way!
Whee! I'm flying!
I'm Alice in Wonderland,
Peter Pan,
Captain Marvel,
also Superman.
I'm a crowd-pleaser
and a hero too.
I can accomplish anything
except get down!

I finally realized I had limitations as a musician, among them not knowing how to read music very well, so I laid the instruments aside. I had been a college newspaper editor, and wrote for a small weekly paper. I realized there was more of a future for me in writing than in making music. But I still had what jazz had taught me, a way to access my subconscious with immediacy (actually the *preconscious* part where many combinations of notes were available).

For my last two years of undergraduate work, I began studying in Berkeley at the University of California. There I saw a jazz/poetry reading advertised on campus. I decided to attend, mostly because I wanted to find out what type of jazz could accompany poems. It featured a Beat poet (Phillip Lamantia, I believe), and a jazz trio. I liked the jazz, but found the poetry fascinating.

I decided to try writing that strange stuff. Writing poetry had certain advantages for me: it was quiet, wouldn't disturb my fraternity brothers' studying. Even more intriguing was the fact that, when I let myself have flights of inspiration, instead of them vanishing in the moment as in jazz, I could preserve the best ones.

After studying poetry for a while, I attempted what some people have called *automatic writing*, tapping into my subconscious by relinquishing conscious control, letting the pen run freely over the page. The focus I assumed was similar to what I'd done in jazz. The poet and Zen Buddhist, Allen Ginsberg, called this technique *First thought, Best thought*, using it to produce his works. He was successful at this because he'd prepared his mind for it over many years.

Although I wasn't hesitant to rewrite, I found my best works were

produced by relinquishing ego control, accessing a different, freer state of mind. My training in jazz improvisation had taught me to follow certain rules I realized were similar to those for poetry: I had to maintain concentration until a natural stopping point occurred. When I lost this focus, the poem would lose its stylistic unity. No matter how hard I tried, I often could not regain that vital element.

Contrary to what some poets had done, even some famous ones, I pledged to myself that no matter how many levels of meaning there were, the first, or denotative level, had to be coherent. For me each poem, although layered with multiple meanings, should also on its surface be an act of clear communication, not a self-indulgent exercise like many contemporary bards tended to produce. I called my approach to poetry *responsible writing*.

Most of my best poems were written when I produced perfect, or near-perfect, first drafts. I won the University's poetry award, after writing poetry for only a year or so, by using this method. I had to let go of my ego, tap the reservoir of meaning in the part of my mind available for immediate use. My major at Cal had been psychology, but I decided to enter grad school in creative writing at San Francisco State University, whose program was considered second only to The University of Iowa's.

On Poetry

Is it really me
who writes these words?
Or am I a conduit
for some higher powers?
Hell, death, playful spirits,
all inspire me.
Great gods and little fishes
are my muses too.
My words can come from
anything I've ever heard,
seen, felt, thought, read.
This world of poetry's
much larger than I thought;
not only wide,
but downright universal.

The major realization I had about poetry was that there were no limits to what it can contain, providing I went by rules determined by each poem. Like a jazz solo, each poem set up its own aesthetic which must be obeyed. I found there were literally no limits to what I could draw upon, which is why I've called it *Big Mind* (I'll elaborate on this later in the

essay). But there were dangers about being so open and aware.

Beauty and Truth

Beauty and truth,
do they ever coexist?
Some say they coincide
in only the greatest of us.
But look at Jack London.
His writing was beautiful
and his life—well—
he died young and alcoholic.
And Hemingway? But Papa
killed himself. And poets?
Hart Crane jumped
off the back of a ship.
Sylvia Plath? Anne Sexton?
John Berryman?
They each created beauty
in their pursuit of truths.
I wish they were alive
so they could tell me
whether by their lights,
it was worthwhile.
I believe the truth,
the *sin qua non* of life and death,
can be quite ugly.
Naked truth has beauty
only from a vast perspective,
more than most can manage.

For most people, their entire *Big Mind* isn't immediately or easily accessible, but I believe it can become so by being completely *in the now*, a phenomenon which happened to me when I hadn't planned what I was going to say. I didn't realize what I'd said or written, (especially its lower, less obvious levels) until I thought about it later. To access *Big Mind* with any degree of success, we have to channel our subconscious elements the way I believe channeling that claims to be communicating with spirits or the dead is done.

In 1967, I attended a performance of *The Committee*, an improvisational theater group whose work impressed me greatly. Encouraged by what I'd seen from them, I joined the San Francisco theater group of Norman Sturgis, a TV and movie actor. He directed us in what

he called *relate improves*, where one of us would start off with a subject or role, and others would join in. I did well at this, having experienced a similar flow many times as a musician and poet.

Norman would give one person an assignment such as, *Be a young man who's just found out his girlfriend is pregnant*.

That person would start with something like this: "I'm a twenty-year-old guy, and I'm worried. I found out my girl is going to have a baby. I don't know what to do."

Then Norman would turn to one of the women and say, *You're his girlfriend. Relate to him*.

That person might say to the first: "I'm worried because you got me pregnant. What are we going to do?"

One by one, other people would join in with whatever role they chose—mother of girl, aunt, father of boyfriend, etc. This made for a very rich series of improvisations, testing each person's imagination.

Norman had us perform these exercises before an audience at **Intersection**, a large nightclub in the city, and also sing a cappella solos, because he said the Moscow Art Theater required these from their students. The exercises were quite stressful for some of us, especially those who weren't singers.

At that time I'd also joined a therapy group. After being married a short while, I'd noticed that my first wife, Toni, had some symptoms that worried me. I thought she ought to be treated by a therapist. A couple in our apartment house, Max and Evelyn Smith, recommended a psychiatrist, Dr. David Shupp, one of whose groups they were attending.

Doctor Shupp conducted therapy groups which met at San Francisco General Hospital, including one for married couples. We started attending those, but before long, Toni decided to drop out. I stayed, and Dr. Shupp, who later became Director of Mental Health for the entire city of San Francisco, was so helpful that I used his services for sixteen years. I called him my *second father*.

The Guide

(In Memoriam—Dr. David Shupp)

I hired a guide
for a small but important trip.
His credentials were in order
but I thought him
just another ordinary hack.
I didn't know
he knew numerous worlds,
like he knew himself.

For sixteen years he led me
to places I'd not dreamt of.
When I'd begin to falter
he'd urge me on.
When I'd fall he'd say
Get up and start again!

I wept when we finally parted,
not so much for the loss of love,
but to celebrate the fact that now
I could travel on my own.

I still see him every year.
He sits in his chair, queries,
How's your world?
I answer, *Beautiful!*,
convinced that, but for him,
I never would have recognized
true beauty.

After my wife and I separated, being in the care of Shupp, whom I trusted implicitly, gave me courage to experiment with several drugs some of my friends were taking. This was in the '60s. There was much drug use among musicians, poets and even rather ordinary people. I'd heard that LSD and other drugs might add to my creativity. I thought that, if there were dangers, I'd have the good doctor to rely upon.

Dr. Shupp opined that my first dose of LSD probably sent me over the edge (although I'd had what people call *a good trip*), because two weeks after that, I underwent a vivid death experience. I thought I'd burned up in one universe, and was in another, parallel one. That began a psychotic process which likely would have lasted until this day, except it has been, and is still, controlled by medications.

The Natural Way's the Best

(To Timothy Leary)

One hit of acid;
I was over the edge.
It took no courage;
only the conviction
something so small
could never hurt.

It was no big issue,
yet it seemed
to transport me
to a world of gods,
witches, ghosts, demons.
What trips for a poet—
as if my universe had split
and I must choose between
the sun and moon.
Heredity picked me
for this hellish mission;
fate was my companion.

Timothy Leary,
wouldn't you be proud?
I fashioned a soul for myself
out of very tenuous materials.
But what about the ones
who kill themselves?
And the ones eternally in hells
of their own creation?
I learned to make lemonade
out of my own green fruit,
but many spend lives
trying to bring back lemons
from weak lemonade.
I've no quarrel with you,
Brother Timothy: with meds
my case went reasonably well.
But I'm more than a little leery
about your claims.
And just for the record
this was written while blitzed
on January 1, 2003.

I was so out of control for one short period that the police came for me twice. I hid from them; they finally went away. Because of Shupp's excellent care, I escaped being in the formal mental health system, a fate I was quite afraid of, since my mother had gone into Greystone Park, The New Jersey State Hospital for the Insane, when I was eight years old, and never been released (she died there after 23 years).

Some Gratuitous Advice

(To Young Experimenters)

Take care of business, youngster.
No matter that you've died.
You're not the first,
nor will you be the last.
It's appalling,
what you're going through,
not fair that your spirit
has to bear so much.

But you simply can't ignore
demands of the ordinary.
Get as much help as you can.
Keep up appearances and be on time.
If you want to be free to travel
(travel's not impossible in hell)
then you don't want to arouse
the fears of ordinary people.
Confide in those you trust
but don't get violent,
scream that you're correct,
or injure yourself (You hurt
every one of us then!)
Be circumspect and take care
if you don't want them to come
in blacks and whites and ambulances
to spirit your spirit away.

When my psychosis came on, the ordinary mental filters I'd developed stopped working. I became overwhelmed by the contents of my subconscious. Dr. Shupp said I'd *decompensated*. Originally, I'd conceived of myself having a *pinhole* to my subconscious I could access when playing music or writing; but now I had to endure words, symbols, images rushing through my mind like water through a fire hose. It was more than my weak ego could handle. In that symbolic world, I began to believe almost anything I happened to think.

The Split

I've one foot in hell,
the other in heaven.
My right hand's in hell too;
my left's in heaven.

My midbrain's running, running,
shouting, "*Choose, damn you,
choose. Anything's better
than this!*" But I don't
for a moment want to humor it.
I guess I'll rest here
half-dark, half-light
like some satellites I've seen,
continue writing funny,
saintly, crazy, tragic poetry.

This breakdown, or *breakthrough*, of the subconscious did give me a bird's eye view of its symbolic language. I suddenly saw hidden meanings in everything: street signs, license plates, random statements and events. Until I integrated these with the help of anti-psychotic medications, I lived in the magical world of schizophrenia.

At the time I didn't think I was learning, or getting more creative, but really was gaining valuable insights about my mind, experiencing enough suffering to develop compassion for others, preparing to be integrated on a new, higher plane. I remember telling Dr. Shupp that I was aware of the second and third levels of meaning in statements, as well as the most obvious or denotative ones. Some people call this *reading minds*.

Madness I

Like with static on my radio,
snow on my TV,
reality comes through
but very faint and scrambled.
Let me see truth!
Let me know the actual!
No, that's a lie:
all I ever wanted was illusion.
Even little truths appal me.
If they put up a statue
and said, *This is you!*
I'd say, *Perhaps, but it doesn't.*
Show my indecisiveness!
I'm in the inner space
hell has in common with the world;
everything is most ambiguous.
I feel like I've done nothing
but exist, just exist.

Madness II

The soul withers
like a spent balloon.
The spirit stays alive,
but its messages
are strangely muted.
Static dominates;
the real's drowned out
by disbelief.
Illusions and delusions
multiply like rabbits
from an infinite set of hats.
The storm in the mind
brings frightening visions
sleep and dreams increase.
Even the body may ache
from utter terror.
Then there's a tiny bright,
a hope amidst the fear,

Of course, I've an excuse: <i>I'm crazy.</i> But imagine those who've no such excuse for their bare and mean existences!	perhaps just curiosity. I tell myself to concentrate on that, to keep it there.
---	--

I realized multiple meanings could exist in phrases, sentences, or even single words, much more than I'd recognized before (or recognized, but ignored). There were obvious surface denotative meanings, which might contain puns or homonyms, their connotations in all uses, plus symbolic meanings with their own connotations.

Once in the group, when I said, "*We took the Sausalito ferry,*" I suddenly became aware that on one level, I could be referring to Dr. Shupp, who was gay, lived in Sausalito across the bay. He was indeed conducting us on a watery journey (there were many tears shed in that group, plus water is a symbol of the subconscious). The doctor recognized my embarrassment about saying that. He had me promise to use such loaded statements only for defense.

There were other times too, when I did what I thought was *speaking to people's subconscious*, as well as to their conscious minds, but I often didn't remember those occasions because they were not so emotionally loaded. I made a bargain with myself to follow the discipline of only using multiple meanings when there was an intelligible surface level, just as I'd done in poetry. At the time, I thought this type of speech merely an interesting trick, or *sleight of mind*.

One incident where multiple meanings protected me (or my ego) was when a P.E. teacher, a very large football coach, resented me letting my class mingle with his in front of the gym before the exit bell rang. That guy was known for gruffness. He began shouting criticisms of me every day in front of my students, a very unprofessional way of handling the situation. Finally, without planning or knowing what I was going to say, I had had enough, and let him have it from the depths of my being. The kids thought I was dressing down a difficult student, but the implicit symbolic message got through to that coach.

It went like this: "*Ralphie, use your imagination! What do you think would happen to you if you acted like this out on the street? I'm a teacher and non-violent, but if you continue to act and talk the way you've been doing, I won't be responsible for the consequences!*" The big coach, within hearing distance, flinched like he'd been *snake-bitten* (in that coach's slang, *to Ralph* meant to vomit). Every time he came out after that, he'd stand out of my sight behind a convenient post.

This type of address, likely a product of *Big Mind*, isn't usually under my ego's conscious control. It includes second and third level symbolic meanings, but I often don't recognize them at the time I say them. Dr. Shupp told me statements conveying these types of double and triple

messages are called *indirectas* in Spanish, but there's no English word for them. He assured me they are more psychologically potent than meanings expressed straight out.

Compliments given this way can be very potent. To help pass the time in my classes, I tried to emulate Shupp's habit of giving them so subtly the recipient wouldn't know they were intended. I might say, *That was a beautiful thought!* to one student, while also meaning it for another, as a comment on the second student's words I'd overheard. Subliminal and double messages like this helped make me a good peer counseling teacher, and aided in other classes too. But I still was occasionally on the verge of craziness.

Pills

Sometimes I still
stray into it,
that shifting zone
where hell
and the ordinary
coexist. It fills me
with sweet voices
(ones that might
have swayed Ulysses),
and the promise
of unbelievable magic.
I notice subtle changes
in the atmosphere:
common words
become ambiguous,
cities more
impermanent,
fields irradiated
with false light.
I duly note these,
but don't allow them
to distract me;
I go about
my ordinary business:
teaching, counseling,
writing poetry,
reaffirm
my connection
with this world's
difficult reality

by taking
two or three
miraculous
but anti-
magic pills.

At Shupp's suggestion, I enrolled in yoga. I also studied Tai Chi and meditation techniques, developed regular practice in those for a while. During the 16 years I was in his groups, Dr. Shupp himself evolved from an interpersonal method of group therapy to a modified gestalt approach, which utilized techniques similar to Eastern *Big Mind* methods. We did exercises, such as speaking as if we were every person, or item, in dreams we were analyzing. The results of this often surprised us, adding to our awareness of our mental processes' breadth and depth.

Part of a typical session of Shupp's gestalt therapy might go like this:
Shupp: You say you dreamt of a large boat on a blue ocean with the sun so bright you couldn't stand it. Tell us what it's like to be that boat.

Client: "I'm a big boat painted red. I'm a container ship. My job is to convey things across the Pacific Ocean. I carry much cargo. I'm very sturdy and well-built."

Shupp: Now you are the Pacific Ocean. What do you have to say as the ocean?

Client: "I'm a very wide body of water, full of fish. Anything buoyant enough can ride on my surface. Right now I'm carrying a boat full of treasure, and interesting people. Many other boats, too. There are airplanes flying over me, cables under my waters."

Then the client would go on to speak as every other significant item in the dream. This technique is almost identical to exercises to make people aware of their *Big Mind*. A session with a guru, or teacher, might go as follows (after reading about *Big Mind* in books by Shunru Suzuki, others, and on Wikipedia):

Master: Speak as your fear. What does your fear have to say?

Student: "I'm Cindy's fear. It's my job to keep her out of trouble. Sometimes I'm very useful, but at other times, I can handicap her. That's when I don't know the difference between what's destructive, and what's neutral or beneficial. Or when I'm fearful constantly, instead of only when needed."

For me or any of us, tapping *Big Mind* is like going from one small room (*the conscious mind*), to having access to a whole town full of houses (*the pre-conscious*), or perhaps a whole planet (those plus all *the subconscious*). No wonder the human brain is considered by some scientists to be among the most complex systems in the universe. I believe every perception is recorded there, how deeply depending on its emotional content. There are also processes in our minds involved with forgetting

(See *The Brain That Changes Itself* by Norman Doidge, M.D.), but I suspect they may not be permanent.

We all have our own *Big Mind*, but most of us can't access it very well, with coordination between *the subconscious*, *the preconscious*, and *the conscious*. Another way of viewing this comes from new brain research (quoted in the book above) which states that, as we age, the connections between the right and left hemispheres of our brains increase. Thus I believe more wholeness or *holistic awareness* (my term) is attained.

Some tasks, such as verbal ones, usually done on one side of the brain, begin to be done on both. This may increase a person's ability to create spontaneous lucid verbal connections. Perhaps these types of messages originate when the right and left hemispheres of people's brains work together to produce speech, writing, and music. This ability is probably displayed mostly by madmen, poets, and mystics, but some others seem to have it also. I don't think I'm that special for being able to do it.

More than once I've met people *older* than I, who apparently could speak on symbolic levels at will. I call this type of layered communication speaking *vertically*, as opposed to speaking *horizontally*, or solely on one level (some people would call that shallowly). I've heard that one can tell a person's degree of evolution (or mental *age*) by the extent he or she can do this.

I do believe in the 'age' part of this, as I'll explain, but not necessarily that a person who's adept at this is extremely evolved; he or she might only be crazy. To me a better measure of how evolved we are is in how much effort and attention we give to changing our society for the better.

The Friend

I see in him
where I was
twenty years ago.
I point it out
very, very gently.
He argues loudly.
I don't pursue
the point.
A year or so later
he says, *Look*
what I found out!
Then I see in him
where I was
fifteen years ago.
He's magnificent
in his defenses.

The next year
he comes up
with it himself.
Then I see where
I was ten years
after that, I don't
let him know.
I've learned not
to blurt out truths
he isn't ready for.
Perhaps he'll never
grow as old
as I've become,
but I'm just glad
those older
than both of us
don't press their
points too bluntly.

The ability to tap into *Big Mind* successfully made me not only more verbally adept, but also wiser in significant ways. As has been said by philosophers (and many others), it's desirable to know one's inner universe; it adds to our confidence, increases the complexity of our personalities, a goal some psychologists believe is the purpose of human evolution (see the book, **Flow** by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi). I think participation in the arts leads to this type of self-awareness, one reason they should be taught in schools.

Many poets use vertical speech in their poems. One example of a very famous poem that accesses subliminal levels of meaning to reinforce its surface statements is *The Road Not Taken*, by Robert Frost. I'm not familiar with everything written about it, but know much has been said about its central metaphor of roads, obviously meaning life-paths or styles, and how Frost chose the more uncommon road over the other, more traveled.

I believe not enough has been written of the lower levels (or *levers*) of meaning many poems contain, although more than a few people are aware of them. I call them *levers* because, when used correctly, they magnify and reinforce the strength of metaphors, adding to their total effectiveness, just as levers enable us to move articles too heavy for our bare hands.

As part of my study of poetry, I've realized that poets not only need to be aware of their individual symbolism, but also that of the culture within which they exist. Carl Jung, the great classic psychiatrist of earlier times, has written about *archetypal patterns*, how they're universal and

ubiquitous. The better poets pay attention to these too.

As I understand it, even if we're not poets, our *Big Minds* grow as the sum of our experiences, both verbal and non-verbal, increases. Although there are narrow limits to what anyone's consciousness can contain, as we age, the neural connections between the different parts of our minds increase exponentially, especially if we consciously aid the process by meditation, and other means.

Poets and others who write and speak can fill their *conscious*, *preconscious*, and *subconscious* minds with words, phrases, and ideas they might want to use. We can influence this directly by changing what information we expose ourselves to through hearing, reading, seeing, or in any other way. As is said about computers, *If junk goes in, junk will come out.*

Some people think our *Big Minds* represent real selves—as opposed to our limited *Ego Selves*. Mine is most available when I speak without planning what to say, thus transcending my *I*, being completely *in the now*, and (I suspect), speaking from my right hemisphere along with my left (which usually processes verbal tasks). Buddhists talk about *beginner's mind*. I believe that may be a precondition for delivering layered speech and writing.

I have had therapy sessions with many doctors, some who seemed more aware and helpful than others. There were ones who seemed to try (perhaps unconsciously) to discourage me from accomplishing anything worthwhile, including successful high school teaching, my main career. One said, if I were really schizophrenic, nothing should be expected of me, and I shouldn't expect much of myself. This is in contrast to Dr. Shupp's comment that I could be successful at anything for which I was properly trained.

Centers

(To certain doctors)

You say we don't have centers;
we're the genuine hollow men.
But we've at least two
pulling at us in opposite directions
with great gravity
like the sun and moon.
You who say we're broken slates
defaced by insane graffiti,
who say we've no special character,
stay away! We don't want you
or need you to take care of us.

You with your grim incantations,
hollow platitudes, invidious labeling;
you're worse than a case of the plague!

I believe no matter how broken we are by life, we have chances to succeed, although these might be in areas we were not familiar with before our breaks. To put it metaphorically, *every door that closes opens other doors*. Ernest Hemingway wrote in his novel *A Farewell to Arms*, *The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places*.

For me, *Big Mind's* multi-level statements usually occur spontaneously, when I feel, in the depths of my being, I'm being picked on over a long period, and there's no other practical way to respond. It's my soul itself that's speaking, shouting, **STOP THE HARRASSMENT**, not a product of my ego, not an **I**, but a **we**, or even, **they**.

Each time it happens, I'm in awe; realizing words or phrases I've just uttered are more complex, meaningful on more levels than anything I could consciously plan. Although some people think this occurrence of multiple levels in speech is nothing more than a clever trick, it can be very persuasive. When used in extremely negative manners, it could almost be called *psychological karate*.

Whatever they're called, having these types of statements as a resource bolsters my confidence, makes me more likely to take risks that go along with accomplishing desirable goals. As I grow older, I believe increasingly in the slogan, **Think Globally; Act Locally** (although the phrase itself has become a cliché). Several times I've been successful in bringing about beneficial changes to organizations and systems, once or twice affecting the entire country. Perhaps I didn't accomplish all I could have, but I did enough to give me great satisfaction.

One of my favorite authors, Sam Keen, the American philosopher, wrote that sometimes schizophrenics can be very influential in societies, bringing about necessary improvements, and renewal. I've met people I believed were culture changers, some who were formally diagnosed as mentally ill, others who were not. People of this rare breed seem to have one thing in common: they're able to communicate on many levels. This is considered abnormal, a characteristic of mental illness by many authorities, but in these people, I believe it's a mark of genius.

Years ago I decided not to let the possibility of going crazy again hamper me from trying to change the world for the better. The fact that some of my attempts fail isn't a big issue for me. So long as I believe I'm doing what's right, making my best effort is what matters. To not attempt to bring about positive changes in society would mean I'd have to find a different answer to the question: **What are we living for?**

Epiphany at Seacliff Beach

where ignorant armies clash by night

—Matthew Arnold—

It's sunset and high clouds
are puffs of pink against light blue
while waves wash in and gently
break upon the shores of Monterey Bay.
It's a world of limitless potential,
an infinity of vistas
as the sun sinks into the crease
where pastel sky meets water.
Now as the whoosh of surf resounds
far lights begin to shine around the bay,
each a twinkling star-like point
against the land's squat darkness.
The spectacle's enough to comfort me,
to make me momentarily forget
blinding bursts of bombs,
white-hot glaring fires of wars.
All around this ample world,
each individual with his/her tiny lights
and his/her total of awakenings,
some happening just now
as separate globes go bright.
It's enough to cause me to have faith,
make me cry out loudly,
Love thy neighbor!
trusting that we'll win
the crucial race to consciousness,
the race against ourselves,
the crazy, painful, brutal, tender,
half-illuminated human race—

The Flood

To be there when the breakthrough occurs,
when the dam of consciousness bursts,
admits burgeoning, heretical life—
could you endure it?
Only a few survived the flood,
or so one scripture says.

But next time, next time
let's have a more insightful race,
a more peaceful and enlightened age.
And if there's fire in that era
won't the water quench it?
And if it's ice I'll bet
the sun-warmed flood will melt it.
There doesn't have to be an apocalypse,
don't you see? Much better if it's gradual:
one by one, two by two, three by three!

Whenever

Whenever the ironies
of the ordinary world
press hard on me;
when people seem too difficult;
when I think
I've never been a success
and never will be,
hell speaks to me
in an encouraging tone.
I remember my own suffering
and think, *He hasn't been there,*
he and she and he.
I was picked to take these pains,
transform them to growth.
Not that it's the only way,
or I'm the only one;
but I've traveled through worlds
most will never see,
a sort of crazy privilege.
I take my satisfaction
like a long, slow drink,
and think, *I've been*
a remarkable traveler
on paths not leveling yet!

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